

## THE GOODNESS OF GOD

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 15, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

When man sees the evidence that is all about him he cannot but be impressed with the overwhelming proof that there really is a God. Our universe is too remarkably made not to have come from the mind of a great designer and creator. However, there are problems. There are questions for which man does not have answers. Most of these have to do with relatively unimportant matters, but a few are of major significance.

One of the most difficult is the question "How could a God of infinite goodness create a world with so much evil in it?" Many intelligent people are deeply disturbed by the evil in our world, and cannot understand how God allows such evil to exist. They speak of sickness and suffering which are known wherever men live. They are impressed with the problem of death itself. Man's inhumanity to man, as seen in war, is also mentioned. Similarly, they speak of man's misuse of other men, and even the subjugation of whole races of men. The universality and ugliness of sin are also pointed out. Then, too, and perhaps most difficult of all to deal with, there are the earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, tidal waves, and other violent, destructive acts of nature.

### Two Premises

As we face this heavy objection to our Christian faith, I would point out two preliminary considerations. First, man's knowledge is limited. Just as a child cannot possibly understand the adult world, so man does not have the perspective to understand fully the nature of God and the makeup of the universe. Man's "line of sight" is often limited and his conclusions often inaccurate. This, if we are honest, all of us must admit from our own experiences. As Solomon said it in the Proverbs, "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." (Prov. 14:12). Man is often mistaken.

Just here I should like to refer to the fact that the Hebrew language is read backward. Most of us are aware that when one sits down to read a page of Hebrew he begins at the right side of the page and reads across to the left, just reverse of the way we read English. I have said this in order to say that often life needs to be read backward. There are many times when we cannot possibly understand a situation in life until we have heard the rest of the story. For example, in the Genesis story of Joseph it was utterly unintelligible until the story was complete. This boy could not possibly have understood why his brothers sold him into bondage, and why his father did not buy him back from the slave traders--that is, until the rest of the story unfolded, and he could comprehend the purpose of it all. Reading backward, every step of his life showed a beautiful plan.

The second important premise is that man's conception of what is good is often mistaken. The pleasure-pain view of existence is shallow and incomplete. Yet, almost all mankind considers a thing good if it gives pleasure and a thing bad if it causes pain. The summum bonum is interpreted as happiness. Every story must end, "A good time was had by all ... And they lived happily ever after."

This is indeed a shallow, incomplete view of life. We human beings are not the center of the universe, and God is not our private lackey or servant. To evaluate everything as good or bad in terms of whether it gives us pleasure or pain is certainly self-centered. There is greater good than pleasure and greater evil than pain. Man does not exist primarily to be happy. God wants him to be happy, but there is a higher goal. Man, the creature, exists in order to glorify God the Creator.

### Underlying Principles

Now let us come to the real explanation of why there is evil in the world. We suggest four great, basic, underlying principles of our universe. Note each one carefully. Note that in order for each one to be present there are certain attendant circumstances which could not in the very nature of reality be avoided.

The first of these underlying principles is the regularity of law. We find it stated in the scriptures when we read, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Gen. 1:1). As that opening chapter of the opening book of the Bible unfolds we read that the various kinds of vegetation and of animals brought forth "after their kind." Other evidences of an ordered system of natural law are also set forth. In Gen. 8:22 as a further example, we read, "While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease." God planned the universe so that it would be run by a system of natural laws, and by these laws everything functions. Without these laws life would be impossible. A world of chance would be chaotic.

It is precisely because of the universal laws of nature that storms occasionally occur. God's plan of causing the sun to evaporate the oceans, of winds to carry the moisture in the form of clouds over the mainland, and of atmospheric conditions which cause rain creates the possibility of floods. As the waters flow down the mountains and through the valleys, as the streams carry the torrents away, it is inevitable that occasionally there will be whirlpools with attendant danger to human life. The winds that normally purify the atmosphere occasionally cause a tornado.

Gravity can be cruel when someone falls from a height and is crushed in the fall, but without gravity it would not be possible for the normal activities of life to go on. Similarly, fire is destructive on occasion, but without fire it would not be possible to cook man's food, nor to provide power for many of life's activities. Sunshine and rain are great blessings, though occasionally the sun causes droughts and the rain causes floods. It is necessary to look at the total picture. If we look at all of nature we find that it is very good indeed. The occasionally destructive aspects of nature are so few in comparison with its blessings that the verdict must be solidly in favor of God's system.

Secondly, there is the freedom of man's will. When God chose to make man he paid him great honor by giving him freedom of will, and making him a creature of choice. Man is no robot or automaton, but a creature of free will. In this crucially important act God did two things. He lifted man above the realm of the animals and above all inanimate objects on earth, giving him a dignity and an importance that are unique. At the same time God made it possible for man to choose evil as well as good. There was no other way. If man was to have freedom of will, it was inevitable that he might choose evil as well as good. Man's misuse of his freedom has brought untold suffering to humanity.

In spite of the charges of some, God is not responsible for much or even most of man's sufferings because they come from man's own unfortunate choices. As an example, we might mention a woman who married a tyrannical husband and then blamed God for her unhappy state. Actually, however, God did not cause her to marry this particular man. That was her own decision, and her suffering was a result of her wrong choice. In a similar manner, when a drunken driver veers across the center line of the highway and causes a collision that takes the lives of several people, this is not God's act. It is a result of man's sin against his fellowman.

There is no possession which man has that is more important than his ability to make choices, yet there is no element of his nature which has been so costly. When God made man with the capability of reaching the stars, inevitably there was connected with it the possibility of plumbing the depths.

The third underlying principle of our universe is the value of imperfect conditions. The problems, imperfections and challenges which our world contains give us opportunities for growth and development which would otherwise be impossible. Sorrow and suffering help us to develop traits which fit us for eternity. A teenage boy does not develop his muscles by lying in a hammock in the shade in the summertime and eating ice cream. Rather, he develops his muscles by the hard labor involved in mowing a lawn, constructing a house, or plowing a field. The imperfections of our world serve a purpose in allowing us to grow and develop into mature, responsible beings in a way which would otherwise not be possible.

The fourth underlying principle is the inter-dependence of human life. It was the apostle Paul who said, in Romans 14:7, "None of us liveth unto himself, and none dieth to himself." Much of man's suffering results from the actions of other people, people of the past as well as the present. The misdeeds of our ancestors continue to plague us, and our misdeeds will inevitably be a burden for our children. But to avoid this it would be necessary for each one of us to live in an airtight compartment. Only in this way could we avoid the interconnections of life, and thereby avoid the results of the misdeeds of others.

Yet, I am convinced that our greatest blessings come from the love which we give to others, and the love which we receive from others. Without this interconnectedness, life would be barren and largely meaningless. The avoidance of all contact with other human beings might save us some suffering, but it would cost us the greatest joys and pleasures of life.

#### The Real Nature of God

A. D. Wilder Smith, a highly respected medical doctor on the staff of the University of Illinois Medical School in Chicago, has written a very remarkable book, *Man's Origin, Man's Destiny*. In this recent publication he said, "The solution to the problem of pain ... is to be found just where solutions to many other problems of life are to be found, namely, in the character and life of Christ. Let us ask ourselves first of all what Christ's attitude to pain and death was. This we can rapidly ascertain if we look at his most prominent activity in life, which was, of course, going about healing and doing good. This means simply that he made it his job to reverse pain and death. He raised Lazarus and Jairus' daughter from the dead. But this attitude was not confined to Christ, for his apostles referred to death as the last enemy. Christ referred to people with certain sicknesses as being bound by the devil. If Jesus Christ considered himself to be God's Son (there is no doubt that he did), he considered that he was doing God's works in reversing pain and death, the enemies of God. He said he was doing what he saw the Father doing. Thus Christ reflected God's attitude when he went about reversing pain and death and their consequences ... On reading the Bible more carefully, there is really never any question of reconciling God with pain, suffering and death as though he were the real author of them--even though he may use pain for his purposes. If Christ gives any indication at all of God's attitude to pain and death, then God is the great reverser and enemy of pain and death."

To this we would add the eloquent words of Ashley S. Johnson, in his remarkable book, *The Life of Trust*, "The devout student of nature cannot fail to see that all things physical and material were created to supply the constitutional needs of man; that he ... cannot frame a wish for which nature has not an apt and abundant satisfaction. For man the sun rules the day, and the moon rules the night, and for his happiness the countless and unnamed worlds exist in fathomless space. For him the seasons, winter with her ice and snow,

spring with her swelling buds and enchanting prophecies, summer with her harvest and fragrance, and autumn with her bursting garners and crimson and gold, roll on in endless progression. For him nature attunes her voices, and for him changing yet changeless beauty lives in perennial youth. For him the oceans wash his shores, the rivers murmur anthems of peace, mountains lift their snow-crowned peaks into the blue vaults above, and grass carpets the valley on which he walks. Nature's God has been prodigal and He has written over all His work, in every language and dialect in words too plain to be misunderstood, that all these things are for the happiness of man ... The earth was made for man ... The heavens above it, the atmosphere around it, and its countless variety of products all unite in proclaiming it a suitable dwelling-place for him who is the offspring of God."

### The Scriptures Agree

The scriptures also point to the goodness of God. David wrote,

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want,  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;  
He leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul!  
He guideth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake ...  
Surely goodness and lovingkindness shall follow me all the days of my life;  
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Ps. 23:1-2, 6).

David also wrote,

Oh how great is thy goodness,  
Which thou hast laid up for them that fear thee,  
Before the sons of man!" (Ps. 31:19).

In yet another Psalm are these words,

Oh give thanks unto Jehovah for he is good;  
For his lovingkindness endureth forever." (Ps. 136:1).

As we come to the New Testament, we find these words of the Lord himself, "Love your enemies, and do them good, and lend, never despairing; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be sons of the Most High: for he is kind toward the unthankful and evil. Be ye merciful, even as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:35-36). At another time Jesus said, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16). This passage is especially meaningful. The phrase, "God so loved the world," suggests the breadth of God's love, as it reaches out across the world and includes all human beings. The expression, "gave his only begotten Son," suggests the depth of God's love. The phrase, "whosoever believeth," suggests the length of God's love, as it reaches down through all of time and includes all of those who will come to him in faith. Finally, the words, "have everlasting life," indicate the height of God's love, as it lifts men from the earth and provides for them an eternal home in heaven. Finally, as evidence of God's goodness, I would mention I John 4:3 where we read simply, "God is love." This is the most accurate, most comprehensive, and most meaningful of all attributes of God. Love is his very essence.

### Conclusion

There are questions for which we have only partial answers. However, there are also certainties upon which we can depend. Nothing is more certain than God's love. Similarly, the evidence of God's goodness is overwhelming. In the midst of a sometimes confusing world we have God's promise that "To them that love God, all things work together for good." (Rom. 8:28). God's way is the best way. It is the most reasonable way. Ultimately, it is the only way.