

Does Suffering Have Meaning?
Rev. Vladimir Berzonsky
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It's odd how the human looks for meaning in the meaningless, trying to make sense of the unfathomable. This is nowhere as evident as in our coming to grips with evil and suffering.

In reading through a set of examination papers I found it interesting that so many of the young people who were asked if God wills suffering and tragedy answered affirmatively. We know that their answers were prompted by the logical application of God's Omnipotence and His action in creation; yet it is neither traditional nor biblical. It is identifying the Kingdom of God with the present world.

In the story of the Fall, man chose to live apart from the Will of God, and so was put out of Paradise.

In the book of Job, nowhere does it mention God's willing evil to befall His servant; He merely doesn't interfere with the forces of evil in the world.

Throughout the Old Testament the Lord has "agreed" to be the God of His chosen people, to bless and watch over those who do His will. For example, the Psalmist who prays:

"I am a man who has no strength,
Like one forsaken among the dead...
Whom Thou doest remember no more;" (Psalm 88:4)

takes for granted that the Lord of the living will not hear him when he is dead; apparently God has nothing to do with Sheol or death.

Even our own priests often console the bereaved family after a funeral by telling them that the death of their beloved was the will of God. What kind of God would want us to die?

Evil, suffering and death are negations of that which God created; as such, they are not logical or meaningful in the sense that God created the world according to His plan, which proceeds from divine logic. What is difficult for us to comprehend is God's tolerance of evil; we generally say that we are exposed to evil because God wants the man to freely choose to divorce himself from evil and to be united with Him.

A great mystic, Jacob Boehme, made the acute observation that any being or principle, in order for it to manifest itself, must presuppose its opposite. For instance if light is to shine, what can it shine through, if there be no darkness? To further apply that theory, could we know peace if we were never troubled; or sound health, if we never felt pain?

Those who reject God on the basis that His creation is imperfect, such as Ivan Karamazov, in Dostoyevsky's "Brothers Karamazov" demand from God perfection in every aspect of our world. If this world is not the Kingdom of God, then there is no God; they will not hear of postponing that Kingdom until some time in the future, neither will they accept an inauguration of God's Kingdom already at work in the world, which is a basic principle of Christianity.

We Christians believe that with the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, all the negative powers, especially death itself, were robbed of their binding force on mankind. In the Scriptures we find the intelligent skeptics who were opposed to Jesus concerned to find out by what authority He performed miracles; they were aware that the power He possessed was greater than the power of the forces of sin, sickness and death. (Mark 11:27)

Once when the scribes witnessed the Lord casting out demons, they reasoned that Jesus was Himself possessed by demons, so that His authority was actually of the devil. (Mark 3:20) Jesus called this reasoning illogical; why would the forces of evil work against each other? Rather, they are united against their common enemy, God, and His creation. Here Jesus makes a very interesting statement: "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man; then indeed he may plunder his house." (Mark 3:27)

Who is this strong man? It is the devil himself, who is in control of the world, and who exercises authority over it. Who then is the one even stronger, who enters the house and binds up the strong man and robs what is in the house? Jesus is telling us that He Himself is the one whose authority is greater than Satan's; He has come to lay claim to the world, which is what is meant by the house of the strong man.

Jesus Christ is on our side if we are opposed to evil and suffering. His power and authority are great than that of the evil forces.

The parable of the strong man's house bears a further application: we should notice that the one who binds up the strong man does not take over the house, but merely plunders that is possessed by the strong man, presumably taking it to his own "house." It means that Jesus' Kingdom, as He told Pontius Pilate, is not of this world. We are again cautioned against identifying the Kingdom of God with the present world.

Finally, we might reread the story of the Creation on the first page of the Holy Bible, to see what it was God created. His words on each "day" of the creation were, "Let there be..." These are what God wanted to Be; they do not include evil and suffering, which are non-being, or else refusing to Be.

Evil and suffering will always be paradoxical and illogical; Christ came to share them with us and to overcome their demonic powers, but not to give them logical explanations. His own words were:

"In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer,
I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)