

Human Strength/Divine Weakness

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"Divine folly is wiser than the wisdom of man, and divine weakness stronger than man's strength." --I Corinthians 1:25



For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, (Isaiah 29:14)

*I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.*

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believed. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

-- I Corinthians 1:18-25



suffered and was executed as a criminal.

The apostle Paul discovered early in his ministry that everyone -- both Jew and Gentile-- was scandalized by the gospel he preached.

The Jew found it unthinkable-- blasphemous even-- for Paul to suggest that God, appearing in the form of Christ,

The Greek idea of God, on the other hand, was that of an apathetic detached entity, unfeeling, above all human suffering.

That God, far from being detached, should love mankind to the point of sacrificing Himself was counter to the very nature of a God as the Greek philosophers conceived him.

For the Jew,
the weakness and suffering of God
as preached by Paul
was a scandal.

For the Gentile,
the sacrificing love of God was a scandal.

For both, divine weakness was foolishness.

Such a God as preached by Paul
would be unworthy of worship.

He would be contemptible.

And Paul's message of the cross
is even *more* offensive and scandalous
to contemporary American popular thought.
We are still made uncomfortable and uneasy
by the weakness of God.

What do we think of when we hear the words
"strength" or "strong", and "power" or "powerful"?
They convey the ideas of
domination, destruction, violence...

We use phrases such as
...a strong wind.
...a powerful explosion.
...military strength.

Do you think of God as exhibiting this kind of strength or
power?

As we consider events in the world,
many of us find it difficult to believe that,
in the words of the hymn,
"Tho' the wrong seems oft' so strong,

God is the ruler yet."

Sometimes everything seems to happen in this world
as if God were weak
and evil were strong.

I don't need to relate any specific examples of needless human
suffering--

We needn't refer back to the Holocaust to find examples...

Today's newspapers are full of them:

There are innocent victims of war
in Kosovo, in Liberia, in East Timor...

And not only victims of man-made disasters--

there are natural disasters:

there are victims of earthquakes, fires, floods...
victims of cancer, disease, poverty, starvation....

Dare to think, for example,

about the human tragedies behind these facts:

children make up 77% of the population of Uganda--
and of those children, 30% are orphans,
and 39% are themselves HIV-positive!

It's predicted that in the next ten years,

100 million children will be orphaned by AIDS!

This is suffering beyond our comprehension!

Those of our congregation who work in University Hospitals
witness human suffering daily.

And there are those in our congregation

who have personally experienced

what seems unnecessary and meaningless loss
of their own health,

or the life of a child or grandchild cut short by disease or
accident.

It's difficult to find much comfort in the message

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"Tho' the wrong seems oft' so strong,
God is the ruler yet."
Is this the way that God rules?

How could a loving and omnipotent God
allow so much pain, suffering, and misery
in the world He created?

This question is probably the biggest intellectual barrier
to belief in God.
Someone has said that God's only excuse would be
that He doesn't exist.

Many years ago when I was a college student,
I struggled with this question.
And for a time I thought that
God's nonexistence was the most probable answer.
(Of course, at that time, having experienced little of life and
suffering,
it was mostly just an intellectual exercise.)

At that time, I remember that I read and reread
a play by Archibald Macleish titled "J.B.",
based upon the story of Job.
There is a character in this play who keeps repeating a jingle
which states the dilemma well-- it goes like this:
*"If God is God he is not good,
If God is good he is not god."*

Think about that claim:
"If God is God he is not good."
If God is God, "Almighty and Omnipotent God",
he is responsible for allowing so much suffering and misery!
Common decency would require

that He step in and put a stop to it....
Any decent person would do as much.
Is He less "good" than ordinary human decency?
An omnipotent God could have stepped in
and nudged my daughter
to awaken her when she fell asleep at the wheel,
before her car left the road.
But He didn't.
Therefore, one could argue,
either he doesn't care—and then he is not all good.
Or he doesn't know,
and then he isn't omniscient and wise.
Or he isn't able to,
and then he isn't all-powerful.

The other half of the jingle says,
"If God is good, he is not god."
He must then be powerless to step in and put things right!
Would such a weak god be worthy of our worship?

This problem has challenged the minds
of the greatest Christian philosophers
and religious teachers over the ages.
Even Martin Luther admitted that
God governs the external affairs of the world
in such a way that
if you regard them and follow what you *see*,
you are forced to conclude
either that there is *no* God,
or that God is unjust.
Many philosophers have argued that
suffering is a consequence
of our being created with a free will.
And without free will,

human goodness and virtue are meaningless.
Without the possibility or even the reality
of evil in creation, the argument goes,
the "good" in creation has no meaning.

Brilliant thinkers have produced many such "theodicies" (as
they are called)
in order to justify the ways of God to man.
Speaking for myself, I don't find them at all satisfying--
somehow they all strike me as intellectual exercises,
displays of human wisdom,
not divine wisdom.

The great Russian writer Dostoyevsky
described the "problem of evil" very eloquently
in his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*.
In a long monologue, Ivan,
one of the four brothers goes on for page after page,
describing human suffering--
in particular the suffering of children.
He describes wartime atrocities
reminiscent of those which we hear about
in Liberia or East Timor.
He tells terrible stories
in which unborn babies were cut from the mother's womb...
... stories in which babies were tossed into the air
and caught on bayonets before their mothers' eyes.

He then challenges his pious brother,
"Tell me yourself, I challenge you-- answer!
Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny
with the object of making men happy in the end,
giving them peace and rest at last.
Imagine that you are doing this,

but that it is essential and inevitable
to torture to death only one tiny child
in order to found that edifice.
Would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?"
Needless to say, Ivan claims that he couldn't,
and that he couldn't accept a God who could.

Lots of other attempts at solving the problem have been made.
Some Christian gnostics
in the days of the early church
taught that God the Father
was not Himself the creator.
Instead, the creator was the Old Testament God, Yahweh,
who was an "emanation" (whatever that means!)
from God the Father of the New Testament.
These gnostics taught that it was this Yahweh who,
after the fall, created the world with all its evils.
This leaves God the Father innocent,
not getting His hands dirty in creation!

The teachings of so-called "Christian Science" are
that the world of matter which we experience,
with all its evils including sickness,
is unreal-- an illusion.
Only Mind is real.
In this way the problem of evil is "solved".
Are you sick? It's all in your mind,
the result of incorrect thinking.

You've probably heard the story
of a Christian Science practitioner
who meets a church member on the street,
and asks, "And how's your brother Joe?"
"Not so good," is the reply,

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"He's been sick for weeks."
"No, he only thinks that he's sick,"
the Christian Scientist says.
"You must remember that!"
Some time later they meet again,
and the Christian Scientist again inquires,
"How's your brother Joe?"
"Much worse!" is the reply.
"Now he thinks he's *dead!*"

Despite Mary Baker Eddy's "Key to the Scriptures",
the Bible doesn't deny the reality of evil,
it doesn't deny the reality of pain and suffering,
of death and decay.
The Bible teaches that evil and death are *very* real.
And it teaches that Christ's ministry
was the *defeat* of evil and death.

And while much evil comes at the hands of man,
and one can argue that
God granted man free will
to do even evil deeds,
it is not just human evil or immorality
which causes pain and suffering.
The Bible declares that it is not only man who has fallen,
but all of creation (whatever that may mean.)
Natural disasters-- earthquakes, floods, fires--
as well as disease and cancer...
are these part of God's plan and purposes?
Did God create the smallpox virus and the AIDS virus
to cause epidemics of disease?
And if, as it is claimed, smallpox has finally been eradicated,
and will be "extinct" when the last two laboratory cultures
are destroyed

(one in the U.S. and the other in Russia)...
Will that destruction of God's "creature",
that smallpox virus,
be God's will—
or is it thwarting some part of His plan?

Is it not a scandal that
God permits evil to occur?
Can God, like Pilate,
wash His hands of the blood
of the slaughtered innocents,
because "the ends justify the means"?

"Divine folly," Paul says,
"is wiser than the wisdom of man..."

Human wisdom,
as expressed in one of Parkinson's Laws,
says, "if anything can go wrong, it will."
Human wisdom says,
"one rotten apple spoils the barrel."
Put nice beautiful ripe firm apples
with a single rotten apple in a barrel.
Will the single rotten apple, surrounded by the good apples,
be restored by their influence?
No-- instead
just a single rotten apple spreads its rottenness!

The Second Law of Thermodynamics
says essentially the same thing--
that the universe is on the whole decaying,
being transformed into less complex structures.
Thus says human wisdom.

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Genesis, in many translations,
including KJV, RSV, and NIV,
starts with the words
"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
And the earth was without form..."

This has been used to support the theological doctrine
of creation *ex nihilo* --
creation out of nothing.

But according to most Biblical scholars,
this first verse of Genesis could instead be translated
(as suggested in a footnote of the RSV),
"When God *began* to create the heavens and the earth,
the earth was formless...."

Not "In the beginning, God created...
and the earth was without form..."

But "When God *began* to create...,
the earth was without form."

The concept of creation
suggested by this alternate translation
is that of a creation of order out of chaos--
a continuing process.

When God began to create,
all was chaos.

God is creating order,
but even now chaos remains.

Health, the orderly functioning of living organisms,
remains threatened by sickness,
the breakdown of order, i.e., chaos.

Life exists under the constant threat of death.

Shalom-- which means not just peace
but an orderliness,
right relationships

and justice in community--
shalom is often disrupted
by breakdown in relationships,
by the conflict and violence and chaos of war.

Human wisdom says that
life is fragile, vulnerable,
weak in the face of death.
So much so that for life to persist
when faced with the power of death
is contrary to human wisdom.

God is the creator and Lord of life,
of health, of shalom, of justice, of reconciliation.
But his lordship is not yet completely realized.
The kingdom of God does not yet encompass the world.
Chaos, death, disorder, evil--
these remain still, as demonic powers.

This is the basically the answer proposed by Rabbi Kushner
in his popular book,
"When Bad Things Happen to Good People".

Many may think Rabbi Kushner's answer to the problem of evil
is heresy.

But I'm convinced that there's some at least *some* truth in it.
The *complete* truth is undoubtedly too big a mystery
for the human mind to grasp!

Rabbi Kushner says that
God does not *permit* evil to occur.
The truth is that
God fights with all His strength against evil.

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God doesn't *permit* suffering.
Suffering from ill health is not God's will.
God wills good health, and wholeness.
For Him to will otherwise
would surely contradict His very nature.

I've always been uneasy
about the concept of intercessory prayer.
The idea that we can will health and wholeness for someone
more than God himself wills it--
that we can gain his sympathy,
and persuade Him to heal--
to me that notion is offensive, even blasphemous.

Of course God wants us to express to Him in prayer
our concerns for the sufferer,
and our hopes for their healing.
But surely His willingness to heal
doesn't depend upon that!
God wills healing infinitely more than we do.
And God suffers along with the sufferer
infinitely more than we do.
Jesus has shown us that
God is not only the God *of the sufferers*
but the God *who suffers*.

In his little book, *Lament for a Son*,
Nicholas Wolterstorff of Yale Divinity School writes:
"It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live.
I always thought that this meant
that no one could see his splendor and live.
*A friend said that perhaps it meant that
no one could see his sorrow and live.*"

Wolterstorff goes on to say,
"God is love. That is why he suffers.
To love our suffering sinful world
is to suffer.
God so suffered for the world
that he gave up his only Son to suffering.
The one who does not see God's suffering
does not see his love.
God *is* suffering love.

"So suffering is down at the center of things,
deep down where the meaning is.
Suffering is the meaning of our world.
For Love is the meaning. And Love suffers.
The tears of God are the meaning of history.

"But mystery remains:
Why isn't Love-*without*-suffering the meaning of things?
Why is suffering-Love the meaning?
Why does God endure his suffering?
Why does he not at once relieve his agony by relieving
ours?
God's work to release himself from his suffering
is his work to deliver the world from its agony;
just as *our* struggle for joy and justice
is our struggle to relieve *God's* sorrow."

I sincerely believe that's true--
but *why* must it be true?
Can there be no other way?

Modern Western Christians
usually think of the world
as consisting of only mind and matter.

The language of "demons" in the New Testament makes little sense.

Serious evil is thought to lie mainly in the human mind, in the form of sin, and Christ's work is thought to be exclusively that of "saving men from their sins".

It is thought that if all men were to be cleansed of their self-centeredness, if they were to let their lives be subject to God and filled with love, then the Kingdom of God would be brought to its fulfillment....

Because the evil of this world results from the conduct of men, from their rebellion against God.

But the New Testament view appears to be different. While men may participate in evil and let it shape their lives, they are not its source....

Demons are its source-- what Paul calls the "powers and principalities of this world."

Striving against the lordship of God is the lordship of Satan in the demonic order.

The New Testament portrays the devil with some of the same imagery it uses of God.

It speaks of the devil's power and dominion in Acts where Paul relates the words of Christ which he heard on the Damascus Road, Paul's commission given him by Christ:

"I send you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light,

from the dominion of Satan to God, so that, by trust in me, they may obtain forgiveness of sins, and a place with those whom God has made his own."

The New Testament speaks of the devil's children in I John 3:8: "The man who sins is a child of the devil, for the devil has been a sinner from the first. And the Son of God appeared for the very purpose of undoing the devil's work." John even refers to Satan's synagogue in the book of Revelations.

Of course we can't accept the ridiculous imagery of the past-- the red devil complete with horns and pitchfork-- and perhaps we don't even wish to consider Satan as a personality.

Nevertheless it seems difficult for me to avoid acknowledging the fact that there are demonic powers in the world,powers which are in opposition to God's purposes,powers of death and decay opposed to God's creative power of life,powers of sickness and disease opposed to God's healing and sustaining power of health,powers of conflict, disruption, and violence opposed to God's peace and reconciliation,hate opposed to love,chaos and anarchy opposed to God's shalom,powers of darkness opposed to the power of light.

Recognition of demonic power would put the whole matter of human evil in a new light.

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For it means that when men do wrong,
they are not generating some kind of perverse destruction
from within themselves,
but are simply submitting to the power of Satan.
Jailers and police in Nazi Germany, Chile, Argentina, Russia,
etc.,
who were guilty of the most atrocious tortures,
were sometimes described as decent people,
loving fathers, good neighbors,
not the monsters we expected them to be.
They are not so much consciously deciding
to do cruel and evil deeds instead of good.
Rather, they are deciding that
satanic power rules them and their world,
and are submitting themselves to it.

In Ephesians 2:1 we are told,
"The time was when you were dead
in your sins and wickedness,
when you followed the evil ways of this present age,
when you obeyed the commander
of the spiritual powers of the air,
the spirit now at work among God's rebel subjects."

The New Testament does not view man's predicament primarily
in terms of his good or bad actions,
but in terms of the kind of power he worships
as ruling his life and his situation.
For this reason, Christ's new commandment is *not* that
you shall do good.
It is that
you shall love the God who is revealed in Jesus,
with all your heart and soul and mind and strength,
and shall give allegiance

to no form of powerfulness but his.

However, if a person sees himself in a world
in which personal fulfillment depends on
exercising a power which dominates,
a violent power,
then such a person cannot love
in the New Testament sense.

There is no point in attacking selfishness,
in urging people to get busy and help others,
for if a person sees himself in a world ruled by God,
then such a person would naturally *not* act selfishly.

If, on the other hand, a person sees himself in a world
where strength lies in domination and violence,
then such a person would be *foolish* to act unselfishly.

Which is a more clear display of strength--
to create and sustain,
or to destroy?

According to human wisdom,
destructive power is the greater--
with nuclear weapons being a good extreme example.
According to human wisdom,
to align oneself with God's weakness is foolishness.

This view I've presented of God's weakness is unsettling,
a scandal to orthodox thought.

Are we to solve the problem of evil
by denying the omnipotence of God?

I understand that many Christians consider such a weak God
to be unworthy of worship.

But they are defining omnipotence in terms of human strength.

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An omnipotent Christ for them would be a Superman--
not the Christ of the New Testament.

Many of these same Christians put their trust
in the demonic power of military might,
because in their human "wisdom"
they see it as overwhelmingly stronger
than the nonviolent love of Christ.

There are Christians who support
using nuclear weapons as a threat,
and who support the death penalty.
But divine weakness is stronger even than human strength.

What idea do you have of God?

....a God who is rich because we are poor,
....a God who is powerful because we are weak,
....self-sufficient because we are dependent,
....a God invulnerable because we are vulnerable.

Adam had this idea of God,
and wanted to become like God.

That was not Adam's sin.

Instead, Adam was mistaken in thinking
that God was an independent,
self-sufficient,
rich and powerful being.

And in order to become like *this* God,
Adam rebelled and disobeyed,
in an attempt to be independent and self-sufficient.

But Christ revealed to us that
to become like God
we do not have to become
rich, strong, powerful, independent, self-sufficient.

It is enough for us to love and serve.

For in the person of Christ,
in choosing poverty, humility, weakness, suffering,
God did *not* take on qualities he did *not* have
in order to make himself more attractive.
If God manifested himself in this way,
it is because there was *no other way*
of expressing in human flesh what God is,
without suffering and self-giving love.

Far from wanting to become like God,
there is in truth nothing we are more reluctant to do.
For God revealed himself
as love, tenderness, dependence, servanthood,
obedience, poverty, humility, suffering--
that is, as divine weakness.

Yes, we love loving,
but we are afraid to sacrifice.
We love giving,
but we are afraid to lose.
We are afraid to be weak as God is weak.
And as a rule we miss the joy of loving, and of giving.

The solution to the problem of evil?
In a sense, *we* are to be part of the solution,
by participating in God's creative, redemptive plan.

Human wisdom says that
death and decay are omnipotent and inevitable...
that "one rotten apple will spoil the barrel."
Divine foolishness replies that
light extinguishes darkness,

but that darkness can *never* extinguish a light!

God calls us to *be* part of that light--
light to extinguish the darkness.

In fact, the words of Jesus in the gospel make it clear
that we are to be finally judged
by our efforts to alleviate pain and suffering in the world.

In fact, we are told that
Christ so *completely* identifies
with the pain and suffering of God's creation
that he says
any effort to relieve the suffering of God's creatures,
the poor, the sick, the hungry, the imprisoned,

is an effort to relieve his *own* suffering.

It may be foolishness on the part of God
for Him to feel all the pain of the world...
It may be a weakness on the part of God...
But I pray that, like Paul, we may learn this *mystery*:
that "Divine foolishness is wiser than the wisdom of man,
and divine weakness stronger than man's strength."
Because, as Paul tells us,
"the message of the cross is foolishness
to those who are perishing,
but to us who are being saved,
it is the power of God!"

