Littleton, CO: Where Was God

_God Is Neither Incapable Nor Unwilling to Deal with Evil. He Has a Better Plan._

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Dear Friend,

The photograph alone told the story. Head bowed low with the weight of sorrow, a candle in his hand, a man knelt in a church and wept. Words scrawled on a paper memorial on the wall behind him echoed his anguish and his prayers.

Months have passed since the events of April 20, 1999, when the lives of fourteen high-schoolers were extinguished and the lives of countless more were changed unalterably. But in one sense what happened in Littleton, Colorado, at Columbine High School will never be old news.

An _L.A. Times_ headline asked the question on the lips of so many: "Age Old Query: Where Was God?"[1]

One Wrong Answer

One answer is not going to work. Reverend Gary Hall of All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, quoted in the article said, "I think God is broken-hearted. I don't think God was in control of these events."

This "finite God" view is promoted by Rabbi Harold Kushner in _Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?_ Evil is bigger than God whose hands are tied by the laws of nature and the will of man. Limited in power and perfection, He weeps with us at a world out of control.

We are to draw comfort from this realization, according to Kushner. "God, who neither causes nor prevents tragedies, helps by inspiring people to help," he writes.[2]

But this isn't the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the One who brought the universe into existence with a single thought. This isn't the God of the Exodus and the empty tomb. A God equally victimized by the march of evil may commiserate with other victims, but He can't inspire or rescue. Nor is He worthy of praise, prayer, or trust.

Another Wrong Answer

But what alternative is there? How can anyone believe in God in the face of such tragedy? The great British philosopher and atheist Bertrand Russell asked how one can talk about God while kneeling at the bed of a dying child.
It's a very powerful image. Like the three-word sound byte "Where was God?" it strikes many Christians dumb. How can anyone cling to the hope of a good and powerful God in the face of such tragedy?

They might consider Christian philosopher William Lane Craig's response: What is the atheist Bertrand Russell going to say to that dying child (or to the parents of 14 dead teenagers, for that matter)? Too bad? Tough luck? That's the way it goes? No happy ending, no silver lining, nothing but devastating, tragic, senseless evil?

No, that also won't work for a very important reason. There are many ways to characterize the killings at Columbine High in a world bereft of God: unpleasant, painful, even ghastly, certainly not something any of us would do.

Yet if God doesn't exist, the one thing we can never do is call wanton murder wicked. If in virtue of this tragedy one concludes that God doesn't exist, then the killing ceases to be tragic. It's just "stuff" that happens. Sometimes we like it, sometimes we don't, but it's still just "stuff" in the end.

Yet the words "wicked," "tragic," and "evil" were on the lips of everyone. We cannot describe the events at Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999 without these words.

But the questions remain: Why didn't God stop these killers? Why is He inactive--apparently impotent--when He could restrain the hands of evil persons?

This protest rings hollow, though, because we don't really want God to end evil, not all of it.

**Picking and Choosing Our Moral Tragedies**

Why does this question come up only with magnum tragedies--like the Oklahoma City bombing or the Littleton massacre--or when we are personally stunned by deadly disease or financial ruin? What about the enormous mass of evil that slips by us every day unnoticed and un lamented because we are the *perpetrators* of evil, not its *victims*?

On April 20, the same day 14 students died at Columbine High School, how many Americans committed adultery around the country? What of the cumulative effect of the personal pain and destruction that resulted--the sexually transmitted diseases, the unplanned pregnancies (and subsequent abortions), the shame and embarrassment, and the emotional pain of being rejected?

What of the marriages those adulteries destroyed that very afternoon? What of the severed trust, the broken families? What of the traumatized children cast adrift, destined as adults to act out the anguish of such betrayal?

One careless act of unfaithfulness leaves in its wake decades of pain and destruction and often generations of brokenness. And--to be sure--this evil was multiplied thousands of times over on the same day the students died in Littleton.

I saw no outcry, though, no moral indignation in the *LA Times* because God permitted this evil. Why not? Because we don't complain when evil makes us feel better, only when it makes us feel bad.

If the truth were known, we do not judge disasters based on unprejudiced moral assessment, but rather on what is painful, awkward, or inconvenient for us. We don't ask, "Where is God?" when another's pain brings us profit instead of loss.
We don't want God sniffing around the dark recesses of our own evil conduct. Instead, we fight intervention. We don't really want Him stopping us from hurting others. We only cry foul when He doesn't stop others from hurting us.

The problem of evil is much bigger than 14 dead high school students. It includes all the ordinary corruptions that please us, the hundreds of small vices you and I approve of every day. It entails not only what offends us, but what offends God.

The answer to the question "Why didn't God stop the Colorado killings?" is the same answer to the question, "Why doesn't God stop me every time I do wrong?" There is a virtuous quality to human moral choice that both dignifies us and makes serious evil possible.

The rules God applies to a serial killer are the same rules He applies to us. If you want God to clean up evil, He might just say, "Let's start with you." If you want Him to stop murderers, then you have to be just as willing to let Him stop you every time you do what is evil by His standards. And that covers a lot of ground. Most people won't sit still for that.

**What Should God Do?**

When people ask "Where was God?" I ask "What precisely did you expect God to do? If you were in His place, what would you do?" If you would use your power to stop evil, would you punish it or prevent it? Either choice presents you with problems.

One reason God doesn't wipe out all evil immediately is that the alternative would be worse. This becomes evident by asking a simple question: If God heard your prayer to eliminate evil and destroyed it all at midnight tonight, where would you be at 12:01?

While reading on the Littleton shooting, I stumbled upon a refreshing bit of honesty and moral clarity by John Hewitt in a piece entitled, "Seeking to Make Sense Where There Is None." Hewitt wrote:

Science has taught us to look for peculiar social or psychological circumstances that cause people to do what they otherwise would not do....We would rather think of bad acts as the unfortunate consequences of discoverable and remedial social and personal conditions. Yet it is precisely the account we do not wish to believe that may best capture what happened in Littleton. The two dead members of the "Trenchcoat Mafia," together with their fellows, may simply have chosen evil in circumstances where others choose to play football or to crave membership in the National Honor Society.[3]

The discomfiting reality is that evil deeds can never be isolated from the evil doer. Our prints are on the smoking gun. Each one of us is guilty in some capacity, and we know it.

That's the problem. Any judicial action God would take today would pin us all under the gavel. When God wipes out evil, He's going to do a complete job. C. S. Lewis soberly observed, "I wonder whether people who ask God to interfere openly and directly in our world quite realize what it will be like when He does....When the author walks on the stage the play is over."[4]

No, God hasn't banished evil from His kingdom--yet. The Bible describes a time when God will wipe away every tear and repair the effects of evil on the world. Men will no longer endure the ravages of wickedness or be victimized by evil seemingly out of control. And no one will ever ask the question, "Where was God?"
Until then, God has chosen a different strategy, a better plan, one that's moral on a higher level. It's a plan that ultimately deals with evil, but allows room for mercy as well. It's called forgiveness.

The Patience of God

God is waiting. Patience, not lack of goodness or lack of ability, stays God's hand from writing the last chapter of human history. God is patiently waiting for us to turn to Him.

Suffering, tragedy, and profligate evil now function as warning signals. Like the ache of a limb out of joint, the pain of living in a broken world tells us that something is amiss. If God took away the pain, we'd never deal with the disease. And the disease will kill us, sooner or later.

Why doesn't God do something about evil? God has done something, the most profound thing imaginable. He has sent His Son to die for evil men. Because we are the real source of evil, God would be entirely justified punishing us. Yet He chose instead to exercise mercy. He took the punishment due us and poured it out on His Son, Jesus, so He could offer forgiveness to anyone who asks.

God is not the author of evil. Neither is He incapable nor unwilling to act. But His remedy for evil is not impulsive. He doesn't obliterate us, the offenders, with one angry blow. Instead He waits.

Bertrand Russell had nothing to say while kneeling at the bed of a dying child. He could have spoken of the patience and mercy of God. He ought to have mentioned the future perfection that awaits all who trust in Christ. He should have considered the Gospel, the only source of hope in a broken world.

Our dilemma should not be why God allows evil. Instead, our wonder should be why He would pay such an incredible price to rescue us at all when we have rebelled so completely against Him.

When this reality grabs our hearts, we will get down on our knees and ask forgiveness instead of criticizing God for not doing enough.

Yours for the truth,
Gregory Koukl
President, Stand to Reason