

Eleventh New Testament Summary Hebrews 1st Peter 2nd Peter

Let's move on to a concept known as "theodicy." It is an attempt to justify the ways of God to men. It is most often employed in respect to the so-called "problem of evil" seemingly first put forth by the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 B.C.). Basically, the argument questions the existence of God because evil exists in the world. That is, if God is all-good and all-powerful, how is it that evil exists? It would seem that if God was all-good then He would desire to eradicate evil; and given His omnipotence, He certainly would have the power to do so, but because evil exists, then God appears insufficient in respect to goodness and/or power. If this is the case, however, then the definition of God no longer holds. He must therefore not exist. The argument from the problem of evil has several shortcomings, and to engage in answering the question (in making any kind of defense for God) means that one engages in a theodicy. A clear shortcoming to the problem of evil is that it assumes that while evil in and of itself is never good, that God is incapable of using it to serve a good purpose and/or that God has permitted to come about for no good reason. A vital step to take in giving answer to the problem of evil is to consider the biblical account of man (male and female) being made in the image of God (the "image" of God in man is emphasized in Genesis 1:27-28). That image of God included the original gift of free agency (the ability to choose/true volition). This free agency was necessary if man would be able to love. There is no being in the image of God without the ability to love. The Bible in fact teaches that God IS love (1st John 4:16). God designed us to love, but to be in such a condition, one must also have the ability to choose not to (that is God allowed the potential to commit sin). The allowance of the potential to sin, however, is not the same as CAUSATION to sin. If you let your friend drive your car, you allow for the potential that your friend may scratch it. That does not mean that you cause your friend to scratch it. God does not cause sin (it is quite simply against His nature). Some want to implicate God, however, because of His attribute of foreknowledge, but foreknowledge and causation (or determination) are two different things. You may know that the sun is going to rise tomorrow, but the fact that it rises does not make you responsible for its rising. What I'm doing is engaging in theodicy. I've taken a long way to say that the Bible itself engages in theodicy as well. Why do Christians suffer? It is an age-old question and needless to say a very important one. The New Testament gives answers to that question. By the way, never forget that the worst suffering that ever took place led to the greatest blessing to ever be given to mankind (namely the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ)! However, in three of our books (or letters) this week (i.e. Hebrews, 1st Peter and 2nd Peter) we encounter examples of biblical theodicy.

Hebrews 12 is a great one. Why do Christians suffer? Answer: we are being disciplined. This is but one answer among several in the New Testament. Consider the text: "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons...No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." (Hebrews 12:4-7 & 11) St. Peter's first letter also

contains a theodicy: "In this [faith] you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 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." (1st Peter 1:6-7) Later on, Peter discusses "suffering for doing good" in chapter 3. He teaches, "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing." Then at 1st Peter 3:15-16 we have one of the most important teachings on witnessing to others: "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." Let's take inventory thus far:

1. According to Hebrews 12, Christians are permitted to suffer for the sake of discipline that leads to "a harvest of righteousness and peace."
2. According to 1st Peter 1, Christians are permitted to suffer in order to be refined in their faith.
3. According to 1st Peter 3, Christians are permitted to suffer in order to witness to people in the world.

And Peter continues. He writes this at 1st Peter 5:12f.: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."

4. According to this Scripture, Christians are permitted to suffer to be associated with Christ's passion and to be overjoyed when Jesus comes again.

Finally -- for this summary anyway -- Peter writes at 2nd Peter 1:5-8: "For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

5. According to Scripture, Christians develop peculiar virtues that are -- obviously -- developed especially in times of trial (e.g. "perseverance"). It has been said that the person who is not tried, learns nothing. The motto of the university where I attained the PhD (University of Birmingham) says this: "Per Ardua Ad Alta" = "Through difficulties (arduous trials), to the heights!" This is especially true in the Christian faith!

These are reasons why trials are permitted. These are example of theodicy.

The last thing I want to share for this week is in respect to "once saved, always saved." It is a popular concept in many Christian circles, but it seems to counter the biblical witness. We see this, especially when we consider St. Mark's Gospel and the epistle to the Hebrews. First

of all, St. Mark records the famous "The Parable of the Sower." Consider the clear words of Jesus as he describes four distinct spiritual conditions: "The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown in them. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop -- thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown." (Mark 4:15-20) Notice the words, "they last only a short time," and the words, "they quickly fall away." Both of these statements describe once having had faith and then no longer. In addition, St. Mark (like St. Matthew and St. Luke) records what is commonly referred to as the "unforgivable sin." (Mark 3:28-29). By the blood of Jesus Christ, ALL sins are forgiven, but there is one exception stated by Christ Himself: "But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin." (Mark 3:29) Now, exactly to whom is Jesus speaking to in this context? Mark says "the teachers of the law" who were claiming that Christ was possessed by the prince of demons (Mark 3:22). In fact, Mark records that Jesus spoke this teaching about the unforgivable sin, "because they were saying, 'He has an evil spirit.'" (Mark 3:30) In picking up contextual clues, we see that the men speaking these things were familiar with the Bible (which at the time was The Old Testament); these were men of Scripture; who -- frankly -- should have known better. In addition, however, it is not that they are merely skeptical towards Jesus or simply not believing (which is bad enough), but they took it a step further: they were publicly maligning Jesus. In doing so, they are committing a terribly grievous sin indeed, because they are actually trying to dissuade other people from believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is, they were trying to keep other people from salvation (hopefully by now you'll see that the concept that all sin is equal is simply a non-biblical notion)! Thus, two basic characteristics of this terrible sin are put forth: 1) These people are in the position to know better (by virtue of already having the Word of God in their lives); and 2) Not merely rejecting Christ, but publicly attacking Him to the point of trying to keep others from Him. To solidify exactly what this sin looks like, let's now consider Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10. First of all, Hebrews 6: "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace." (vss. 4-6) Hebrews 10: "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God." Please mark this: **YOU MUST UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT OF HEBREWS IN ORDER TO PROPERLY UNDERSTAND THESE VERSES!** The context of Hebrews is that the early Jewish-Christian converts were undergoing tremendous persecution. In this persecution, they were being tempted to turn away from Christ, but not simply in such a way as to turn from their own commitment, but to blatantly and publicly deny Jesus Christ by returning to the temple worship of Judaism and the animal sacrifices (Hebrews was written before the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70). If they had gone back to the old worship, they would

have not only publicly denied Jesus (note that Hebrews 9:12 & 28 emphasize the "once for all" sacrifice of Christ), but they would have been encouraging others to do the same. The sin being referred to in Hebrews 6 and 10 are public renuncements of the Lord Jesus Christ by former believers or people who should know better. This is totally consistent with Mark's testimony above. Drawing a basic conclusion from all of this is to say, "Once saved, always saved, is disproven by the Scriptures themselves!" Furthermore, this is what the "unforgivable sin" is looking like:

1. It is committed by someone in possession of the Word of God and someone who would be considered to have faith in God (Hebrews 6: "who have once been enlightened").
2. This person is not simply not believing or denying Jesus Christ, but they are blatant and open about trying to get others to follow their rebellion. It is "against the Holy Spirit" because it is the Holy Spirit's ministry to lead people to Jesus, but this sin does the exact opposite and totally resists what the Holy Spirit desires to do!
3. Finally, if you are concerned about having committed this sin, then you have nothing to worry about. In fact to be concerned about this is proof that you have not committed this sin. That is to say, people who go this far, have their consciences seared, and would therefore no longer care! So if you care, you're not in this boat.

It is humbling that Hebrews (6:6) and Mark (4:17) use the concept "fall away," and these are the words that will not permit "once saved always saved" to represent Scriptural teaching. This reality, however, is not to suggest that we have to be "scared" into believing. Of course not. It is, however, a reminder as to why God commands us not to take our faith for granted and it reminds us as to why we are called to remember the words of Jesus (also recorded in St. Mark): "Don't be afraid; just believe." (5:36)

In Christ, Dr. Espinosa