

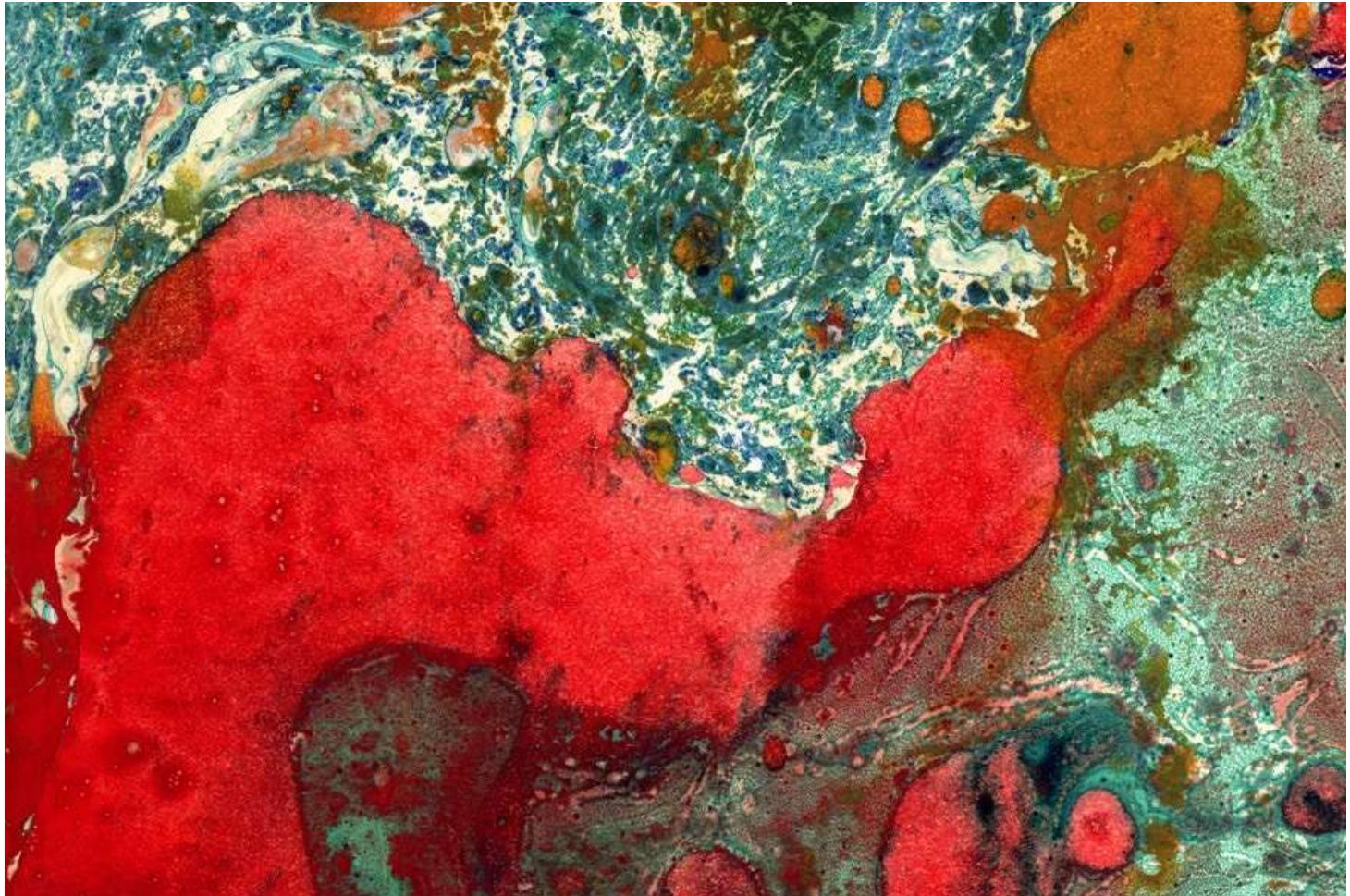
Book Excerpt

The Christian Response to the Problem of Pain and Evil



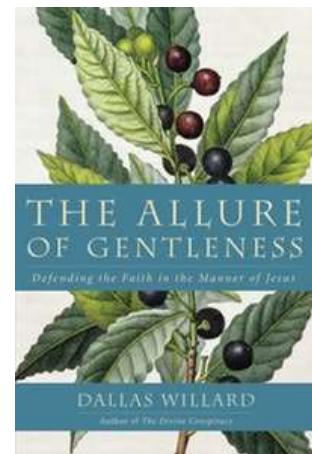
Dallas Willard

Topics: Problem Of Pain Lent



How then do we reply to the objections that the creator and sustainer of a world in which there is war, deformity, suicide, depression, earthquakes, famine, pestilence, and cancer cannot be a good God, able to assist those who trust him and those who must depend upon his care?

First, we agree that many things that happen, when considered by themselves, are not good. They are indeed tragic. We must never deny this. It's important not to give a cavalier or simple answer to those who have suffered. You have to accept the full reality of suffering and not try to explain it away. Let those who suffer tell you



their story and really listen to them. Where was God? God is always where the suffering is. Those who are there and turn to him will find him.

[Excerpt from The Allure of Gentleness](#)

Imagine yourself talking to someone whose loved one was on the top floor of the World Trade Center when it was collapsing. You could never say anything to diminish the pain they actually feel or explain it away. But you can say that there is something beyond the pain. Those who look to God and call upon him can be sure that good will triumph in their lives.

Second, we agree that God is not the agent behind these things. God doesn't do evil. He knows better. It's the same reason I don't stick a pen in my eye. It's because I know better. God designed a world where people have space to choose their own actions, starting at the very beginning with Adam and Eve, and there is an enemy in the picture taking advantage of this. On the larger scale, we all know this.

The book of Job is important here. It helps us understand we're in a battle. After reading Job, you might think it would be a good idea not to call the Devil's attention to yourself by being too good, but testing will still come. God does not torture or send suffering upon his people. Sometimes he allows them to experience suffering, because they've walked away from him, but suffering doesn't always occur for that reason. It occurs because there is an enemy who wishes to make you doubt God. In the overall picture, that is the meaning of the book of Job. In the middle of all his pain and losses, Job says, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (13:15 KJV). Your trust in God is what matters.

Now, no matter what the difficulties are, and sometimes they're extremely hard to bear, we do not want to doubt God. We want to cling to God. If we think, "God is testing me," we're apt not to focus on him. Let me assure you that God does not need to test you to find out about you. I have to test my students to find out about them, but God doesn't have that problem. He already knows. So understand that testing comes, but it's not God's work to test by causing suffering. He knows who we are, and he knows what we can bear. When trouble does come, the important thing is to know that God is against it.

Third, we point out that the creation of a world with a general order in which pain and evil are possible is good, beyond any comparison possible to us. And it is the greatest conceivable good, giving humanity the opportunity to develop into creatures of the highest value. C.S. Lewis wrote:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest, most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations.... There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.... Next to the holy sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.

—*The Weight of Glory*, p.15

Fourth, we maintain that “earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal” (Thomas Moore). The battle is not over yet, and God is going to win. To single out a specific sorrow as evil forever is to question the Christian view of God and our eternal destiny in God’s great universe. Romans 8:28 tells us: “All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” If we have committed our lives to God, he will restore us in our life here on earth, as he promised Israel in Joel 2:25-27:

I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent against you.
You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.
You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.

God will also redeem every aspect of our lives in the hereafter. The claim that this present suffering is beyond redemption can only be true if we know that a God of Christian dimensions does not exist. We hold to the promise in Revelation 21:3-4:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no
more,
for the first things have passed away.”

The Christian faith is committed to a picture of God and the world that makes every event ultimately redeemable, and therefore permissible, by a personal God who is both willing and able to nurture into being a creation that cannot be improved upon. It does not hold that every event is good in itself. Bad things, even horrendous moral evils, do come to pass. But in the vision of Jesus Christ communicated to his people, all human beings—and yes, even the sparrows and the lilies—are effectively cared for. Every person is invited to say in faith and obedience, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1).

If all the individual has is “this” life, then clearly evil, pain, and frustration are not redeemed. But seen in the context of God’s world as a whole, seen as but a part of a life that never ends and endlessly becomes more and more glorious, there is no evil individuals may suffer that can prevent them from finding life to be good and God to be good. Theirs is the perspective of the apostle Paul, who speaks of great suffering as “this slight momentary affliction [that] is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

We get a little taste of that in this life. When we move into the future and the future is good, the past, which was unbearable when we went through it, now takes on a different quality because it’s a part of the larger whole. It’s the greatness and goodness of God that matters. Even David Hume, who is well known for his skepticism, says, “If your God is big enough, there is no problem of evil” (my paraphrase). That’s the key. Jesus affirms that in our lives, and we can go on from that and experience the goodness of God as we face each new day.

The child who dies during a famine is ushered immediately into the full world of God in which he or she finds existence good and prospects incomprehensibly grand. There God is seen, as he now surely is not seen, to be good and great without limit, and every individual received into his presence enjoys the everlasting sufficiency of his goodness and greatness. There is no tragedy for those who rely on this God.