

Cancer and War from God's Hands?

by Paul G. Humber

Some know that I wrote devotionals for *Days of Praise*. I referred a colleague [of the Haverford School—see image of me with some of them to the right] to one I had just written. He commented later that he agreed with every word I said. This was an encouragement. Perhaps the Lord was/is working in his heart. (I invite you to pray.) But he followed with a sincere question about the sovereignty of God over



such things as cancer, war, and the Holocaust. I said a few things on the spot but later handed him a more formal reply. With a few minor changes, here is my response.

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for your note which said that I had stated well the nature of your questions. As I sit down at my computer this Saturday morning to formulate a more lengthy response, I sense a need to get over two preliminary (and perhaps only imagined) obstacles. You may be wondering 1) what is my motivation for doing this, and 2) am I not a bit presumptuous in attempting to do what far greater minds than mine have failed to do?

My Response to Obstacle #1: First, I enjoy a challenge. You remember that I used to coach pole vaulting. Getting over a bar is a challenge, and I enjoy it. Your question is like a crossbar — a challenge. Can I get over it?

Second, I named my son Peter after the Apostle who wrote, “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” (1 Pet.3:15-16). I value your friendship. You have asked a good question. I have an obligation to give my reasons for the hope that I have in a fair and just God.

My Response to Obstacle #2: On the matter of arrogance (and I'm not saying you are accusing me of such), I have several things to say.

Many years ago, when we used to meet as an Upper School faculty in the Board Room, I spoke out against smoking in the Faculty Room. One of my peers represented me (in the minutes) as being “adamantly opposed” to smoking in the faculty room. At the time, I was on the radical fringe of what was acceptable — smoke had been billowing out into the hall and almost into my room. The irony is that now my fringe position is centrist.

Some may have thought at the time that I was arrogant to think I knew what was best for my colleagues. The truth of the matter is that I was right, but not because I was more intelligent. I was simplistic, having seen pictures of lungs blackened by tar. I deduced (rightly) that such was harmful to the body. You may remember that I posted pictures in what was then the mailroom.

There is an interesting passage in the Psalms that speaks to the matter of arrogance: “Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes” (Ps.119:98-99). Note that the writer of those words had more insight, not

because he was smarter, but because the Lord was and is smarter. The believer has answers because he is more familiar with God's "Answer-Key."

Do cancer and war (specifically, the Holocaust) come from God's hands? I would like to answer this question in seven parts with a concluding summary:

Part 1: It's Okay to Ask Sincere Questions.

First, this is a fair question. We are creatures made in God's image. He is eminently rational, and it is fitting that we ask rational questions. He said, "'Come now, let us reason together,' says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool'" (Is.1:18). Job asked all kinds of questions — so did the Psalmist (Ps.73) and Habakkuk:

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received. How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted. (Hab. 1:1-4)

The slain saints (cf. Rev.6:10) asked another probing question from heaven, but I move on to the next part.

Part 2: It's Not Okay to Be Puffed Up with Pride.

Having said the above, it is also very important to be humble before God. Putting God on trial (and He has allowed this to happen more than once — see pp. 17-18 of my book) is indeed arrogant! God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. He said:

Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. (Is.46:8-10)

Man today says that he will do all that he pleases, but he will fail in his prideful efforts to usurp God.

Part 3: Let's Admit to Our Limitations.

We also should realize that our capacity to understand is very limited. Even if we are more intelligent than Adam (a thing very unlikely), our understanding is next to nothing when compared to God. But He has revealed Himself to us: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deut.29:29).

Part 4: Getting to Know God's Character.

The most important thing for us as humans is to know God intimately and lovingly. Jesus prayed:

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them. (Jn.17:24-26)

Getting to know someone involves getting to know his character. God is loving, compassionate, holy, and just. When a human author (C.S.Lewis) creates an evil character (the White Witch), we do not say that the author is evil for doing so. The character may be evil, but the author is not — especially if he has a good purpose that transcends temporary evil (the ultimate triumph of good over evil, for example).

The Sovereign of the Universe, in order to display the wonder of His character to the cosmic (heavenly) host, created people who would fall into sin. Unlike Lewis' White Witch, however, Adam and Eve were created both real and good. They chose the evil (to disobey God). That sin has been imputed to us, their

descendants. In Adam, all fall.

Two questions might arise at this point. First, is not the idea of a heavenly host fanciful — does it find biblical support? Second, who does God think He is — making the universe this way? In response to the first question, there is ample support for the heavenly host notion. I offer two passages. The first is from the Book of Revelation (Chapter 5):

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped. (Rev. 5:11-14)

As to the notion of man’s being on display before angels, see the first chapter of Job:

One day the angels [*note*: literally, the sons of God] came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them. The LORD said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered the LORD, “From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it.” Then the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.” “Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan replied. “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.” The LORD said to Satan, “Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.” (Job 1:6-12a)

The second question was: Who does God think He is — making the universe this way? This is not unlike the hypothetical question the Apostle Paul entertained:

One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?” But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? (Rom. 9:19-21)

This may be something like asking, “Does not the author (Lewis) have the right to make with the same pen and ink some characters for noble purposes and some for ignoble?” The Apostle went on immediately to write:

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath — prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory — even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea: “I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one,” and, “It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’” (Rom. 9:22-26)

Part 5: Let’s Not Forget God’s Mercy.

Lest we be tempted at this point to sit in judgment over God, it would be good to remind ourselves that the same God who punishes evil with war and judgments also displays His character of love and mercy. It seems that both Adam and Eve, for example, who were expelled from the Garden, were rescued. He gave them garments of skin — requiring sacrifice of an animal. This typified the covering of righteousness the Lamb of God gives to those who humble their hearts before the Cross. Adam and Eve accepted God’s provision.

Part 6: But Why Cancer?

Several years ago I held my father-in-law's hand as he passed from this life. Though he was (is) a Christian, he died of cancer. Why? Isn't God supposed to heal all our diseases? My wife, Prudence, has been healed of cancer! Why not her father?

First, my father-in-law did live much beyond the maximum of four years that was projected following diagnosis of the cancer. Fifteen years is much more than four. But also, it was a tremendous learning experience for him and others. He gained new appreciation, for example, for the passage in 1 Pet.1:3-7:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this 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.

My father-in-law, a former executive with Firestone Tire and Rubber, would go with men from his church to the Akron City Jail and speak to some on death row. I would wheel him around in his wheelchair. When they spoke of death row, he identified with them by saying he was on death row, too. He rejoiced in the opportunity to share with them freedom in Christ.

Cancer for my wife was a learning experience. For one thing, we learn utter dependence on God. The Lord comes very close to His children when they suffer. He never leaves them nor forsakes them. Cancer is not such a bad thing if it means closeness to the greatest Lover of all time, and death for the believer is like birth — a moving from one location to a much bigger world.

Much, much more could be said here, but I move to the Holocaust.

Part 7: Why War and the Holocaust?

I don't know if you have ever read my articles dealing with Hitler's evil and the resistance of Christians to it. I mention Corrie ten Boom in one of those two articles, and I loaned you a copy of the video, *The Hiding Place*, featuring her story. She is interviewed at the end. We have the notion that the ultimate evil that can come our way is physical death, but this is not right. The Lord said, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Mt.10:28)

Corrie's sister died in one of the prison camps. Her family's crime was trying to save Jews. The apostle Paul wrote:

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. (2 Cor.4:16-18)

Death in a concentration camp, for the believer, is a "light and momentary trouble." The Apostle Peter wrote:

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Pet.2:21-25)

Summary

I do not profess to have answered every aspect of your question, but I find God's revelation of Himself in His Word satisfying to me. I allow that there are many dimensions beyond my ability to understand, but He has proven His goodness to me in so many ways that it would be utter folly for me to do other than to bow before Him in humble admiration, love, and praise.

If there is one passage that says it all, it might be the Apostle Paul's words in Eph.1:11-12: "In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory."

A passage in his third chapter, perhaps because it is more lengthy, may actually top it, however. Paul adds:

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of His power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph 3:7-11)

Thank you for setting up that crossbar so that I might at least try to "Paul-vault" over it. I'm not sure whether in your mind I have quite cleared the bar, but it's been a joy trying, anyway.

May the One who gives us strength to do anything — including staring "in wonder" at "a leaf bud emerging on a flowering pear" with all of its "delicate complexity" and "filaments of fragility," fill our hearts with such love and adoration of Him that we all but burst with His joy.

Scripture quotations are from the New International Version. Paul has an A.B. degree and an M.S. degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a B.D. degree from Westminster Theological Seminary. He was on the faculty of the University of Phoenix, Philadelphia Campus, and is (2016) the Director of CR Ministries in Philadelphia.