

THE CHARACTER OF GOD

As seen in the last lesson, "*The Fact of God*," there is no real logical escape from the causal argument for God. Therefore, failing in this, atheists and skeptics take refuge in a diversionary argument, thinking that discovery of some imagined flaw in God's character will suffice to disprove His existence.

It must be emphasized, however, that our own ignorance of God's motives and purposes does not prove He has none, nor that they are not reasonable and right in the light of eternity. If God does exist, it is arrogant for His creatures to question His actions. "*Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?*" [Romans 9:20]. Our very minds were made by Him, so how can we presume to formulate autonomous judgment as to His character? What God does must be absolutely right, *by definition*. That He does exist, as an omnipotent, personal, holy God, is proved to a high probability by causal reasoning, as well as by the evidence of the person of Jesus Christ and by the testimony of His written Word. The injection of extraneous questions concerning His character into the argument can in no way refute this fact.

Nevertheless, people do raise such questions. A world which is so obviously full of evil and suffering, they say, could not be attributed to an omnipotent, holy God. If God were omnipotent and yet allows evil to develop and continue, then He is not good. If God desires to rid the world of evil, but is unable to do so, then He is not omnipotent. In either case, He cannot be an omnipotent, all-righteous God, so the objection goes, and therefore the God of the Bible does not exist.

But to pronounce such judgments as these implies omniscience on the part of the one judging. In effect, the skeptic is saying there is no possible explanation other than atheism for the present existence of both good and evil in the universe. He is professing to know so much about both past and future that there can be no possible justification for a holy God to allow evil to enter and thrive for a brief season. Since such knowledge must be infinite in breadth, he is therefore setting himself up as God. This is somewhat presumptuous. The fact that he doesn't yet understand all of God's purpose does not prove there are none.

Unless one really does have infinite and infallible knowledge of all things (and therefore *is* God), it is obviously impossible for him to *prove* there is *no* God. Consequently, he must at least confess the *possibility* that God exists. In the light of that possibility, it would then follow that he may himself have been brought into existence by God. Thus, his mind, his reasoning ability, his capacity to believe or not believe, may all likewise be creations of God.

In fact, the very attempt to reason things out and make value judgments in this way, in itself, presupposes the existence of God. If there is no God, and our brains and thoughts are mere chance assemblages of atoms and forces, then obviously there is no such thing as any rational meaning or moral value in the universe. If logic and reason do have reality, however, and if good and evil do have any meaning at all, then there is order and purpose in the universe and a moral First Cause does exist. The evidence from causation is still *there*, like it or not. Therefore, God is still there!

Now, although it is really presumptuous for us to raise doubts about God's character, it is proper for us to seek to understand His actions within the limits set by His own revelation. We

cannot comprehend their fullness, but we can at least obtain a partial and tentative understand of them to the extent revealed in the Scriptures.

In the first place, it is clear that He has chosen to create *responsible* beings, both angelic and human. Man in particular has been created in His own image and, therefore, capable of love and holiness as well as intelligence and volition. Because of His own nature of infinite love and grace, it was His good pleasure to create beings on whom He could bestow His love and grace and who, being made in His image, would be capable of reciprocating and responding to that love. "*Thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created*" [Revelation 4:11]. "*We love Him, because He first loved us*" [1 John 4:19].

It is evident that freedom to love also entails *freedom **not*** to love. Responsibility to obey implies also the ability to **dis**obey. Thus, the creation of *moral beings*, in God's image, necessarily implies the possible, though not necessary, entrance of sin and evil into His creation. Man was not to be a machine, but a *responsible, thinking, decision-making* being.

Man *has* sinned as is evident from the age-long existence of suffering and death in the world, **for these are the consequences of sin**. God, of course, foreknew all this but, rather than refraining from creating man on this account, He had already ordained and set in motion His marvelous plan of salvation.

Knowing that sin would come into His creation, God choose to manifest His redeeming grace. God's grace would be a means of man coming to know God in the fullness of His love, he would become a redeemed sinner, saved through faith in One who died for him. Man would learn of a love far deeper than one based only on God's work in creating and providing for him.

This reason probably constitutes the best explanation one could give for God's allowing sin in His universe. It at least provides a framework within which one can tentatively understand the many individual problems that seem to exist in God's moral world.

Thus, the suffering and sorrow that are now such a part of human experience are directly related to sin. "*For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now*" [Romans 8:22]. "*Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned*" [Romans 5:12]. Death - (with the suffering and sorrow that lead to, and follow from, death) - came into the world only when sin entered into the world.

It is true that not every instance of suffering is *directly* related to a particular sin committed by the sufferer. The soldier killed in the war did not start the war, nor was the blind man "*born blind because his parents did sin*" [John 9:2]. Nevertheless, "*sin was in the world*" and therefore "*death reigned...even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression*" [Romans 5:13-14].

The truth is that "*all have sinned*" [Romans 3:23] and therefore all have earned the "*wages of sin*" which "*is death*" [Romans 6:23], even though it is seldom possible to assign a

particular death to a particular sin. Because of the universal reign of sin and death, "*man that is born of a woman is of a few days, and full of trouble*" [Job 14:1].

There would be a real problem here, of course, if this situation were to continue forever. In fact, the very existence of such inequities in the present moral universe is evidence that this present world does *not* last forever. God is allowing sin and suffering to exist for a season but eventually will settle all accounts and banish these intruders once and for all. "*For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*" [2 Corinthians 4:17].

Another clue as to why God permits evil is that, in some strange way, God "*makes the wrath of man to praise Him*" [Psalm 76:10]. As Joseph told his brothers, "*Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good*" [Genesis 50:20]. somehow, in the scales of eternity, the character is purified and strengthened through suffering. "*No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nonetheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby*" [Hebrews 12:11].

Within this general framework, one can at least suggest a tentative and partial answer to the problem of evil. This frame-work consists of God's sovereign grace, man's responsible freedom, the curse on man's dominion because of his sin, God's redemptive purpose in the death and resurrection of His Son, the present process of cleansing and preparation, and God's promised consummation and restoration of all things.