

I. Why Would God; Sunday, January 15, 2012 (Sunnyslope)

Psalm 19:14

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be
pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

- A. "Good morning, church!"
- B. Has anyone heard of a "cargo cult"?
 - 1. In World War 2, the Japanese Empire invaded much of the South Pacific
 - a) Many islands concured were tiny atolls
 - b) The indigenous people had never seen outsiders
 - (1) Their entire concept of the universe was their island surrounded by water
 - (2) There was nothing else
 - c) The United States adopted a strategy called "island hoping" wherein we would skip some islands and land troops on other islands, cutting off supply lines to the skipped islands
 - d) We would also land troops on small atolls the Japanese ignored and build runways and small bases from which to launch attacks on other islands
 - 2. On many of these islands, the native populations considered the Americans to be like gods descending from the sky
 - a) We flew in riding big metal birds
 - b) And we had crates of food, more food than the natives had ever seen
 - c) The Americans were typically kind to the natives, giving them food and strange looking objects like mirrors

3. Then one day, the war was won; so the Americans left
 4. Years past, until anthropologists visited the islands in the early 50s
 - a) They discovered a native peoples who spent most of their time building shrines and idols that looked like the metal birds the Americans flew in on
 - b) [Elaborate ceremonies]
 - c) [Praying to the gods to send the metal birds back along with their cargo]
 - d) [A whole religion had sprung up complete with dogma, priests, and worship rites]
- C. The idea of a "cargo cult" is essentially a belief or set of beliefs that's not backed by any real understanding of the "big picture"
1. "Other people believe this, and it sounds appealing, so I'll believe it too"
 2. And when two or three or more folks get together sharing beliefs formed from "cargo cults", they reinforce each other
 3. We see this in the medical community all the time
 - a) Prevailing opinion prevails because of the unwillingness of a community to question the failure of the opinion
 - b) When most medical doctors are presented with overwhelming evidence their practices are flawed, they tend (as a community) to defend disproven theories
 4. Likewise, we need to be on guard against falling into this trap
 - a) Instead of accepting on face value what we read on the Internet or what our friends are saying...

b) ...we need to investigate with an open mind

c) We need to discover the details of a subject, not just blindly accept the prevailing opinion of our compatriots as truth

D. Here's another example, a little closer to my heart (namely my stomach): This week, Hostess announced it was going bankrupt

1. Hostess is the company that creates (among other things) the almighty Twinkie
2. There is a distinct possibility that if Hostess goes under and is not reinvented or re-established, the Twinkie as we know it will cease to exist

a) (I don't mean to tell you this to alarm you or cause panic; I'm just using this as a worst-case illustration)

3. Now given this possible impending catastrophe of Biblical proportions, I think it's not unreasonable to ask:

a) How could a good and loving God allow this to happen?

4. Certainly, of course, I'm exaggerating for comedic effect
5. But I'm trying through this to express the idea that perhaps our perceptions about an impending or past negative thing are distorted
6. Perhaps our perceptions, just like practitioners of cargo cults, is flawed and imbalanced

II. There's a common misperception and cargo cult today with regard to God's interactions with mankind as chronicled in the Old Testament

A. Members of this cargo cult will claim that the God of the Old Testament was evil

1. As an aside, if you find yourself arguing with someone about this, ask, "OK, if you're right, so what?"
 2. Typically, the answer will be, "Well, then we shouldn't worship a god like that."
 3. Notice the straw man logical fallacy there?
 4. The argument doesn't say God doesn't exist; instead, it claims God isn't worthy of our worship
- B. Anyway: There's a great many resources and writings online and elsewhere that attempt to defend the belief that the Old Testament God is unworthy of worship
1. There's even a web site: www.evilbible.com
 2. It's leading headline reads:
For far too long priests and preachers have completely ignored the vicious criminal acts that the Bible promotes.
 3. I hope to prove that statement wrong today
 4. But we have even more quotes of interest from members of this cargo cult:

Sam Harris, Letter to a Christian Nation, 8

The idea that the Bible is a perfect guide to morality is simply astounding, given the contents of the book. Admittedly, God's counsel to parents is straightforward: whenever children get out of line, we should beat them with a rod. If they are shameless enough to talk back to us we should kill them.

Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

- C. So first, I'd like to disprove the leading quote from evilbible.com by reviewing just a handful of these so-called "vicious criminal acts" discussed in the Old Testament
1. In Deuteronomy 7:1-5, God commands Israel to completely annihilate the people living in the land so that they may live in the land
 2. In Joshua 12:7-24, there's a list of kings defeated as a result
 3. God many times commands Israel to do things to foreign nations that some could argue are evil:
 - a) Exodus 23:23-28 - wipe them out, drive them away
 - b) Psalm 135:10 - God struck down many nations
 - c) Numbers 21:32 - drive them out
 - d) Numbers 33:52 - dispossess
 - e) Deuteronomy 6:9 - thrust out
 - f) Deuteronomy 7:24 - wipe names out
 - g) Deuteronomy 9:3 - subdue and annihilate
 4. In Joshua 6:21, God commands that all should be destroyed in a given city
 5. In 1 Samuel 15:1-4, God commands the complete destruction of the Amalekites
 6. And this of course is only a partial list
- D. I think certainly now anyone with an open mind will agree I as a preacher have not ignored so-called "vicious criminal acts"
1. This alone is sufficient to warrant a more critical review of anything written on evilbible.com

2. Adherents to that view ought not find themselves members of a cargo cult, agreeing with evilbible.com because it's congruent with their desires of what truth should be..
 3. ...but instead critical question its findings in light of how easily I was able to disprove its opening sentences
- E. Now with that out of the way, let's turn to a more complete rebuttal of the idea that God in the Old Testament was evil

III. First, want to present the concept of "boxing" God

- A. God is bigger than the mental box we like to put Him in
1. The correct question is not, how could a good God command war and destruction? The correct question is, does the viewpoint of the texts on holy war contradict the Biblical understanding of God or is it consistent with the concept of a just and holy, creator God?
- B. Humans are very good at "boxing"
1. What I mean by "boxing" is that we're great at classifying things, simplifying the complex into a set of rules
 2. In modern science, this is called inductive logic:
 - a) Taking a hundred observations, all with slightly different results
 - b) And grouping them, removing the outliers, and coming up with a theory that explains the results we see and that predicts future results
- C. The problem is that God cannot be boxed
1. God is infinite and impossible to be boxed
 2. But we try to anyway

- a) Because otherwise we can't really get a mental grip on the concept of God
- b) And because sometimes boxing gives us a sense of control
- c) When I'm able to understand how tides work, for example, with the orbit of the moon around the Earth, I can predict tides
- d) But even if I can't do the math required and can't predict the tides, I gain a feeling of control because I understand some part of the governing dynamics of the universe in which we live

D. But God is too awesome to be boxed

Psalms 104:1-2

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul!

O LORD my God, You are very great;

You are clothed with splendor and majesty,

²Covering Yourself with light as with a cloak,

Stretching out heaven like a tent curtain.

1. After summoning every part of his being to extol the Lord, the psalmist gave one of the great descriptions of God
 - a) Of course it's figurative, because there's really no other way we can come so close to fully describing God
2. As the writer stands and gazes and wonders, he writes, "O Lord my God, You are very great."
 - a) Then come some details
 - b) God has robed Himself in garments of inexpressible splendor and majesty.

- c) He has covered Himself with light as with a garment, a symbol of His absolute purity and righteousness.
- d) He spreads the stellar and atmospheric heavens over the earth like a curtain or a tent
- e) And all this boggles the mind by its immensity

E. When Albert Einstein was asked if he believed in God, here was his response:

The problem involved is too vast for our limited minds.

We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many languages. The child knows someone must have written those books. It does not know how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books, but doesn't know what it is.

That, it seems to me, is the attitude of even the most intelligent human being toward God. We see the universe marvelously arranged and obeying certain laws, but only dimly understand these laws.

F. Now I'm not suggesting that God is such a mystery that we should just blindly accept that God is good and "yeah God" and let's praise Him without trying to understand

1. Certainly not!
2. If I advocated such a view, I'd be guilty of encouraging you to join a cargo cult
3. Instead, I'm suggesting that God is bigger than the phrase: "a good and loving God"
4. We hear that phrase a lot because it's very popular in the last century: God is a "good and loving God"
5. We hear and talk about the benevolence of God
6. And yes, that's an important aspect of God

7. But it's not all God is
8. God is...
 - a) ...a God of love
 - b) ...a God of peace
 - c) ...a God of hope
9. But God is also...
 - a) ...a God of vengeance
 - b) ...a God of power
 - c) ...a God of justice
10. God is bigger than the box we like to put Him in

IV. Let's take a look at some arguments for why God actually isn't evil when described in certain passages of the Old Testament

- A. First, let's look at something mathematical with regard to suffering
 1. Let's assume for a moment that God exists
 - a) Let's further assume that Heaven exists, we can get to Heaven (or Paradise) by being changed beings from sinfulness to holiness through the power of God
 - b) And let's also assume Paradise is infinite; our time once there lasts forever
 2. Now given all this, we can clearly see that suffering on Earth exists as well (we experience it)
 - a) But let's suppose that through this suffering we are refined from sinfulness to holiness

- b) Thus our temporary suffering in this finite Earthly life makes it possible for us to be without suffering in Paradise for infinity
 - 3. In mathematics, you create ratios based on one number divided by another
 - a) If I eat 2 of 10 Twinkies, I have consumed 20% of the Twinkies
 - b) The value of this is 0.2
 - c) If I eat 2 of 100 Twinkies, the value of my consumption as compared to the whole is 0.02
 - 4. So what number do you get when you take any finite number and divide it by infinity?
 - a) The answer is zero
 - b) If I eat 2 Twinkies out of infinity Twinkies, I have consumed zero percent of the supply of Twinkies
 - 5. Finite suffering on Earth divided by infinite Pradice means any suffering we experience on Earth is mathematically zero
- B. Also note that teaching, rebuking, training, and correcting requires "negative reinforcement" as a component of encouraging positive behavior
- 1. What if as only means to be in Paradise we must be rebuked and corrected?
 - 2. Would you voluntarily go through mathematically zero amount of suffering to enter Paradise?
- C. We should also realize God choose to act in human history to bring about the possibility of salvation
- D. God is holy (which means perfect and without sin) and cannot not be wholly just
- 1. This means God must punish when a community is completely lost into sin

2. Consider the Sodom and Gomorrah example:
 - a) God tried everything to save them (without forcing them to change)
 - (1) According to Genesis 13:10-12, the cities were on good land
 - (2) According to Genesis 14, they had been saved from attacking armies by Abraham
 - (3) And yet, according to Genesis 13:13, their evil crimes continued
 - (4) God sent missionaries to try to change the hearts of people
 - (5) But all this failed
 - b) God ended up destroying them as a last resort
 - c) But yet even so, God spared those who would turn away from sin and not look back
3. The Flood of Noah's time is the same idea
 - a) God hands down just judgment on the Earth
 - b) And yet He intentionally makes special provisions for those who earnestly seek holiness
4. Let's look at the Amalekite Annihilation of 1 Samuel 15
 - a) When Israel first left Egypt the Amalekites attacked them; because of this unprovoked attack the Amalekites would be punished, though they had a couple hundred years to repent before the actual judgment went into effect
 - b) Prior to the annihilation the innocent were told to leave (1 Sam. 15:5-6)

- c) The point here is that they had chance to change their ways and the destruction when it finally came was a judgment, though the innocent could still be spared
- 5. Consider another example, when a people were sinful and yet repented: the story of Jonah at Nineveh
 - a) The people of Nineveh were promised annihilation in judgment of their sins
 - b) But they changed their ways and as a result judgment did not come
- E. There are recurrent themes in the Old Testament we will notice if we earnestly read it instead of just listening to others who purport to know Scripture:
 - 1. God judges people for their cruelty, evil, and violence
 - 2. Prior to judgment, people are warned to change their ways
 - 3. And those who repent always escape judgment (Lot, Noah, Kenites, the whole of the city of Nineveh)
- V. Let's look at God's modern day involvement with the state of Israel
 - A. Arab invasion (May 14 - January 7, 1949)
 - 1. May 14, 1948 = establishment of Israel and last British forces left
 - 2. Same day:
 - a) Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq
 - b) They declared war on the new state of Israel and immediately invaded
 - c) Saudi Arabia and Sudan also contributed some troops
 - 3. Arab states had heavy military equipment at their disposal

4. There was also an "Arab Legion"
 - a) Mostly formerly British forces that stayed in Palestine when the British left
 5. Israel literally attacked on all sides (including from the inside)
 6. Result after 7 months was that Israel pushed back all attackers, gained territory, and won the war
- B. Six-day war (June 5-10, 1967)
1. Egypt, Jordan, and Syria versus Israel
 2. Six days later, Israel won
 3. It now controlled the Golan Heights, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the entire Sinai Peninsula
 4. Later, it gave Sinai back to Egypt in exchange for a peace treaty
- C. Yom Kippur War (October 6-25, 2073)
1. Coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria
 2. Coalition launched a joint surprise attack on Israel on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in Judaism
 3. The war began with a massive and successful Egyptian crossing of the Suez Canal during the first three days, after which they dug in, settling into a stalemate
 4. The Syrians coordinated their attack on the Golan Heights to coincide with the Egyptian offensive and initially made threatening gains against the greatly outnumbered Israelis
 5. And yet 19 days later when the war ended, Israel had pushed back all attackers

6. At the conclusion of hostilities, Israeli forces were 25 miles from Damascus and 101 63 miles from Cairo

D. I can't prove it; but seems like God was involved

1. Many Arabs died as a result of these conflicts
 - a) It's entirely plausible that a majority of the Arabs who died were only following orders as loyal members of their nations' militaries
 - b) One could argue the massive loss of life was an evil that should be avoided
 - c) Yet because of these 3 stunning, overwhelming, and unexpected victories for Israel, it has not since been similarly attacked
2. I can argue that because of the 3 victories, Israel can exist in relative peace and prosper
3. Tel Aviv: technology center

VI. The real issue here, the core of the matter, is not a debate over whether God in the Old Testament was a "good god" or was evil; it's a question about people today dealing with suffering in their lives, which masks personal reason for falling into cargo cults

- A. It is natural to ask, especially at times of pain or suffering: "If there is a good and all-powerful God, why does He allow so much pain and suffering?"
 1. The logic goes: If God is all powerful, all wise, and yet good and loving, why does He permit so much suffering and evil? Why does God not do more to intervene if He is so powerful and loving?
 2. This is called the Problem of Evil

B. It certainly seems true that there is no greater obstacle to faith than that of the reality of evil and suffering in the world. Even for the believing Christian, there seems to be no greater test of faith than this: that the God who loves the Christian permits suffering to the Christian, at times in excruciating ways.

C. Why does God allow suffering?

1. Posit: Struggle refines us, if we allow it

2. Romans 8:28 = God uses all things

Romans 8:28

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

3. Perhaps there are people who would never sense their utter dependence on God apart from experiencing the intense pain that they do in life.

Psalm 119:71

It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

4. It may be that the suffering we experience in this life is somehow preparatory to our existence in the life to come

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

5. Suffering can also allow us to give proof of the genuineness of our faith, and even serve to purify our faith.

1 Peter 1:7

These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

VII. We thus need to take comfort where we can and learn how we can and should change our views

A. We are encouraged to express both our positive and negative feelings in prayer

Psalm 62:8

Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.

B. When we suffer we should draw comfort from reflecting on Scriptures that assure us that God knows and cares about our situation, and promises to be with us to comfort and uphold us.

Psalm 34:18

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalm 23:4

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Isaiah 49:15

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!

C. Key point: Don't be anxious; you'll get Peace

Philippians 4:4-7

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

- D. Finally, evil and suffering can awaken in us a greater hunger for heaven, and for that time when God's purposes for these experiences will have been finally fulfilled, when pain and sorrow shall be no more.

Revelation 21:4

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

- E. Amen.