

Why Suffering by Vince Vitale (Ravi Zacharias Ministries)

In one of the first significant conversations I had on the topic of suffering, my Aunt Regina expressed to me how difficult it was to see her son Charles, my cousin, struggle with a serious mental illness. Being more concerned at the time with the question than the questioner, I started spouting some of my abstract, philosophical ideas about why God might allow suffering. But after listening very graciously, my aunt turned to me and said, “But Vince, that doesn’t speak to me as a mother.” Suffering is very real and very personal, and since that conversation with my aunt I am always hesitant to address it briefly. In what follows, I will try to provide some starting points for further thought and prayer, but please forgive me if anything I say comes across as if I am not taking seriously any real-life suffering you may be experiencing. My hope is that will not be the case, and that amid the suffering of this world each of us will find strength, comfort, and meaning in the community of those who have put their trust in Jesus Christ. Let me begin to sketch seven approaches to thinking about the challenge of suffering.

1. THE OBJECTIVE REALITY OF EVIL The challenge is often framed in this way: if a loving and powerful God exists, He would not allow evil to exist. Evil does exist; therefore, there must be no God. For evil to pose this problem for belief in God, evil itself must be real. But there is a serious question about whether atheism can account for the objective reality of the evil that motivates the problem of evil in the first place. If you need a good God to account for evil, then you can’t disprove that good God with evil. I recently came across an interview with Richard Dawkins in which the interviewer was challenging him about the implications of his naturalistic worldview. The interviewer said, “Ultimately, your belief that rape is wrong is as arbitrary as the fact that we’ve evolved five fingers rather than six.” Dawkins responded, “You could say that, yeah.”¹ I guess you could. I certainly don’t want to, and I don’t think it’s rational to, and having an objective, unchanging standard for morality in the existence of a loving God can help explain why we don’t need to reach Dawkins’s disturbing conclusion. If a good and loving God exists, then there is something we can appeal to beyond shifting cultural trends and arbitrary genetic programming as the basis of morality—as the basis for saying that some things really are objectively good and right, and some things really are objectively evil and wrong. Alternatively, if what we call morality is just a byproduct of naturalistic evolution, then to say that something is moral or good is just to say that it is conducive for the survival of the human species. But that is not the morality we actually believe in. People are not morally valuable only insofar as they can be put to use for the survival of the species. No. Each and every individual has an intrinsic and inalienable moral worth. And this worth is no less when old age or disability or disease or any number of other things threatens to make us less useful for the evolutionary goal of survival. The following article is adapted from *Why Suffering?: Finding Meaning and Comfort When Life Doesn’t Make Sense* by Ravi Zacharias and Vince Vitale (Faith Words: October 2014). JUST THINKING • VOLUME 22.4 [21] Naturalistic evolution cannot explain the intrinsic dignity and worth of every single person. What can explain this is that each person is created in the image of a good God, and is fully known and unconditionally loved by Him.

2. THE LIMITS OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE One of the assumptions smuggled into the thought that suffering disproves the existence of God is this: If God has good reasons for allowing suffering, we

should know what those reasons are. But why think that? When parents decide to move their family from one city to another, this can genuinely be very difficult on a young child. It may be experienced by the child as the absolute worst suffering that could ever occur. In the moment, the child might be certain that all happiness is behind him, that his parents hate him, and that for all practical purposes his life is over. And yet even such outrage on the part of a child does not mean that the child's parents are wrong to make the move, and it does not mean that they don't love him. In fact, it's very likely that it was precisely the good of their children that weighed heavily in the parents' decision. You can see the analogy: if parents' reasons are sometimes beyond what a child can fully grasp, why then should we be surprised when some of God's reasons are beyond what we can fully grasp? This general approach is referred to as Skeptical Theism in academic philosophy. But it's not a new idea: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9) If God is as great as Christians claim He is, then sometimes not fully grasping the fullness of his reasons is exactly what we should expect. And if it's exactly what we should expect to find if God does exist, then our finding it can't be strong evidence that God does not exist.

3. A RESPONSE OF FREEDOM

What kind of world God would have made depends on what God values. According to Christianity, what God values above all is relationship. But for relationship to be meaningful, it must be freely chosen; for relationship to be freely chosen, there must be the possibility of it being rejected; and wherever there is the possibility of rejecting relationship, there is also the possibility of pain and suffering. The Bible affirms this truth from its very first pages. We find a story of people who are in intimate relationship with God, and who know what He has asked of them. But then they hear this voice in their ears, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1). And they begin to doubt God. They begin to doubt that He knows what's best for them. They begin to doubt that He is for them. Ultimately, they begin to doubt what He has actually said—his word. And then they sin. They do what they know deep down they should not do. Not a big sin, just eating a piece of fruit that they were told not to eat. No big deal, right? But it starts them down a path. First we're told that they felt shame. They were convinced that God wouldn't want anything to do with them anymore, and so they hid themselves from God. Then they began accusing each other. Adam pointed at Eve and said, "She did it!" (in essence pointing his finger at God as well by referring to Eve as "the woman you put here with me"). Eve pointed at the serpent and said, "He did it!" From temptation to doubt to disobedience to shame to hiding to finger-pointing to suffering—is there really a question about whether this story speaks the truth about the human heart? When I read it, I have to admit that it resounds with the truth about me. But here's the most amazing part of the Fall story. The first persons have rejected God. They've decided they'd rather be their own gods. And how does God respond? He goes looking for them. He pursues them; He calls out to them: "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). Then, after their first interaction with God after they had sinned, Adam names his wife "Eve." It's a name of great honor. It is often understood to mean "breath" or "life" and it is given to her "because she would become the mother of all the living" (Genesis 3:20). Symbolically, it connects her with God's breathing of life into Adam. And even the spellings of the names Eve and Yahweh show

similarities in the original Hebrew. 2 They have the same ending. In English, it would be something like a daughter Hanna having a mother named Joanna. This is probably not the name Eve expected to be called after helping to cause the Fall of all humanity! But even then, in her moment of great sin, she gets the honor of a name that symbolically connects her with God Himself. Even amidst the consequences of the Fall, how generous and loving must God's interaction with them have been for Adam to choose that name for his wife? Next we're told that God "made garments of skin for Adam and [Eve]." In an ancient Near Eastern culture, this is the exact opposite of what should have happened. Their clothes should have been torn to symbolize their disgrace. Instead, God makes garments for them. And not only that, but the text gives this beautiful detail: "and [He] clothed them." Imagine the intimacy of God pulling a shirt over your head and carefully guiding your arms through the sleeves, before kneeling down to tie your shoelaces. God dressed Adam and Eve himself so that they would not be ashamed, foreshadowing that one day He would clothe us in Christ (Galatians 3:27), with the best robe (Luke 15:22), with power from on high (Luke 24:49). Right from the very beginning, it is in God's response to suffering that we see the love of God most clearly, a love that refuses to give up on us even when we use our free will to cause great suffering.

JUST THINKING • VOLUME 22.4 [23] 4. WHAT IT TAKES TO BE YOU

It's typical to think of the problem of evil like this: we picture ourselves in this world of suffering, then we picture ourselves in a world with far less suffering. And then we wonder, "Shouldn't God have created us in the other world—the world with far less suffering?" That's a reasonable thought. But it's a thought that relies on a philosophical mistake. It relies on the assumption that it would still be you and me who would exist in that other world. And that is highly controversial. Let me explain. There was a pivotal moment early on in my parents' relationship. They were on their second date. They were standing on the Brooklyn Bridge, overlooking the picturesque New York City skyline, and my dad noticed a ring on my mom's finger. So he asked about it, and she said, "Oh, that's just some ring one of my old boyfriends gave me. I just wear it 'cause I think it looks nice." "Oh, yeah, it is nice," my dad responded. "Let me see it." So my mom took it off and handed it to him, and my dad hurled it off the bridge and watched it sink to the bottom of the East River! "You're with me now," he declared. "You won't be needing that anymore." And my mom loved it! Now it was a pretty risky move my dad made hurling my mom's ring off the Brooklyn Bridge. She loved it, but what if she hadn't? What if she had concluded that my dad had lost it and then run off with her old boyfriend instead? What would that have meant for me? (If you can believe it, fifty years on, my dad is still trying to get my mom to reveal who gave her that ring. Mom flatly refuses to say!) I might be tempted to think that if Mom had wound up with her old boyfriend I could have been better off. I might have been taller. I might have been better looking. Maybe the other guy was royalty. That would have been cool! I could've lived in a castle! But actually, that's not right. There's a problem with wishing my mom wound up with the other guy, and the problem is this: "I" never would have existed. Maybe some other child would have existed. And maybe he would have been taller and better looking and lived in a castle. But part of what makes me who I am—the individual that I am—is my beginning: the parents I have, the sperm and egg I came from, the combination of genes that's true of me. Asking "Why didn't God create me in a world with less suffering?" is similar to saying, "I wish my mom had married the other guy." I'm sure my mom and her old boyfriend would have had some very nice kids, but "I" would not have been one of them. We often wish we could take some piece of suffering out of our world while keeping everything else the same. But it doesn't work that way. Changing anything changes everything—and everyone. Why didn't God create a different world? Well, it

depends on what God was after. It depends on what God values. And what if one of the things He values, values greatly, is you, the people you love, and each person who will ever live? I might be tempted to think that if Mom had wound up with her old boyfriend I could have been better off. I might have been taller. I might have been better looking. But actually, that's not right. "I" never would have existed. [24] JUST THINKING • RAVI ZACHARIAS INTERNATIONAL MINISTRIES Imagine the intimacy of God pulling a shirt over your head and carefully guiding your arms through the sleeves, before kneeling down to tie your shoelaces. JUST THINKING • VOLUME 22.4 [25] Sometimes we wish God had made a very different sort of world, but in doing so we unwittingly wish ourselves out of existence. And so the problem of suffering is reframed in the form of a question: Could God have wronged you by creating a world in which you came to exist and are offered eternal life, rather than creating a different world in which you never would have lived? 5. "THE BEST LIVES" THOUGHT EXPERIMENT For a fifth response, think of what is, in your opinion, one of the greatest lives ever lived. Consider it in detail. Think of the person's character and how it was formed. Think of the person's relationships. Think of his or her great triumphs, their sacrifices, their steadfastness for what is good and true. Now, try in your imagination to subtract from that person's life all possibility of suffering. Subtract the suffering that shaped the culture and family they were born into, the suffering that formed their character, the suffering they fought against, the suffering that they carried others through. What happened to the life you were picturing? All of a sudden it doesn't look anything like the great life that you were initially so inclined to celebrate. Without the possibility of significant suffering, practically every great true story in history would be false. No one would ever have made a significant sacrifice for anyone else. No great moments of forgiveness and reconciliation. No opportunities to stand for justice against injustice. No compassion (because nothing to be compassionate about), no courage (because no dangerous situations requiring courage), no heroes, no such thing as laying down one's life for another. Is it so obvious that God would create that world rather than our own? Criticism without alternative is empty. It's easy to get mad at the world God has made. It's much harder to say the world God should have made instead. 6. THE GOD WHO SUFFERS WITH US A sixth response to the objection from suffering I take, somewhat ironically, from Friedrich Nietzsche. He wrote: "The gods justified human life by living it themselves—the only satisfactory [response to the problem of suffering] ever invented." 3 Nietzsche is actually writing of the ancient Greeks here, and in his bias he does not make the connection to Christianity. But as a Christian, I am very pleased to agree with him and then point emphatically to the cross where Jesus died. The night before his death, as Jesus wrestled with what He knew the next day would bring, Jesus said to his friends, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow, to the point of death" (Matthew 26:38). Think about it. The God of the Universe, the Creator of all things, saying He is overwhelmed with sorrow, even to death.... At the Cross, we see the absolute uniqueness of the Christian response to suffering. In Islam, the idea of God suffering is nonsense—it is thought to make God weak. In Buddhism, to reach divinity is precisely to move beyond the possibility of suffering. Only in Christ do we have a God who is loving enough to suffer with us. [26] JUST THINKING • RAVI ZACHARIAS INTERNATIONAL MINISTRIES If you've ever experienced deep depression or thought about dying, Jesus is right there with you. There is no depth of agony and helplessness we can experience in this life that He doesn't understand. At the Cross, we see the absolute uniqueness of the Christian response to suffering. In Islam, the idea of God suffering is nonsense—it is thought to make God weak. In Buddhism, to reach divinity is precisely to move beyond the possibility of suffering. Only in Christ do we have a God who is loving enough to suffer with us. The

loving parent is not the one who never allows suffering in a child's life. The loving parent is the one who is willing to suffer alongside their children. And in Christianity this is exactly what we find. 7. A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE Finally, the challenge of suffering is in part a challenge of perspective, and it's important to remember that our current perspective is not the full perspective. The Bible says that the eternal life that God offers to every person will be one where "God will wipe every tear from our eyes," where there will be "no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4). Imagine aliens who somehow managed to tap into a video feed from earth, but all they could see was the hospital delivery room when I was being born. They watched as the doctors forcefully told my mom to do things that made her scream in pain. And then when she could take no more, the doctors got out a knife and cut right into my mom's stomach. They took me out—blood everywhere— and even though my mom was reaching out for me and screaming for me, the doctors immediately rushed me away from her. What would the aliens think of the doctors? If all the aliens saw were the first few moments of my life, they might think that the doctors were utterly evil. Only from a fuller perspective would they be able to see that the doctors actually cared for my mother extremely well, and in fact saved my life. On the Christian understanding of reality, what we currently see is only the first few moments of life—literally just the birthing process of human history! We will always come up short if we attempt to find the full explanation for suffering in this life alone. This life is only the smallest fraction of our lives. We are going to live forever. And even though right now we live in a harsh, broken world, Jesus promises that one day "everyone who calls on [Him]" will live in a world that will be good to us (see e.g., Romans 10:13, Acts 2:21, Joel 2:32). "DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?" When things get worse before they get better, God is with us. And as we look to the future, we can trust in the words of JUST THINKING • VOLUME 22.4 [27] Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). Recently I shared these words with the father of my oldest friend, Chris. I grew up right next door to them. As I write this, his father, Joe, is suffering from a brain tumor, and the doctors have given him two days to a week left to live. When I walked in to see him, I didn't know if he would want to talk about his approaching death. Joe had always been strong and capable. He had a voice so deep that no matter what he was speaking about, it resounded with confidence and authority, leaving little room for vulnerability. But as soon as Joe saw me, he said, "Hey, Vince. Good, I'm glad you're here. I told Chris I wanted to talk to you." Joe went on to tell me that although he had always been confident that God exists in some way, he was finding himself increasingly scared about what comes next. As we spoke, what became clear to me was that Joe's understanding of the central message of Christianity, of what it takes to be right with God, was that you should try to do more good than bad in your life, and then just hope that in the end your good deeds will outweigh your bad deeds. If they do, something wonderful awaits. But if they don't, you're in trouble. And as Joe reflected back over his life, he recognized that if that was the case, then he, like the rest of us, had reason to fear. Never was I so incredibly thankful to be sitting before someone as a Christian. Other ways of seeing the world would have had nothing to say. As an atheist, I would have had to say there is no hope at all beyond the grave. If I adhered to almost any other religion, I would have had to tell Joe that he was basically right and had every reason to fear what was next. Only as a Christian could I explain to Joe for the first time that while Christianity does say that God wants us to do good, that is not what makes us right with God. I was able to share with him that the message of Christianity is that what makes us right with God has nothing to do with anything

we do or ever could do, but rather with what Jesus has already done—once, and in full, and for all. I explained that if we trust in Jesus Christ, we no longer need to fear judgment, because on the cross Jesus has already taken the judgment for everything we have ever done or will ever do wrong. I explained this at length, and when I asked Joe if this made sense, he responded—in classic New Jersey fashion—“That’s a hell of a realization.” Emphatically he said it again, “That’s a hell of a realization,” and then continued, “Sixty-nine years and I never thought of that. I thought Christianity was one thing, but it was something else entirely.” There was an extended pause, and then Joe said, “You know, Vince, you spend your whole life trying to make up for your [mess ups], but this finally explains how we can deal with guilt.” I asked Joe if he wanted to pray with me to accept this gift from God— to trust in Christ’s sacrifice and not in our own works—and he said he did, and with great conviction he thrust out his arm to me. We clasped hands, and we wept, and we prayed, and as we finished praying he exclaimed aloud, “Amen.” Joe asked me if my wife, Jo, knew this great truth about Christianity as well. I said that she did, and he said, “It must be a happy life.” And then, after a thoughtful pause, “Now I’m actually looking forward to what’s next.” When Joe’s family saw him the next day and asked how he was, for the first time in a long time he responded, “Wonderful.” The transformation in him was so visible that his family called me. Each one of us is going to deal with significant suffering in our lives. And, one day, each of us is going to have to deal with the reality of death. When suffering comes, when death comes, who will bear it with us? Who will see us through it? [28] JUST THINKING • RAVI ZACHARIAS INTERNATIONAL MINISTRIES immediately and wanted to know every word that I had shared with him. Life after death, on its own, does not bring hope. Only grace brings hope. I know of no grace as extravagant as the grace of Jesus Christ. And as grace upon grace—because Jesus has already done everything necessary for us to be right with God—this greatest of all hopes can be received with a simple heartfelt prayer. I have suggested that the rationality of Christian faith is not undermined by the existence of evil and suffering. But the challenge suffering poses to belief in God is not the only problem of suffering. There’s also the problem of how we’re going to deal with suffering, and that’s a problem for every one of us, regardless of what we do or do not believe about God. Some think the problem of suffering should push us away from God. For me, it’s precisely because I feel the problem of suffering so severely that I am led to trust a God who can do something about it. Each one of us is going to deal with significant suffering in our lives. And, one day, each of us is going to have to deal with the reality of death. When suffering comes, when death comes, who will bear it with us? Who will see us through it? Jesus will, if we ask Him to. He won’t force Himself into our lives. But if we invite Him, then we will never be alone in our suffering, and we can trust that we will spend eternity in a place where suffering will be no more. Vince Vitale, PhD, is Senior Tutor at the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics and a member of the speaking team for RZIM. 1 See Justin Brierley’s exchange with Richard Dawkins in his review “The John Lennox—Richard Dawkins Debate” (October 21, 2008), online at <http://www.bethinking.org/atheism/the-john-lennox-richard-dawkins-debate>. Accessed April 25 2014. 2 In the original Hebrew, the names are hwx (“Eve”) and hwhy (“Yahweh”). I do not mean to imply here that Adam knew the name “Yahweh” when he named Eve. 3 Friedrich W. Nietzsche and Francis Golffing (translator), *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 30. This quotation is taken from *The Birth of Tragedy*.