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The Thorny Thesis of a Theodicy

by Daryl E. Witmer

It was not a pretty sight. The smallest most fragile babies were very quiet — too weak to cry — and all of them were dying of AIDS. Other babies were screaming in torment. Their little frames twitched violently, over and over again, with the spasms of withdrawal. A TV camera panned the hospital nursery as a doctor intoned: "These were the ones most severely addicted (to drugs) at birth."

In Brazil multiple thousands of dirty, rejected, wretched little children live on the streets. Most have no families, no homes. Many are sexually exploited. Some years ago a ten-year old Brazilian street child said: "I sleep in a shopping center and at midnight or dawn the police beat us. They force us to eat [excrement] and they throw hot water on us." Repeated news reports seem to substantiate the fact that at times off-duty police have actually been paid a bounty to hunt down and kill these "undesirables."

Not so long ago I read the repulsive account of a little baby girl being brutally raped by her babysitter's boyfriend. And where was God when that was going on? Certainly not coming to her rescue.

What does it take to get God's attention, anyway? What would

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be needed for Him to rise up and stop evil in this world? How about **six million Jews** dying in a **Holocaust**? No. Even in the face of that unspeakable horror, God did not step in and say, "Enough!"

I have personally spent considerable time on both sides of a hospital bed-rail. I have been a pastor and I have been a patient. I know what it's like to lie in a bed in misery, feeling totally ignored by God, hour after hour, day after day, night after night.

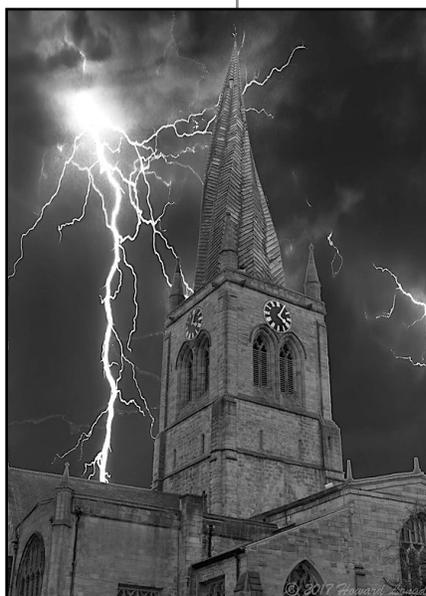
Some years ago I watched a kind gentle woman move through the last agonizing stages of ALS, i.e. *Lou Gehrig's disease*. Slowly but certainly, in excruciatingly painful increments, she was strangled in the torturous vice grip of that dreadful condition. Eventually, all motor activity, including her speech, was squeezed out of her. She became totally paralyzed, "buried" alive, unable to even pull in her next breath. The suffering was unimaginable.

In a June 10, 1991, essay for *Time* magazine, Lance Morrow cited **three propositions**: **1)** God is all-powerful, **2)** God is all-good, **3)** Terrible things happen. He then referred to author Frederick Buechner who once wrote that the dilemma has always been this: "You can match any two of those propositions, but never all three."

A **theodicy** is a **defense of God's goodness** in spite of **evil**. The bold **thesis of a biblical theodicy** is that all three propositions actually *can* be matched. The thesis is made **thorny**

because awful scenarios, such as those cited above, make any attempt to vindicate God as being all-good an incredibly thorny difficult task. We can all understand and relate to what **St. Teresa of Avila** meant when she lamented: "Lord, if this is the way You treat Your friends, no wonder you have so few of them!"

In the absence of a good theodicy, despair frequently prevails. Holocaust survivor **Elie Wiesel** referred to God as being "in exile." **Rabbi Harold Kushner** portrayed God as impotent. The philosopher **Nietzsche** said that God was dead.



Can the **rose** of a sound theodicy really truly ever be plucked from such doubt and despair? **Yes.** One very useful theodicy involves recognizing how God balances **temporary human pain** with His own **eternal purposes** and the **greater, ultimate, good**. Adversity in this life is temporary. So God does not reckon our pain-filled moments — or even *years* — in **the same way** that we tend to

reckon them. In fact, He outrules any sort of comparison equation: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." **Romans 8:18**

A second effective theodicy involves the matter of God's *timing*. Consider the following syllogism: **1)** If God is **omnibenevolent** He would **choose** to defeat evil. **2)** If God is **omnipotent**, He would be **able** to defeat evil. **3)** Evil is not currently defeated. **4)** Therefore, at some point in the future **God will defeat evil.**" Just *when* God chooses to do so and His reasons for delay may not seem acceptable to us *in the moment*. But that's because we're not God. He is.