

Bible Workshop: Readers' comments

Regarding John 8:7 (see Jan. 2005, p. 8), a reader has pointed out that, when Jesus challenges the accusers of the woman taken in adultery by saying, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her", the phrase "without sin" is the Greek word *anamatētos*. This occurs only here in the New Testament, and it occurs just once in the Septuagint Old Testament, in the following passage:

"And it shall be if one shall hear the words of this curse, and shall flatter himself in his heart, saying, Let good happen to me, for I

will walk in the error of my heart, lest the sinner destroy the guiltless [*anamatētos*] with him: God shall by no means be willing to pardon him, but then the wrath of the Lord and His jealousy shall flame out against that man: and all the curses of this covenant shall attach themselves to him, which are written in this book, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven" (Deut. 29:19,20).

The suggestion is that Jesus wrote out Deuteronomy 29:19 in Greek, saying, 'If any of you be *anamatētos* let him throw the first stone', then wrote out verse 20 with its reference to the curses.

The elders would have been reminded of the terrible curses of Deuteronomy 28 and would have quailed before them.—*T.B.*

The problem of suffering

Alan W. Fowler

The recent tsunami disaster in the Indian Ocean has caused some to question the existence of God. This article shows that suffering and death are an inevitable part of this world, in which man has free will, but that God has provided a way of escape for those who heed His Word.

THERE ARE TWO interlocking reasons why suffering is a problem. Firstly, it often appears to be random, occurring irrespective of merit. Secondly, if God is omnipotent, why does He not protect the 'innocent' from suffering? We shall consider this problem under four headings:

- [Suffering and death in the living world](#)
- [Natural disasters](#)
- [Disease](#)
- [Accidents](#)

Suffering and death in the living world

The natural world is based on cycles of life and death. All plants and animals were created with an inbuilt span of life and equipped with 'seed' by which new life arises from the old. The abundance of the 'seed' is such that if they existed on their own most species of plants and animals could fill the earth. Since there are millions of different species of plants and animals there must

be a means of balancing the huge variety of living things. This is achieved by competition and the death of losers in the struggle for survival. Plants compete for space and light. Animals compete for food and shelter. The animal kingdom is an intricate web of food chains by which one form of life consumes but does not destroy another.

The fact that competition, predation and death are an essential element in the balance of life on earth raises the question, Why did God create a world that appears to involve cruelty and suffering? A frequently alleged example of cruelty in nature is the reproductive strategy of the *Ichneumonidae*, a group of parasitic flies that lay their eggs in the bodies of living caterpillars, which they first immobilise by injecting a paralysing agent, thus providing a continuous supply of fresh meat for their larvae. However, before we call this cruel we should consider whether caterpillars feel pain as we do, and whether the paralysing agent also contains an anaesthetic.

Other alleged examples of cruelty in nature are the actions of a cat playing with a mouse, and a fox in a henhouse. But these are unnatural patterns of behaviour induced by man. The cat

* Quotations from the RSV.

has been artificially fed so it does not need to eat the mouse, but still retains its genetically programmed instinct to hunt for food. The fox is programmed to chase one chicken at a time, so when confronted with a large number of captive birds it becomes confused and runs amok.

But what do we make of nature being 'red in tooth and claw' and the balance of nature being maintained by predation? Is predation cruel? In seeking the answer to this question we are often guilty of attributing human feelings to animals (anthropomorphism). We imagine that animals feel the same as we would when fleeing from a tiger. Wild animals have no understanding of abstracts, they have no concept of time, and live only in the present, so they cannot know what death is and therefore cannot fear death.

Thus the rabbit being chased by a fox has no idea that this might be the end of its life. The sight of a fox switches on a genetically programmed flight mechanism involving the outpouring of adrenaline-type hormones. The adrenaline rush not only primes the body for escape (by raising blood pressure, increasing heart rate, elevating blood sugar and dilating the pupils), it also acts as an anaesthetic and obliterates immediate pain.¹ Predation therefore involves neither fear nor pain.

We should also bear in mind that in the wild very few animals live long enough to suffer long from the effects of disease and ageing. As soon as an animal is unfit it becomes vulnerable to a predator. Thus we see that, far from being cruel, predation prevents animals from suffering.

Neither disease nor death in the animal kingdom is responsible for much suffering, and there is no evidence that the natural world is cruel. Man alone is the source of cruelty.

Natural disasters

Natural disasters are events occurring in the physical world as distinct from the biological. They include earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, tempests and droughts. When they cause widespread human suffering, God's justice is often called in question.

Genesis 1 informs us that living things were placed on an earth that had undergone huge changes since its original unformed state. Although the earth was well prepared for human habitation, changes are still occurring in the earth's crust, over which we have no control. But in calling these changes 'acts of God' we are

often concealing the role of human acts in turning these events into tragedies.

The effects of earthquakes are augmented by the construction of high, unstable concrete buildings. Casualties from the recent earthquake in the Indian Ocean were greatly increased by large numbers of people living on coastlines and by cutting down coastal barriers of mangrove forests to create artificial beaches to cater for mass tourism. The ever increasing pressure of human numbers has led to the occupation of unsuitable areas, such as those adjacent to volcanoes, or flood plains. Extensive deforestation is largely responsible for disastrous flooding and landslides. Man's profligate consumption of the earth's store of fossil fuels is leading to global warming, with the prospect of massive inundation of low-lying land surfaces.

But, although many of the disasters stemming from 'acts of God' are attributable to acts of man, none of us is exempt from the influence of random events over which we have no control. Lightning strikes without respect of persons. Jesus tells us to pray for deliverance from evil (Mt. 6:13). "Evil" here is the Greek *ponēros*, which often relates to amoral events causing pain or distress, as distinct from *kakos*, which refers to moral evil. "Deliver" (*rhuomai*) means 'rescue' or 'save'.

So we understand that we should not expect to be prevented from encountering naturally occurring adverse events, but we are encouraged to ask God to deliver us from an evil outcome. Jesus assures us: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father Who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Mt. 7:11).^{*} Atheists may scorn those who seek help from a heavenly Father, but it is hard to find an atheist on a life-raft!

Natural disasters not infrequently involve large numbers of people, and we tend to add up the total of suffering and create a monster. Sadly, some will then blame God for allowing such monstrous suffering. This is illogical, because no suffering can exceed the maximum endured by

1. As a young man, the tramp-poet W. H. Davies fell while train jumping in Canada. In his autobiography he wrote: "I lay for several minutes, feeling a little shaken, whilst the train passed swiftly on into the darkness. I attempted to stand, but found that something had happened to prevent me from doing this. Sitting down, I began to examine myself, and now found that the right foot was severed from the ankle".

one individual. The 'sum total' of human suffering is a product of the imagination. It is significant that we do not create the same 'monster' when confronted with the fact that worldwide there are about 1.2 million deaths every year—and four times as many permanently disabling injuries—caused by road traffic accidents.

Disease

As explained, the population balance in the animal kingdom is chiefly maintained by predation between species. Over millennia human populations have been controlled by wars within our own species, together with famine and disease. Human wars are largely motivated by our instinct for national survival—the human equivalent of the herd instinct in animals. Famines are nearly always caused by mismanagement of natural resources. But why do we get sick? Like us, animals suffer from diseases, especially from attacks by micro-organisms and parasites. Humans have discovered ways of conquering many infections, so we now live longer and suffer from diseases related to ageing. More and more are living to the end of the span of human life and dying of old age.

Notwithstanding man's success in prolonging our expectation of life, many diseases are caused by human error. For example, many intestinal infections are due to failure to follow Mosaic principles of hygiene. If everyone followed Biblical morality, all sexually transmitted diseases would die out. If we ate the foods that God designed for us we would avoid many conditions such as obesity, high blood pressure, maturity-onset diabetes, etc. And if we abandoned our cars we would avoid heart attacks and osteoporosis, and many accidents.

Accidents

We define accidents here as unplanned events occurring unexpectedly during human activity. Common examples are industrial injuries, traffic accidents and civilian casualties of war. Although in all instances man is solely responsible for the evil, it is evident that in many accidents those injured are not to blame. So, as in the case of natural disasters and disease, suffering may occur irrespective of merit. This fact lies at the heart of the problem of suffering.

Since we accept that God is all-powerful and just, we may ask why He allows such random suffering. And since we believe that God is also merciful we may ask why He does not protect

us all from suffering, whether we are to blame or not. Our answers to these questions must be unequivocal. If these were principles in God's dealings with men it would fundamentally change the nature of man. Man would cease to have free will, and, since free will is what distinguishes us from the animals, we would cease to be human. Free will is all or nothing. Wild animals have no free will; they are controlled solely by their preset instincts. If we expect God to direct us away from suffering then we are abandoning free will and asking God to attach strings to us and control us like a puppet-master.

Bible comments

Does the Bible provide satisfactory answers to the problem of suffering? The Old Testament book of Job was written specifically to address the problem of human suffering. Job was, by human criteria, a good man, yet he suffered a sequence of evils, which included theft of all his property, slaughter of his servants, death of his children in a hurricane and finally his affliction with a loathsome skin disease. Job's 'friends' argued that he must be wicked. Job accused God of injustice. The solution came when Job understood that, like all human beings, he was a sinner in God's eyes. On repenting Job received back what he had lost, showing that in God's plan justice will triumph.

In the New Testament we have only one short but highly significant direct reference to the problem of human suffering. Jesus asked whether the eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam collapsed were more wicked than others. He responded to his own rhetorical question by warning his audience that they too would perish unless they repented (Lk. 13:4,5). Jesus was echoing the lesson of Job. Suffering may be random, but those who repent will ultimately be vindicated. God's justice will prevail.

In this brief survey of the problem of suffering we have surely not solved all the problems posed by suffering. To those who may still have difficulty in accepting that a just and merciful God allows random suffering, we commend the words of Jeremiah: "Righteous art Thou, O LORD, when I complain to Thee; yet I would plead my case before Thee. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?" (12:1). However difficult it may be to come to terms with suffering, in our search for answers we must never doubt that God is righteous.