

PRAYER: DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE

November 16, 2025
Library Bible Study

Disappointment With God-He allows Evil

- Two truths- 2: the renewal of the world
- Trust God... “Nothing can separate us from the love of God.”
- “If you seek God alone you will gain happiness.” That is the promise.

The Renewal of the World

The second Christian doctrine that speaks so well to our hearts is that of the final judgment and the renewal of the world. Many people complain that they cannot believe in a God who judges and punishes people. But if there is no Judgment Day, what about all the enormous amount of injustice that has been and is being perpetrated? If there is no Judgment Day, then there are only two things to do—lose all hope or turn to vengeance. Either it means that the tyranny and oppression that have been so dominant over the ages will never be redressed, and in the end it will make no difference whether you live a life of justice and kindness or a life of cruelty and selfishness, or it means that, since there is no Judgment Day, we will need to take up our weapons and go and hunt down the evildoers now. We will have to take justice into our own hands. We will have to be the judges, if there is no Judge.

And so the biblical doctrine of Judgment Day, far from being a gloomy idea, enables us to live with both hope and grace. If we accept it, we get hope and incentive to work for justice. For no matter how little success we may have now, we know that justice will be established—fully and perfectly. All wrongs—what we have called moral evil—will be redressed. But it also enables us to be gracious, to forgive, and to refrain from vengeance and violence. Why? If we are not sure that there will be a final judgment, then when we are wronged, we will feel an almost irresistible compulsion to take up the sword and smite the wrongdoers. But if we know that no one will get away with anything, and that all wrongs will be ultimately redressed, then we can live in peace. The doctrine of Judgment Day warns us that we have neither the knowledge to know exactly what people deserve, nor the right to mete out punishment when we are sinners ourselves (Rom 2:1–16, 12:17–21). So belief in Judgment Day keeps us from being too passive or too violently aggressive in our pursuit of truth and justice.

But it is what lies on the far side of Judgment Day that is of the deepest consolation to sufferers. Peter van Inwagen writes:

At some point, for all eternity, there will be no more unmerited suffering: this present darkness, “the age of evil,” will eventually be remembered as a brief flicker at the beginning of human history. Every evil done by the wicked to the innocent will have been avenged, and every tear will have been wiped away.²⁰¹

As we have said, there is no fully satisfying theodicy that completely shows why God is justified in allowing evil. Nevertheless, the Christian doctrine of the resurrection and the renewal of the world—when all the biblical promises and implications are weighed and grasped—comes the closest to any real explanation we have. The resurrection of the body means that we do not merely receive a consolation for the life we have lost but a restoration of it. We not only get the bodies and lives we had but the bodies and lives we wished for but had never before received. We get a glorious, perfect, unimaginably rich life in a renewed material world.

Often we can see how bad things “work together for good” (Rom 8:28). The problem is that we can only glimpse this sometimes, in a limited number of cases. But why could it not be that God allowed evil because it will bring us all to a far greater glory and joy than we would have had otherwise? Isn’t it possible that the eventual glory and joy we will know will be infinitely greater than it would have been had there been no evil? What if that future world will somehow be greater for having once been broken and lost? If such is the case, that would truly mean the utter defeat of evil. Evil would not just be an obstacle to our beauty and bliss, but it will have only made it better. Evil would have accomplished the very opposite of what it intended.

How might that come about? At the simplest level, we know that only if there is danger can there be courage. And apart from sin and evil, we would never have seen the courage of God, or the astonishing extent of his love, or the glory of a deity who lays aside his glory and goes to the cross. For us here in this life, the thought of God’s glory is rather remote and abstract. But we must realize that the most rapturous delights you have ever had—in the beauty of a landscape, or in the pleasure

in the swift answer to Elisha. He was as lovingly involved in the silence of that cistern as he was in the noisy, spectacular answer to Elisha's prayer. And indeed, it could be argued that Joseph's salvation, while less supernatural and dramatic, was greater in depth and breadth and effect. The Joseph story tells us that very often God does not give us exactly what we ask for. Instead he gives us what we would have asked for if we had known everything he knows.

We must never assume that we know enough to mistrust God's ways or be bitter against what he has allowed. We must also never think we have really ruined our lives, or have ruined God's good purposes for us. The brothers surely must have felt, at one point, that they had permanently ruined their standing with God and their father's life and their family. But God worked through it. This is no inducement to sin. The pain and misery that resulted in their lives from this action were very great. Yet God used it redemptively. You cannot destroy his good purposes for us. He is too great, and will weave even great sins into a fabric that makes us into something useful and valuable.

Ultimately, we must trust God's love. After Jacob dies, the brothers fear that Joseph may harbor residual resentment toward them and now take his revenge. Joseph, however, assembled them and said:

"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them (Gen 50:19–21).

This little speech holds enormous resources for anyone facing confusing dark times and betrayal at the hands of others. First, Joseph assumes that behind everything that happened was the goodness and love of God. Even though what the brothers did was evil and wrong, God purposed to use it for good. This is the Old Testament version of Romans 8:28—"All things work together for good to them who love God." Paul then adds a set of powerful questions and declarations and run-on sentences concluding that nothing "in all creation" can "sepa-

rate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:31–38).

Paul and Joseph are saying that, no matter how bad things get, believers can be assured that God loves them. In verses 38–39, Paul says that he is *absolutely* certain of this. He bursts the limits of language to say that neither death nor life, not heaven or hell, nothing can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. All the powers of evil inside of you and all the powers of evil outside of you cannot separate you from the love of God. Once you give yourself to God through Christ, he is yours and you are his. Nothing can ever change that.

Everything Hangs Together

The story of Joseph shows us that everything that happens is part of God's plan, even the little things and the bad things. Let me give you just one personal example of this.

I sometimes ask people at my church in New York City, Redeemer Presbyterian, if they are glad the church exists. They are (thankfully!). Then I point out an interesting string of Joseph-like "coincidences" that brought it all about. Redeemer exists to a great degree because my wife, Kathy, and I were sent to New York City to start this as a new church. Why were we sent? It was because we joined a Presbyterian denomination that encouraged church planting and that sent us out. But why did we join a Presbyterian denomination? We joined it because in the very last semester of my last year at seminary, I had two courses under a particular professor who convinced me to adopt the doctrines and beliefs of Presbyterianism. But why was that professor at the seminary at that time? He was there only because, after a long period of waiting, he was finally able to get his visa as a citizen of Great Britain to come and teach in the United States.

This professor had been hired by my U.S. seminary but had been having a great deal of trouble getting a visa. For various reasons at the time the process was very clogged and there was an enormous backlog

stories, an encounter with the silence of God hits like a shocking exception and stirs up feelings of inadequacy.

The exception, in fact, is the cheery optimism of modern consumer-oriented faith. For centuries Christians learned what to expect on the spiritual journey from the bumbling pilgrim in *Pilgrim's Progress*, from John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul*, from Thomas à Kempis's challenging *Imitation of Christ*. The one mentor who wrote most openly about the presence of God, Brother Lawrence, composed his thoughts while washing dishes and cleaning toilets.

If I suffer a time of spiritual aridity, of darkness and blankness, should I stop praying until new life enters my prayer? Every one of the spiritual masters insists, No. If I stop praying, how will I know when prayer does become alive again? And, as many Christians have discovered, the habit of not praying is far more difficult to break than the habit of praying.

Survival Strategies

I have never had to deal with the shattering kind of test that blindsided Karl, the paraplegic chaplain. But I have experienced the silence of God often enough in smaller doses to develop a series of coping strategies.

I first run through a checklist of what might be blocking communication. Have I caused the blockage itself through my deliberate sin or callous inattention to God? If the blockage seems obvious, I must clear the channel through confession.

As part of the checklist, I also examine my motives in prayer. Perhaps I have been seeking misty devotional feelings: God on my terms and not God's. Dietrich Bonhoeffer asks, "May it not be that God Himself sends us these hours of reproof and dryness that we may be brought again to expect everything from His Word?" Instead of looking for a new revelation of God's presence, perhaps I should focus instead on the revelation God has already given: in creation, in the Bible, in Jesus, in the church. Bonhoeffer cautions against the vanity of relying on exceptional spiritual experiences as if we have some entitlement. "'Seek God, not happiness'—this is the fundamental rule of all meditation," he said, then added, "If you seek God alone, you will gain happiness: that is its promise."

I often find that during a season of dryness in prayer the rest of my life comes alive. I listen more attentively to friends; ideas leap out to me from books; nature speaks to me more deeply. Keeping company with God

includes far more than the time I devote to prayer each day. God is alive all day, living both around me and inside me, speaking in a still, small voice and in other ways I may not even recognize. God is not really silent, we are deaf, says Teresa of Avila. My job is to remain vigilant like a sentry on duty, straining to hear the sounds of the night as well as the first signs of dawn.

Continuing with the checklist, I ask myself whether I have been primarily pursuing results from my prayer rather than companionship with God. When Paul prayed for removal of the "thorn in my flesh," at first he seemed puzzled by the lack of response. Wasn't God listening? Then he got a valuable spiritual insight: the affliction would force him continually to rely on God. He made an immediate adjustment, because Paul valued a close dependence on God more than physical health.

If I find no self-evident reason for God's silence in my checklist, I move on. I look on periods of blankness in prayer much as I look on suffering. It does little good, I have found, to spend much time dwelling on the "Why?" questions. The Bible itself moves the emphasis from past to future: not "Why did this happen?" but, "Now that it has happened, what can I learn from it and how should I respond?" Thus the major New Testament passages on suffering all focus on the productive value of suffering, the good that it can produce in us (perseverance, character, patience, hope, and so on).

In the same vein, I ask God to use the time of spiritual dryness to prepare me for future growth. Jesus hints at such a process in his analogy of the vine: "Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful." As any vintner or rose-grower knows, the act of lopping off lush branches, which at first seems cruel and destructive, actually causes the pruned shoots to

Forgive the Silence

MARK JARMAN, FROM "FIVE PSALMS"
IN *TO THE GREEN MAN*

First forgive the silence

That answers prayer,

Then forgive the prayer

That stains the silence.

Excuse the absence

That feels like presence,

Then excuse the feeling

That insists on presence.

Pardon the delay

Of revelation,

Then ask pardon for revealing

Your impatience.

Forgive God

For being only a word,

Then ask God to forgive

The betrayal of language.

grow back more productive than ever. A vintner explained to me that he refuses to irrigate his vines because the stress caused by occasional drought produces the best, most tasty grapes. Seasons of dryness make the roots run deep, strengthening the vine for whatever the future holds.

In the words of Henry Blackaby, "You can respond to the silence of God in two ways. One response is for you to go into depression, a sense of guilt, and self-condemnation. The other response is for you to have an expectation that God is about to bring you to a deeper knowledge of Himself. These responses are as different as night and day."

The Questions Beneath

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Unfortunately, my parents' professed faith did not translate into their family life. About the age of eight I was molested by a relative, and I was emotionally and psychologically abused and neglected by both parents for as long as I can remember. I chose to cope by being a good girl, disappearing into the woodwork and performing perfectly, never acknowledging that I was in pain.

Then at age nineteen I was involved in a horrible auto accident which took the life of my best friend. On the outside I clung to God with all my strength. But on a deeper, subconscious level I was enraged with God that he would allow such a tragedy, that he would "take" my friend from me knowing how she was family to me when I had none of my own. I became convinced in my heart that God was just like my father—uncaring, cruel, a betrayer of trust.

It wasn't until I reached my thirties, married and with children of my own, that the eruption let loose. There were headaches and numerous viruses, outbursts of anger and times of depression. Then I began to experience panic attacks. I was terrified of what was happening to me. With the help of a highly skilled Christian therapist I began an emotional journey that has often seemed unendurable and endless. The feelings that had been pushed down inside of me for so many years gushed out all at once and threatened to overwhelm me.

A large part of my healing process has been to try to come to terms with God—no small task. I have challenged him, cried with him, raged at him, and

I try to see the dry period as a time of *waiting*. After all, I gladly wait for loved ones when their planes are delayed, wait on hold for computer help lines, wait in line for a concert I want to attend. Waiting need not kill time; it uses time, in anticipation of something to come.

I once heard a theologian remark that in the Gospels people approached Jesus with a question 183 times whereas he replied with a direct answer only three times. Instead, he responded with a different question, a story, or some other indirection. Evidently Jesus wants us to work out answers on our own, using the principles that he taught and lived. Prayer, I find, often operates

clung to him. In my quieter moments, I have searched for him, implored him, worshiped him, and meditated on his Word. I have asked the hard questions, laid it all out, and waited for his answers. My journal is thick with entreaties and longings and grief. I have cried more than I ever thought humanly possible and felt such intense pain that at times I felt my body simply could not endure it.

I have a quiet joy now, a kind of mysterious settledness to be able to say that God has met me. There are times when he answers me in a surprisingly direct way through his Word. There are other times when his answers are not a response to what I asked, but satisfy me anyway. It is as though God knows that there are questions underneath my questions and those are the ones he answers. Often he simply waits, lovingly waits, for me to get it all out and get to a place where I can hear him and comprehend what he wants to say.

God has, for the time being at least, settled many of my questions by answering my crucial one: Do you love me, God? That was at the heart of my turmoil and confusion and that was the one he has answered with a resounding "YES!!" Over and over and over again God has revealed his love for me in countless, varied, and creative ways. In those moments the tears of pain become tears of joy and grateful relief to finally, finally be loved—fully, freely, eternally.

My other questions will have to wait. And I can say that, while I still feel wounded and sore and even raw in some places, I have come to know that God will give me enough of an answer to enable me to live and even to live abundantly. I am looking forward to moving out of this period of grief and into more of that abundant life!