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The Problem of Evil and the Firmness of Faith

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I was listening to the Bible in a Year Podcast when these lines came up from 2 Chronicles 28:3: “[King Ahaz] burned incense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burned his sons as an offering, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.”

“Pause that,” interrupted my six-year-old. I hadn’t noticed that he was listening more attentively than I was. “Why did he do that?” My son understood the gravity of it, and his tone revealed abhorrence and confusion. “Because he was evil,” came my startled, less-than-inspired response. But little kids have a way of outsmarting their parents, especially when they receive unsatisfying answers. “Why was he evil?”

“Because he chose to disobey God,” my wife chimed in. **“When we don’t follow God’s will, men’s hearts can turn to darkness, and then they do evil things as a result.”** Our son, well-schooled in *The Lord of the Rings* and improperly schooled in Batman, courtesy of his older brothers, comprehended the connection between darkness and evil. The conversation ended there.

But I continued to consider, not so much his question – the perennial problem of evil – but how the reality of evil impacted him on a visceral level. I typically think about “the problem of evil” in academic and apologetic contexts – not a bad thing,

though **the classroom evacuates evil of its shock and gravity.**

When we face evil squarely, rational responses, though they certainly play a role in grappling with it, can clang like a bamboo arrow striking a steel tank. Which may explain why, when I encounter news of horrific evil, I move on to the next thing as quickly as possible rather than dwell on it.

The academic and apologetic answer to the problem of evil is correct. God, who is infinitely good and complete in Himself, created the world and the beings within it to share in His love. All that He created is, unlike Him, finite and subject to change; the intellectual beings made in His image possess freedom through which they have the power to choose the good. But change can cause destruction, as with natural disasters and diseases; freedom can be misused to inflict evil on others. **God permits evil to happen only because He can bring a greater good from it.**

This is a rational argument. But given the haunting force of evil, this argument requires firm faith to be truly accepted. Those without faith stand befuddled at best, angry at worst, as they watch evil unfold or endure it themselves. Twenty years ago, the Manhattan Institute's Heather Mac Donald, a nonbeliever, wrote that attributing good to God but giving Him a pass for evil seems like "double standards of a kind that would make even affirmative action look just."

A major ingredient to forming a firm faith is a proper understanding of God, who cannot be understood as just another person, or even a super person, subject to the same judgments, or double standards, that we are. He is fundamentally other than what we are.

When we judge Him by human standards – including asking why He did not intervene to halt an evil – we make a huge category mistake akin to judging dogs by human standards.

Should a pet dog that attacks and kills a human being be read his rights, placed in jail, assigned a lawyer, forced to wait months for a trial, given a selection of fine clothing for the occasion, and allowed the choice of whether to testify on his own behalf?

To us, the fact that God allows evil seems absurd, contradictory, unjust, cruel, tyrannical. But God inhabits a realm beyond our comprehension. Acknowledging this fact is not giving Him a pass; it's recognizing the reality of who and what He is.

God's being includes His omniscience. To Him, unlike us, the past, present, and future comprise a single moment. He knows the good that will follow an evil before the evil occurs; we have to wait and wonder whether that good will ever come, and even speculate what that good may be. "Under our condition of mortality," St. Augustine writes in the *City of God*, "we cannot observe the whole design [of the universe], in which these small parts, which are so disagreeable, fit together to make a scheme of ordered beauty."

Perhaps the greatest challenge of faith is failing to trust that God is the loving Father that He has revealed Himself to be. When things don't break our way, we quickly can succumb to the pernicious temptation of cutting God down to our level. "Let us reduce God to our own image, in the image of man we weakened Him, petty and sniveling we created Him."

Then it is easy to blame God for our problems and indict Him when He doesn't come through. The indictments generally fall along three lines: He doesn't exist, He doesn't care, or He is vindictive.

None of these conceptions is true. The importance of the academic argument that describes God's nature and how evil coexists with Him returns with force here. It can rebuild the trust – the faith – we have lost if we are willing to wrestle with it seriously.

The argument doesn't have visceral force; it cannot heal wounds or take away pain. **Yet it can help us to heal**

spiritually by guaranteeing that, despite how awful things may be, God *has to be* in control; He *has to be* with us; He *has to have a plan* for the situation, even if we don't see it.

When faith fortifies reason, especially the Church's theological reasoning, reason can, perhaps unexpectedly, fortify a faith, wavering and challenged, and in need of a boost.

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