

Evil and the Faithfulness of God

David Suryk, January 27, 2006

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1 Introduction

Trever told me that I should speak no longer than 30 minutes. Last November I attended a Christian graduate student conference at the University of Chicago where Dallas Willard was one of the key speakers. There was another man there named Graham Walker who teaches at a Christian college. He said one semester he looked over his student evaluations and was struck by what one of his student had written. The student wrote this, “If I had twenty minutes left to live, I’d want to spend them in Professor Walker’s class—because he makes twenty minutes seem like an hour.” I hope that won’t be true for us tonight.

Trever also said this semester you are studying Paul’s letter to the Romans. Two years ago I lead a manuscript study through the book of Romans with twelve graduate students from seven countries and five continents. One theologian and historian of the first century called Paul’s letter to the Romans one of the greatest masterpieces from the ancient world. As we worked through the letter we found that to be true page after page after page.

One thing we also discovered was that Paul did not write a summary of his theology for the Roman Christians, but rather made an argument. More to the point, Paul mustered his theology for the task of explaining God’s purposes for the world in terms of God’s faithfulness in Christ to address the evil and sin in the world, and in calling his renewed people to be the people of God for the sake of the world that he is redeeming.

I assume that most of you here tonight are Christians but who also represent a continuum of understanding of God, his word and his ways. I assume too that the topic

of evil for some of you has been up in your face, either through introductory philosophy classes, or through your own personal observation and experience. Some of you come from broken homes where divorce or death or physical, emotional or sexual abuse has done serious damage to you. Some of you have may have suffered faith-crushing events in your young lives such that right now you wonder whether following Jesus is what you should continue to do. Some of you are not yet believers but you've come tonight to hear something of the Christian faith on an important issue. Please don't take me as the only or even the best example of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Two days ago I received an email from a Dutch graduate student named Matthieu who was in our graduate Christian fellowship last year. While at the U of I he was a regular member of the worldview manuscript study which I led and which met in the home of a U of I math professor. But after Matthieu returned to the Netherlands, he found himself struggling in his faith. Here's the email he sent Wednesday:

Hi David!

How are you doing? ...

Thank you so much for your advice, David. Yes, you just contacted me at the right moment!

I'm sorry I didn't get back to you earlier, but my grandmother passed away, so I had other things on my head than emailing.

The problem for me is that I'm judging God. Please forgive me my bold writing, its almost to painfull to write it, but it is nevertheless how I feel. How could God make us like this? Why did we fall in paradise? God is Almighty, and He already decided from eternity that the humans would fall and that Jesus would be provided to save them. Is God making a show, to show of His love and forgiveness by letting people suffer and then save them? The main point is that I can't trust Him therefore. It's all getting hopeless and helpless....Best! Matthieu

Whatever your situation tonight, I hope that you hear something that helps you better understand the God who is faithful in Jesus Christ in dealing with Evil. I will also

try to clarify some confusion and misunderstandings we encounter about these topics, and help us to think our way through them.

My title suggests a reasonable outline. I'd like to first make some comments about Evil, and then about the Faithfulness of God, and what this means for us here.

2 Evil

Trever also told me not to use a lot of big words. Well I want to use at least one big word tonight that you may not have heard before, and that is the word "theodicy." Literally in the Greek "theodicy" is a compound word made up of *theos* for "God" and *dike* for "justice." It was coined in the 1690s by a philosopher named Leibniz. The idea of a theodicy is to defend God against charges of injustice, if we may speak this way.

There's an ancient Greek philosopher named Epicurus who is supposed to have set up the Problem of Evil this way: "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (Hume, *Dialogues*, 63)

Epicurus lived in the 5th Century BC and the Apostle Paul met his philosophical descendents at the Aerogapus in Athens; see Acts 17 for that. It's important, however, in thinking about theodicies to realize that *they are contextual to their times*. Epicurus was not using this phrasing of the Problem of Evil to advocate for atheism, as so many today who quote him as doing.

Rather Epicurus raised these questions to help his contemporaries respond to the evils in the world. Epicurus believed in the gods and understood their nature very well. But the gods he believed in were neither willing nor able to prevent evil. But that did not mean the gods were malevolent.

There's a very famous book by a Rabbi who personally wrestled with the Problem of Evil in the loss of a child. In *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Kushner concluded that he could not believe in a God who is evil or ignorant of evil.

And so he concluded that God is *not* all-powerful; rather, God *needs* us humans to join with him in overcoming evil. Well for Epicurus, the gods were neither willing nor able to prevent evil. For Rabbi Kushner, God is willing but unable to defeat evil. What's more, on his account, the ultimate defeat of evil is not a sure thing.

2A Four Important Developments

In thinking about how we got to our present context and the way in which these questions concerning evil and God arise for us today, it's helpful to look at four important developments. Three of these developments are nicely outlined by Princeton philosopher Mark Larrimore, and I'll add another development later. As we quickly walk through these development do not make the mistake of thinking I'm giving you merely a history lesson. Please try to locate your own thoughts and feelings as we go.

The first development is the Renaissance's revaluation of values such that *earthly happiness became the standard to be achieved in this life*. In Medieval thought, the present life is only a testing ground for the future life. In fact, suffering in this life was a sign of divine favor! Suffering in the future life of course is not a sign of divine favor, but suffering in this life meant God cared about you. They thought that idea came from Proverbs 3:12 and Hebrews 12:7 where it spoke of God disciplining or reproofing his children.

But with the Renaissance, this whole outlook and attitude changed. Not at all impressed with the Medieval insignificance of *this* life compared with the coming eternity, Renaissance thinkers sought "to make sense of the world in its own terms, and so it makes sense to us to judge God as the 'sum of his acts' in this world." (Larrimore, xxviii)

Notice what's going on here. Renaissance thinkers removed the eternal backdrop to this world and the evils in it, and sought to make sense of, and judge God by, the value

of happiness in this world and what actions of God we see in the world to promote our happiness.

That's the first development: valuing happiness on earth in the here and now as the primary value, and judging God by that expectation.

The second development, and related to the first one, is what happened in the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. With the Enlightenment, a great many people no longer believed in the Fall of human beings or in original sin, or in a personal being known as the devil or Satan. *This development* according to Mark Larrimore

weakened the explanatory force of traditional accounts of the literally earth-shattering consequences of the Fall. As long as the Fall and original sin framed human experience of the world, there could be, strictly speaking, no such thing as *innocent* suffering to wonder about. Nobody deserved happiness. Instead of complaint at injustice, response to suffering was more like the psalmist's cry of "How long, Lord?"—not a protest of innocence but prayer or lament. The focal point of reflection on evil was on sin—a subject human beings could hardly trust themselves to treat disinterestedly.

So the second development is a move away from seeing all suffering as somehow *deserved* because we are sinful human beings, to a focus on *undeserved* suffering because we now see ourselves as basically good. What's more, God was seen as the absent Landlord: the Creator of the world, yes, but no longer active within it.

A third development is the great gains of modern medicine and the dramatic rise in the quality of life and more careful attention to hygiene. Before modern medicine, pain, suffering and early death was the regular backdrop of human life. One historian argued "that only in the modern period was theodicy *possible*, and only in the modern period was it *necessary*." (Marquard quoted in Larrimore)

A theodicy is *necessary* in the modern epoch because, in the words of that same historian, "Only when the direct pressure of suffering and compassion relents, under conditions of distance, do we arrive at theodicy...[T]he modern age is the age of distance:

the first epoch in which impotence and suffering are not the taken-for-granted and normal state of affairs for human beings.” (Marquard, quoted at Larrimore, p xxix)

We can see these developments in action by looking at the interrelationships between evil and suffering. It used to be that *evil* was the source of sufferings. But now suffering is the source of evil.

Did you catch the difference there? When a culture thought there was such a thing as evil—human and demonic evil—there was a ready explanation for the sufferings of the world, but, importantly, also a solution: the Source of the sufferings is *evil*—human and demonic—and the Solution is that God must deal with evil.

But when through the wisdom of the Enlightenment those categories are eliminated, evil can no longer be the source of sufferings. And when that happens, we end up with philosophers defining morality solely in terms of pain and pleasure, for example, or solely in terms of what the majority of people in a culture call good and evil. But what’s worse, without the true diagnosis of evil, all the proposed remedies fail, and the true solution to evil is ignored or ridiculed.

A further development I think we should mention is that the Problem of Evil is now embedded in a broader problem—the *Problem of Meaning*. Once we lose the larger background categories of human rebellion and sin, of demonic powers, and, indeed, of God himself as an active agent in this world, then we have the deep problem of whether the universe is meaningful or absurd.

2B Correcting the Record about Evil

I said I wanted to correct some confusion, misunderstandings or mistakes tonight. One mistake I hear with great frequency—and by very intelligent people who should know better—is this. They say—as if it’s common knowledge—that most of the hostilities in the world are and have been by religious people or religious regimes. And

thus, *the source of evil in the world* are the various religions and the religious people who act from those religions in public and yes often in devastating ways.

On C-Span last week I watched an author by the name of Sam Harris promoting his new book, *The End of Faith: Terror, Religion and the Future of Reason*. His anger was palpable throughout most of his presentation. Mr. Harris, a self-described atheist, argued that religions generally and the fundamentalisms of Islam and Christianity in particular are the cause of more evil and deaths in the world than any other.

Hear this from Mr. Harris's own webpage promoting his book:

This important and timely book delivers a startling analysis of the clash of faith and reason in the modern world. *The End of Faith* provides a harrowing glimpse of mankind's willingness to suspend reason in favor of religious beliefs, even when these beliefs inspire the worst of human atrocities.

To be sure, people do commit horrendous atrocities in the name of religion, as the events of 9/11 clearly demonstrate. But we need only look to the record of human history to see the truth more clearly. In fact, a look at the 20th Century will suffice.

The number of people who died in World War 1 (1914-1918), called at the time "the war to end all wars," was 15 million. Into the Enlightenment's story of the goodness of humanity and the myth of human moral progress came quite literally the bombshells of World War 1. Was World War 1 the war to end all wars? By no means. Rather it produced the seeds for the bloodiest century in human history.

The Russian Civil War (1917-22) that immediately followed the War to End All Wars killed over 9 million people; Stalin's regime that followed (1924-53) killed 20 million more people.

World War 2 (1937-1945) killed over 56 million people, of which 30 million were civilian deaths. Following World War 2 was the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949) that killed 2.5 million Chinese, with Mao Zedong's regime, lasting from the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 to 1975, being responsible for over 40 million further deaths.

Need I mention the Korean and Vietnam Wars?

And it won't due to claim, as I heard one Hindu scholar say recently in a C-Span interview, that Adolf Hitler was a Christian and therefore World War 2 was started by Christians. The fact is that Hitler was not only *not* a Christian, he was in fact explicitly *anti-Christian*. According to Hitler it was incompatible to be both a Christian and German. In his Table Talks of 1941 Hitler said: "The heaviest blow that ever struck humanity was the coming of Christianity," and also this:

When National Socialism has ruled long enough, it will no longer be possible to conceive of a form of life different from ours. In the long run, National Socialism and religion will no longer be able to exist together.

Therefore, contrary to what Mr. Harris and others continue to say, more people have died at the hands of *atheists* and in the name of *godless ideologies* than in the name of religion. And contrary to so much thinking today, all religions are *not* the same, all religions do *not* in the same way understand the source of evil and how it should be addressed. But there is a deeper explanation for evil that Mr. Harris refuses to consider.

Secular psychiatrists and psychologists are notorious for locating evil behavior in everything other than human sinfulness and demonic beings. It does not follow of course that there is no such thing as mental illness due to medical and other human psychological problems. But that too is explained in the Christian understanding of the Fall and the human brokenness that resulted from the Fall.

But one noted psychiatrist came to realize that while he could explain most of his patients's conditions without recourse to the demonic and treat them accordingly, at the end of the day had to conclude that some of his patients were influenced by genuine demonic activity.

What about Postmodernism; can it provide a solution to the Problem of Evil? A core characteristic of Postmodernism is the distrust of all grand or overarching stories.

According to Postmodernism, all stories are necessarily local, and all seek power. The Enlightenment story of progress and human goodness is really just a power play. And Christians who have a Story, a Gospel to tell are also merely grabbing for power. That is, we are told that Christians are seeking to dominate others by proclaiming truth with a capital T for all the peoples of the world.

To be sure Postmodernism was correct to find the Achilles's heel of the Enlightenment boast concerning the myth of progress and expose some of the ways in which Enlightenment thinkers are really after just power.

But a fatal problem with Postmodernism is that it offers no overarching account of evil—it cannot do that—and so it also has no remedy to offer the evil that all people experience. If everything is ultimately reduced to grabs for power, then even socially-constructed notions of good and evil are themselves merely grabs for power. Even Postmodernism as an ideology is merely a grab for power.

The biblical account of evil as caused by human and demonic choices in rebellion against the Creator God is the best explanation for all the evils in the world. I've not mentioned for the sake of time much about the natural evils—tsunamis and earthquakes—that have such devastating power. Somehow at the Fall, the earth itself was affected by the human rebellion of the God's designated stewards of creation. In Romans 8 you'll learn more about how creation itself is healed with the full redemption of God's New Humanity at the day of resurrection.

In the face of such evil, it is right to call out to God for him to do something. Let's look now at what God has done and is doing.

3 The Faithfulness of God

God's answer to the Problem of Evil is found in the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This last part of my talk is about the Cross and Resurrection.

3A The Cross

This past week you studied Romans 1:18-32 in your small groups. That very first sentence talked about the wrath of God being revealed from heaven against human ungodliness and wickedness. The wrath of God speaks both to evil and to the faithfulness of God, and both are met in Christ at the Cross. Christ took upon himself the evil and sin of the world so that at the Cross it could be dealt with.

One very common misunderstanding that both non-Christians and Christians make about the wrath of God is *thinking that the opposite of God's wrath is his love*. This wrath-love dualism is so common today that it blinds us to important truths. The opposite of God's wrath is not love, but rather it would be God's *inactivity toward the sin and evil in the world*. The *opposite of God's wrath* would be God passively letting evil consume the world that he had made and doing absolutely nothing about it.

Notice what's going on here. If God did *not* hate evil and act against human sin, wickedness and rebellion, then God would be neither a God of love nor a God of wrath. That god would be very different from the God that's revealed in the Bible; it would not be the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Think now for a moment about the good creation. Genesis 1:31 says, "God saw everything he made, and indeed, it was very good."

However we understand what it means that God called his creation good, it must include the fact that it was good in the sense of *being the suitable arena in which there would need to be a sacrifice for sin as the way to defeat evil and redeem the world*. The world that God spoke into being was one in which he already knew his human creatures would rebel against him, and that he would have to do something about it—and at tremendous cost to himself.

Listen to theologian R Scott Rodin's comments from his wonderful book, *Stewards of the Kingdom*:

God's covenant with his creatures predated creation itself, which means we must take care never to separate creation from covenant. Our redemption was prefigured in our creation. God the Father chose us in Christ "before the creation of the world" (Eph 1:4). Our names are written in the book of life "belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Rev 13:8). Covenant theology recognizes that there is an unbreakable link between creation, covenant, redemption, reconciliation and final glorification. God's plan for creation assumed the Fall, anticipated the incarnation, cross and resurrection, and moved creation toward the second coming. (63-64)

Some of you here tonight might be thinking that *God should have created a world in which evil—human, satanic or otherwise—was not possible*. Two responses.

First, Christian philosophers such as Peter Kreeft and Alvin Plantinga have argued that God could *not* have created a world that included human beings who would freely love him, *without at the same time those same human beings also able to freely choose to rebel against him*.

Here we highlight the great good of love that is freely given and that is freely received. This insight, I think, adds further depth to every single passage that speaks about love in the Old and New Testaments. Page after page the Bible is about the love of God and what it means for humans created in his image to love him back as well as to love one another. God's love was freely given and God desires our love freely given in return.

And so these Christian philosophers say this kind of love is not possible without also the possibility of human rebellion against God. That's one response.

Here's a second response—and it points both to Mystery and to God's Love: If God could have created a world of human beings made in his image that needed redeeming at the cost of his beloved Son, then probably *he would have done so*.

But some might object that God could have redeemed the world *without the*

Cross, without Christ's death. Perhaps he could have just forgiven us and left it at that.

A problem with that objection is that Jesus himself in the Garden of Gethsemane understood that there was no other way. If there were a way that bypassed the Cross, then God probably would have taken it to spare the death of his beloved Son.

Ultimately it's a mystery to us why God could call his creation good knowing ahead of time both the evil that his human creatures would unleash on one another and on the natural environment, and that he would have to send his beloved Son into this world to die on a tree in order to deal with the evil of the world. But that's where Mystery and God's Love meet—at the Cross.

But some might object also that if creating a world where evil is not possible, and *this* is something that God could *not* do, then God is not all-powerful after all.

The problem with that response is that it's not a limitation on God's power if he cannot do that which is logically impossible. Thus God, for example, cannot create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it, or God cannot create a round square.

And so, given the *kind of love that God values*—and which we also value, by the way—God created a world in which human rebellion and evil could occur. But also, in God's faithfulness to the world, he was ready, willing, and able to redeem it—and at great cost to himself.

I also want to mention here in this context an objection to the book of Joshua where God tells the Israelites to go into the Promised Land and take possession of it.

The objection here is that somehow God is unfair and unjust to command the Israelites to kill the inhabitants of the Land. I've spoken with many people who find the Old Testament a long bloody story of human violence and who say that God is behind that violence especially in the story of Joshua.

It's crucial to remember that the inhabitants in the Land were under God's judgment for their wickedness. Right after God made his covenant with Abraham in

Genesis 15, God told Abraham that in the fourth generation his descendents would go into the Promised Land *when the sin of the Amorites is complete*. And at the end of Leviticus 18—which is written to the fourth generation of Abraham’s descendants—we learn that the Land *vomited out those inhabitants because of their sin*.

Now notice what Joshua did as he took city after city after city. Under God’s direction, Joshua was to kill the inhabitants, but each king of each city was to be hung a tree. The law in Deuteronomy had already been given to the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. And in Deut 21:23-24 it says that whoever is hung on a tree is under God’s curse. The apostle Paul used that very language in Galatians 3:13-14 in speaking of Christ’s work on the cross for the sake of Abraham’s descendants by faith.

This picture in the book of Joshua of a king representing his people on a tree prefigured and looked forward to the death of King Jesus on the Cross. Christ is the King who represents all who by faith are in Christ. You will see the apostle Paul explore these issues in your Romans Bible study this semester. And if you have not yet found your way into a small group, don’t go to sleep tonight until you’ve signed up for one. Now to resurrection.

3B Resurrection

Have you ever wondered why Jesus had to be raised on the third day, as opposed to the second day or the fourth day? Why did it have to be the third day? John’s Gospel helps us on this.

On the sixth day of the Jewish week, that is on Friday, we are told that Jesus was crucified. And John said in chapter 20 that it was *the first day of the week*, that is on Sunday, that Jesus rose from the dead. What happened on Saturday, the seventh day? That was the day on which Jesus rested after his work of the new creation. John wants us to hear that Christ’s death and resurrection is all about God’s faithfulness to deal with evil and with human and cosmic rebellion, so that he could bring forth a New Creation.

Listen to these words from 1 Corinthians 15:

20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. **21** For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. **22** For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. **23** But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. **24** Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. **25** For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. **26** The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Paul tells us here that we now live our lives between Christ's resurrection and the day when, at Christ's return, we too will receive resurrection bodies just like his resurrection body. Jesus's own resurrection was always meant to prefigure or look forward to the day when all who are in Christ will receive resurrection bodies.

We live in the Overlap of the Present Age which is dying and will come to an end at the day of our resurrection, and the Age to Come that had begun in Christ's resurrection from the dead and the giving of the Holy Spirit.

But verse 25 is troubling, isn't it? Paul said there that Christ "must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet."

Here again is where questions arise as to whether God is faithful to deal with evil. If Jesus Christ reigns now as the Lord of the world, how come there's so much evil still in the world? You and I have surely asked that very same question. What's Christ up to?

Back to John chapter 20. On the first day of the week, the first day of the New Creation, when Jesus was raised from the dead, he appeared to his disciples in the locked room. Now hear verses 21 and 22:

21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." **22** And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit...."

As God in Genesis 2 breathed into Adam giving him life, so God the Son breathed on his disciples the Holy Spirit creating his New Humanity that is now dead to sin and alive to God. All who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ by faith, have their sins forgiven and receive the Holy Spirit. God is faithful to redeem all who are in Christ by recreating them into the image and likeness of his Son—that's where Romans 8:29 comes in.

But God is also faithful to redeem his creation in large part through the work of his New Humanity in Christ who now are salt and light to the world.

If Enlightenment thought had too high a view of fallen humanity, we Christians have too low a view of God's Redeemed Humanity.

In God's faithfulness to the world to do something about evil, sin and death, he sent his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And here we learn that God is faithful to do something about the injustice and violence in the world by sending his New Humanity in the power of the Holy Spirit to work out the implications of the Cross and Resurrection, on the ground, in your own lives, in your relationships, yes, but also in the workplace, in corporations and in your communities, in the schools, in your service in the government—all aspects of society. You who are going into engineering and technology are to do so as God's New Humanity just as those who go into the so-called helping professions.

There's a story from Auschwitz where one prisoner asked another prisoner, "Where is God? The second prisoner replied, "Where is man?"

I think we need to ask ourselves, "Where is God's New Humanity?"

Right now perhaps you feel the tug of evil in your own heart and life.

If you are not yet someone who is "in Christ" by faith in the Lord Jesus, then you are still enslaved to sin and death. To use Paul's category of thought in his letter to the Romans, you are still in Adam. I now urge you to turn to Christ for freedom; believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, be reconciled to God and then become an agent of reconciliation.

To those of us who are in Christ, we have been set free from slavery to sin and death. We are part of God's New Humanity in Christ. But Paul calls us to put off our old self that led to death, and to put on our new self that is being created back into the image and likeness of God in Christ. We must stop abusing our freedom in Christ by selfish living, and be the salt and light Christ redeemed us to be.

If you're like Matthieu whose email I read at the beginning, it's okay to take your hurts, questions, doubts and even anger to Christ. Share them with other Christians. But don't give up; Christ doesn't give up.

We still engage in spiritual warfare, Paul tells us in Ephesians 6. But Christ has overcome the world, disarmed the powers of darkness, and is redeeming his good creation. May we all do our part as we anticipate the New Inheritance, which is no longer that little strip of land in the Middle East over which so much blood continues to be spilled, but is rather nothing less than the New Creation. Amen.