IF GOD IS GOOD, WHY DO SO MANY BAD THINGS HAPPEN?

by Jim Elliff

My visit to the small apartment of an oriental couple in the Chicago suburbs was disturbing. Here was a man who had innocently gone to work one day, but was caught in the crossfire of a gunfight. He was paralyzed from the neck down. What do you say to a man like that?

"If God is all-powerful and is also good, why is there pain in the world?" The question is among the most difficult to answer, especially when we see "innocent" people destroyed by pain inflicted by others.

It is true that God is good and that in the world under His control bad things happen—at least bad things happen from the human perspective. When I discipline my child, it might seem like a bad thing from his vantage point, but it is a good thing from mine. When a nation wins a just war, it might seem bad from the enemy's side, but it is good for the world. So at least part of the problem is perspective. Are we saying something is bad from God's perspective or man's?

From the creation of man and his fall into sin (Gen. 3) the Bible places man at blame for sin and evil in the world. So in one sense we always lay the responsibility for evil in the world at man's feet. But God is in control and is all-powerful. In fact, God is able to make things all good—after all, he made heaven a perfect place. So why does evil still remain on the earth? A good and just God is obviously accomplishing some good and just things through it.

The most obvious illustration of this is the death of Christ. Judas, the betrayer of Christ, and other evil men did this as an evil act, yet God planned it for our good from eternity past. Judas and the others are judged for their evil, but God is praised for the good accomplished through it. Judas broke the moral will of God (God's will related to commands), but God accomplished the sovereign will or purpose He intended. In a prayer found in Acts 4:27-29 Jesus' followers say that these evil men "gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done." (see also Acts. 2:22-23) Everyone will admit that this is hard to understand and it therefore remains in some ways a great mystery.

Here are some good reasons for what man thinks is bad:

1. **Pain and death help man comprehend the power and awfulness of sin.**
   The entrance of sin brought destruction and decay into the world. It is a good thing to be wary of the effects of evil. Our own sin might be the cause of somebody else's pain in the future. My selfishness might cause divorce, for instance. My sinful words might scar the mind of a child. Some other person's greed might cause you to lose your financial security. By seeing how bad results come from sin, we might learn to avoid it to whatever degree possible.

2. **Pain and death are sometimes used by God to judge sin?**
   The Bible is full of stories of God's use of physical pain and death to accomplish judgment. If a terrorist were killed by a bullet or a falling rock, we might say, "God has judged his actions." Don't we think that it is a blessing for society when an evil man is taken out of the way? It is a good thing for God to show us some of His judgment for sin ahead of the final judgment. Justice is always a good thing. When the flood came, the Bible states that God was actually judging the world through it. Because all men are sinners and deserving of judgment, it is entirely rational for God to do that if He wished. No person in hell who died as a result of the flood can shake his fist at God and say, "I don't deserve this!" In saying the above, I do not mean by this that everybody who dies or is in pain is being judged as you will see below.

3. **Pain and death help us know the importance of Christ's death.**
   The Bible teaches that Christ bore the sins of people who have rebelled against him. Look at the awfulness of that sin. Look at what it wreaks on humanity. Look how it destroys persons and families. Christ took sin on Himself at the cross in order to deliver people from the consequences of their sin. We should be thankful that God has made a way to escape the consequences of sin through Christ. The more I know about evil, the more I should want to be freed from its power, and the more I should be appreciative of the only way of ultimate escape through Christ's death.

4. **Pain sometimes brings people to Christ.**
   When a person realizes that he is weak and needs Christ, he is most willing and ready to come to Him. Sometimes God is good in removing our self-sufficiency through suffering. This friend of mine was shot in the crossfire of criminals, and is now paralyzed. He was brought to Christ through these troubles. He thanks God for this apparent "bad thing" because God was so good to bring Him eternal life through it. He misses a little bit of physical freedom now, but it will not matter much when he is in heaven for millions of years and more.

5. **Pain and conflict with evil does the authentic Christian good.**
   Paul said that his battle with "bad things" helped him immensely:

   And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

   The Bible actually says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." (Rom. 8:28)

   After Joseph had endured a lot of evil from his own brothers, he told them, "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good." Gen. 50:20 Even death is a mercy for the believer, since he goes right to heaven.

6. **Finally, bad things happen because God wants to teach Christians something about His special favor toward them.**
   In the Bible Paul said this:

   What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory..." (Rom. 9:22-23)

As the true Christian looks at the rest of the people in the world, he is reminded that God is doing something really special with him. He sees the privileges of relationship with Him, access in prayer, the tender care of a Father, and a thousand other reminders that he is receiving grace that those without Christ don't have. We learn best by comparison. We know soft because we know hard; we know up because we know down. God permits evil people to remain on the earth, doing evil, so that he can show the true Christian by contrast how merciful He is toward them. This knowledge is important to the Christian so that he will praise God correctly and exuberantly.

We can be thankful that God does not remove all evil right now. If he did, would he not remove you? Suppose he said, "Ok, I will do just as you request. I will take away all evil right this minute!" Do you think that you would be spared?

At the final judgment he will remove all wickedness from the good. We cannot be spared at that judgment on the basis of personal goodness. We simply are not righteous (Rom. 3:10). As Christ said, "There is none good but One." (Mt. 19:17) But there is a way to be spared—through Christ's perfect righteousness. The Bible says that Christ has taken our sin on Himself so that those who trust Him might be delivered forever from the penalty, power, and presence of sin in heaven.