

Why Believe in God in a Suffering World?

To the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship in the House of Commons.

This talk, 'Why Believe in God in a Suffering World?', is the second of three talks given by Roy Clements, minister of Eden Baptist Church, Cambridge, to an audience of MPs and peers in the House of Commons. The series was organised by the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship and the Jubilee Centre, Cambridge, and this presentation was given on May 3rd, 1994.

The question, 'Why?', of course, is the question people always ask in a situation of suffering, isn't it? Whether it's the doctor at the hospital bed, or the minister at the graveside, or perhaps sometimes in their own private hell, 'Why God?', they say.

I think it's an interesting response really, that the question 'Why?' should come so spontaneously to us when we're in a suffering situation because, in a way I think it rather demonstrates that many people are nearer to faith than perhaps they believe. After all, if we really believe that the world was just random chance, that there was no order or meaning to it, then the question "Why?", would never occur to us, would it? Yet, extraordinarily, people who profess to have no religious faith at all still feel somehow the incongruity of suffering, still feel the problem of it. Still ask 'Why?' when they're propelled into a situation of it. CS Lewis in his book on suffering, 'The Problem of Pain', says in this respect pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. He suggests that atheism is a comparatively easy game to play while everything's going well with you. But when you're thrown into a situation of suffering, then its real character as a philosophy of despair is made starkly apparent to anybody who embraces it. And I think it has to be said that there is some measure of truth in that, at least in this respect, that there are many, many people who find faith through experiences of suffering, rather than losing it, though no doubt the sceptics will quickly dismiss such faith as a crutch, grasped irrationally in a moment of acute anxiety or suffering, and therefore not worthy of the name faith. But those who testify to coming to a faith in God through an experience of suffering really don't feel that they're grasping at straws in that way. When you talk to them, most of them will say

that they really feel that the experience of suffering has sensitised them to some intuitive need or awareness of spiritual things which their prosperity, their former prosperity rendered them too complacent to recognise. It's as if in the crucible of suffering reality, sometimes, is more apparent to us than on the mountain top of cool reflection.

Still, that is no answer to the question 'Why?', is it, the fact that some people find faith rather than losing it through suffering doesn't really solve the problem of suffering. Let me begin, then, by identifying two unsatisfactory answers to this problem, though you will sometimes hear these answers propounded by well-intentioned Christians.

The first unsatisfactory answer is what I call the 'Blame it all on the Devil' answer. You sometimes hear people say, 'well, there are two forces in the universe, Good and Evil, God and the Devil. And all the nice things that happen are the responsibility of God, and all the bad things that happen are the responsibility of the Devil. Philosophically this is called 'dualism', and it is a very convenient solution to the problem of why suffering happens. It excuses God from having to take the blame for any of them, and nicely apportions them all to this evil force. And of course the Bible certainly does witness to a personal, spiritual force of evil, it speaks of the Devil and it certainly attributes some, at least some, of the suffering in the world to his malevolent activity. However, as a solution, as I say, this is inadequate for a very simple reason. The Bible insists that God is almighty, so there is no ultimate dualism of power. If the Devil exists, it's by God's permission, as His creature. In no way does the Devil's power equal God's. There is no fundamental dualism of ultimate power in the universe, God is the only one who has omnipotence, He's almighty. The Bible insists upon that very strongly, and that of course is the reason why the Bible is so sure about the ultimate victory of goodness. If there really were an ultimate dualism of power, then there could be no certainty at all that good would ultimately win over evil, and maybe the witches have backed the right side. Maybe they will inherit bliss and St Francis will inherit the inferno, if dualism is the right sort of answer! No, the Bible's convinced that God is almighty and that's the source of its assurance that at the end of the day goodness will win. But that means you have to face the difficult question, 'If He is all-powerful, why does He allow suffering?'

The second inadequate solution I call the 'it's all in the mind' answer. Now again you sometimes hear this from religious

people. They'll argue that really suffering doesn't exist. It's imaginary. It's all in people's minds. Maybe you know that little limerick, 'There was a faith healer of Deal, who said 'Although pain isn't real, When I sit on a pin, and it punctures my skin, I dislike what I fancy I feel.' That puts it very simply, it's very hard actually for anybody who's actually going through an experience of suffering to be convinced that this is all in the mind. It seems very much in their external world and in their body, it doesn't seem that simply a bit of mind control is going to take it away. Indeed that's the conviction of the Bible too. That suffering is real, that is evil, indeed that God doesn't like it, He takes no pleasure in it, that there was no suffering in the world as He intended it, and that when the world is restored to the way He wants it, all suffering will be excluded, there will be no pain in heaven. The Bible is convinced about that, that God is good. The 'all in the mind' answer comes very close to a philosophical position called 'monism', which suggests that everything that we experience is really part of the one underlying reality, and that labels like 'good' and 'evil' are arbitrary convention that we impose on these things, they're not really grounded in the reality of things. The Bible won't accept that at all. It insists that God is righteous, God is good, that He stands over and against everything that is evil, and that is why heaven will be a place where we will want to be. Because goodness will triumph. But of course if that is the view you are going to take, you have to ask, 'Well, if God dislikes suffering and regards it as an evil, why does He permit it?' So we come back again to this question 'Why?' Christians feel this problem of suffering uniquely acutely. I don't think any other religion in the world feels it quite as acutely as Christians do, because they believe in a God who is both almighty and good and loving. Because of that, they have to believe that God is allowing things to go on in His universe which He could quite easily stop and to which He is thoroughly opposed. There is no ducking that problem, I think. Many philosophers argue that this problem of suffering is the most serious argument that can be lodged against the Christian view of the world, and I think they're right.

So where do we go looking for response to it? Well, let me begin by making two observations about human society and even human government that may help us to understand God's government.

The first observation is this. Sometimes we are prepared to put up with a considerable amount of preventable evil in society for the sake of some larger plan or greater cause. The illustration I

gave of this last week, for those of you who were here, was Hyde Park Corner every Sunday. Here people are allowed to stand up and tell the world all sorts of things, some of which are probably libellous, some of which may well be criminal. The police stand idly by, simply mandated to maintain public order but not to stop people saying these things which may be seditious or outrageous or damnable in all kinds of ways. Why do we in England allow such things to go on? There are of course countries in the world where no such freedom would be given to stand up and speak your mind in that way.

Well, we allow this abuse of freedom because we have a greater cause in mind, a greater plan in mind, that of a free society which protects liberty of speech, and we accept that a certain amount of abuse of that freedom is the price we must pay if we would have such a free society.

That's a fine illustration, it seems to me, of the way in which human government, for the sake of a greater cause, will sometimes tolerate a certain amount of preventable evil. Even though it has the power to stop it, it will allow it, because it has some greater goal in mind. In the same way, I think, the Bible suggests that God has a greater plan in mind, a greater purpose, a greater goal. It too has something to do with a free society. And because He is committed to that vision of the sort of world He wants, a world which knows freedom, He too is prepared to put up with a considerable amount of preventable evil, abuse of that freedom. That brings me to a second observation from human society and human government that I think may help us on our way a bit. As societies, we are prepared to inflict a considerable amount of suffering on people, if we believe the maintenance of moral order demands it. Two simple examples of that are parents disciplining their children, and the law courts punishing criminals. Now I do not want to get involved in the debate in Europe about whether smacking is or is not something that's morally defensible, neither do I want to start talking about Howard League, penal reform, or any of that sort of stuff. I simply want to make the observation that I think that any of us, wherever we're coming from politically on these sort of issues will agree that every society does take to itself the right to inflict a certain amount of suffering on members of that society when it wishes to signal that it disapproves of the way they are behaving. This is discipline, punishment, whatever you want to call it, something which every society has to engage in, if it's not to allow evil to go unacknowledged as evil. Now in the same way, the Bible would suggest that this righteous God is prepared to

inflict, to allow a world in which suffering takes place as the signal of His moral disapprobation. The Bible is convinced that suffering entered the world because we human beings screwed it up. We disobeyed God's laws and that the suffering that we see around us is a consequence of that lack of conformity to God's law which God either actively or passively, either directly or indirectly, permits to be there as a signal of His divine disapproval. As the Bible would call it, His wrath, His anger. God is not pleased with our world and He is not making a secret of the fact that He is displeased with it. There is evidence of his displeasure. Suffering, among other things, is that evidence.

Some people of course feel they're doing God a favour by softening this element of anger in the divine character. Some people feel they're doing God a favour by portraying Him as a gentle, avuncular Santa Claus type figure who would never hurt anybody. But nice as it would be to subscribe to that view of God, it's certainly not the Bible's view of God. You don't have to read very far into the Bible to realise how angry God sometimes can be at moral failure in human society and how directly He's prepared to express His disapproval. In fact it seems to me that all that people do who try to, as it were, save God the embarrassment of being portrayed as an angry God, all they actually do in the long run is make it impossible for more rigorous thinkers to believe in God. They actually undermine faith, though they may think their sentimental view of God is actually doing Him as favour. In the long run, more rigorous thinkers realise that such a God, such a never-harm-a-fly God cannot possibly be the king of this world, there is too much suffering in it. There must be something more to be said about God than that He's just a nice old man who would never harm a fly, if He's the king of this world. And rigorous thinkers, the like of Bertrand Russell and so on, have been merciless, therefore, and rightly merciless, with sentimental 'God is all love' kinds of assertions by well-meaning clerics.

In some ways, of course, our complaints against the way God allows suffering in His world are a little unfair on Him. I mean, if the Bible is right when it says that God is angry with this world, that He has a moral law, that we have broken it, that He intends to judge the world, and that therefore one day we must face a God who will punish us too, with everybody else, if we have broken His law. If there is any truth in that at all, it will be extremely unfair of God not to give us some early warning of His intentions, wouldn't it? I constantly meet people who will tell you, 'Well, if there's a loving God in this world, why has He is

allowed this to happen to me?' A man said that to me in a hospital ward only a few months ago. 'If there was a loving God in this world, this wouldn't have happened to me, I'd be out there still making money', was actually what he was bothered about, his business was going downhill because he was in a one-man business, a private-enterprise sort of fellow and he was thoroughly angry that he had been placed in hospital in this way, unable to conduct his business. And I pointed out to him, if he had still been prosperous and healthy, would he have given one thought to God? Not at all, he candidly admitted, he never thought about God from one end of the week to the other. So here was a man, you see, who when God sustained him in prosperity and health, never thinks about God and if God for so much as a week takes away that prosperity he's immediately complaining 'Oh, that proves there can't be a God, then, or He wouldn't allow this to happen to me', and God can't win with people like that. But that's the way most of us are. No, Lewis is right, pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. Most of us are sleepy and complacent about God and about eternal issues and about judgement and about the fact that maybe we will have to face God one day. Suffering is one of the ways He uses to alert us to the fact that all is not as it should be in our world or in our lives. Maybe we should think about such things.

Then, of course, the sharp among you, I'm sure, have already homed in the weakness to this sort of line of defence. All right, let us say that God is pledged to human freedom and that therefore He is prepared to tolerate an abuse of human freedom, because He wants a free world, not to be a tyrant. Let us say that He therefore chooses to indicate His displeasure of our sins, of our failures, of our challenge to His moral law by placing signals in our lives and in our world generally, which we call suffering, which are meant to indicate to us that all is not as it should be, and that we should therefore turn our attentions to Him. Let's just say that that is right. What then are we to make of the suffering of the innocent? Then you would have thought if this was the right explanation for the suffering in the world, then God would organise things so that as to give some incentive to good people and some disincentive to bad people, wouldn't you? We would certainly do that in our courts. I mean we certainly punish children, but we punish naughty children. But we punish criminals, we don't punish good people. This seems to us to be a fundamental point of this whole business of indicating your displeasure at the breaking of laws and rules, that you punish the right people. But when you look around God's government of the universe, God's government of our society, that doesn't seem to

fit at all, everybody knows that poor Mrs Jones down the road is crippled up with arthritis, and she's a saint. And yet old Mr Smith at the other end of the road, who has been a rogue all his life, has never known a day's illness. How are we to explain that? The suffering of the innocent? So we come back to the question 'Why?', and more sharply focused this time. Not just 'Why suffering?', but 'Why innocent suffering?'

Well now let me make a few observations in response to that narrower question. The first is this: the Bible is very candid in acknowledging that this is a problem. There are many sections of the Bible which face up to it very directly. One of the most famous of course is the Book of Job. The whole point about Job is that he was a good man. Many of his well-meaning friends came up to him to try to convince him that all these terrible things couldn't possibly have happened to him if he really was a good man, he would have had to have done something bad. But they were wrong, and the Book of Job makes it quite clear. They were wrong. He was in fact a righteous man, and yet he suffered. It is a problem, and the Bible acknowledges that it is a problem.

The second thing to say is this. The Bible refuses to individualise God's retribution against sin. This is something, actually, which Jesus was particularly adamant about. There was a situation which we read about in the gospel of Luke where a tower fell down in Siloam in Jerusalem and killed a number of people. I imagine it was in the newspapers that morning. Jesus asked them 'Do you think that those who perished when that tower block fell down were worse sinners than anybody else in the city because this disaster befell them?' Now I suspect there were eager nods in the audience as he asked that question, because many Jews would have thought that way in those days. But Jesus insisted no, it was not so. No, he said, it isn't so, these people were not worse sinners than anybody else. The right conclusion to draw, he said, from that tower falling down, is unless you repent you will all likewise perish. That's a very interesting perspective from Jesus. He insists that we are not to draw a conclusion from particular suffering events that that particular person who's suffering was a worse sinner than anyone else, rather we are to see it as a signal, a sign, a pointer, to God's general judgement against the world. Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. This is in fact, a characteristic of the whole of the Bible. People sometimes express offence at that line in the Ten Commandments which talks about God visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation. And I can understand their discomfiture at those words. But if you think about it, it is just a facing up to

the way things are. The sins of the parents do get visited on the children in all kinds of ways. It's part of the way we function as a society, it's bound up with the fact that we aren't just a load of atomised individuals doing our own thing. We are part of a corporate whole, a society. I grew up in the East End of London. There was a kid who lived around the corner from me who was a thief. Everybody knew he was a thief. He would mug old ladies and steal their handbags, especially when they were coming back from the post office with their pensions. Then of course you would say that was entirely his fault, he was a thoroughly bad sort, and so he was. But when you looked into that boy's family background you could begin to see some extenuating circumstances. He had no father at home, his mother had had any number of men, there had been no real discipline in the home. So who was really to blame for those old ladies suffering? The boy? Well, yes of course he was to blame, but wasn't his home situation also partly contributory, wouldn't most of us want to say 'Yes', the boy wouldn't have been that sort of boy if he'd had a different kind of background'. Then he goes a little further than that even you see, this story, I asked my mother once, I remember, about this boy's family situation and she said 'Ah, yes, well his mother was in love once and the man she was in love with got killed in the war and it completely broke her up. Her life fell to pieces after his death and she was never the same again! So we can understand that too, can't we? Who are we going to blame the war on? The war that took the man she loved and left her feeling bitter and incapable perhaps of raising that son, the way that she should have done.

So I'm not excusing people, but we all know this is the way human society works. Sin, like a kind of rebound, works through relationships affecting people sometimes quite distant from where it all began. This is part, I think, of what the apostle Paul means when he talks about us all being 'bound up in Adam'. The sin of the human race is a corporate thing, we can't stand aloof in some holier-than-thou little corner saying 'It's all their fault'. We're bound up in one another's mistakes and failures. And we pay the price for one another's mistakes and failures. The suffering in the world is not allocated individualistically in precise little apportioned parcels, determined by our personal sin. The Bible indicates that one day we will all be judged individually in that way, but for God to take that step will require complete winding-up of history and a disentangling of all the strands of history so that the book can be opened and we can be assessed. But as things are now, wrapped up in the warp and woof of human relationships and history those threads cannot be

disentangled, and as a result, we all share the common suffering, the common suffering of our common sin, a human race that has gone astray, and which is collectively experiencing the consequences of God's judgment and anger. That is the way things are. We may want to complain about that. We may want to say 'Why couldn't God organise the world differently? Why did he make us with this kind of racial solidarity which results in so much unfairness, us all sharing in the consequences of one another's sins in this way?' Well, we can rightly ask that question, but there is another side to it, and one which for Christians is perhaps the most interesting of all. Precisely because we are designed in this strange, social way, with genetic and social links that relate us to one another, and therefore make us vulnerable to one another's failures and sins. Precisely because God has made us that way, the Bible insists we can also be redeemed. Precisely because we bear the punishment of one another's sins, it is possible for someone to bear the punishment for our sins. Let me read to you a little poem that I always think puts us on the track of this rather well.

It was on a Friday morning when they took me from the cell,
and I saw they had a carpenter to crucify as well.
You can blame it on Pilate, you can blame it on the Jews.
You can blame on the Devil, it's God I accuse.
'It's God they ought to crucify instead of you and me',
I said to the carpenter a-hanging on the tree.
Now Barabbas was a killer, and they let Barabbas go,
but you are being crucified for nothing here below,
and God is up in heaven and he doesn't do a thing.
With a million angels watching, and they never move a wing.
'It's God they ought to crucify, instead of you and me',
I said to the carpenter a-hanging on the tree.

The greatest irony the Bible knows is this; that when you ask the Bible 'Where am I to find evidence, concrete evidence, of this God of Love you speak about in the midst of this suffering world?', the Bible says the answer to that query lies in one particular suffering man, Jesus, the carpenter a-hanging on the tree.

But of course he wasn't an ordinary man. His sufferings were innocent. Nobody was ever more righteous than he. The Bible insists upon it. But he was not an ordinary innocent sufferer like Job. In some way in Jesus, that would take us far beyond the orbit of our question tonight, God was in Christ. So somehow in this man God had come amongst us and identified with us as a human race. And he had done this with the specific purpose of

absorbing into himself the pain and suffering that is the result of the sin of the world. The punishment for our sins was upon him, that's the way the Bible puts it. Its an astonishing claim of course and unique to the Bible and that uniqueness is something we will be thinking about next week when we talk about why believe Jesus in a multi-faith society. Archbishop William Temple put it quite well some years ago in these words "There cannot be a God of love, men say, because if there was and he looked upon our suffering world his heart would break. The Church points to the cross and says it did break. It is God who made the world men say, He should bear the agony of it. The Church points to the cross and says he did bear it. The claim of Christian revelation is that God is good and Almighty and the evidence of it is this, that He did not remain aloof in Heaven presenting His condolences to us in this suffering world by long-distance telephone. He came down among us, he felt the lash of his own anger against sin by identifying with the sinful race of mankind. God even knows, says the Bible, what it is to cry out with a righteousness more justifiably outraged than ours could ever be "My God, my God, why"? It is in the assurance of that suffering God that Christians find the courage to go on believing in God in a suffering world.