



Understanding suffering

RELIGION: Randy Alcorn explains why evil doesn't disprove the sovereignty of a good God by MARVIN OLASKY

RANDY ALCORN'S *IF GOD IS Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil* (Multnomah, 2009) responds to the atheistic claim that the existence of evil negates Christian proclamation of God's total sovereignty plus total goodness: If He's

really in charge, He's a sadist. Alcorn responds by showing that atheists lack reasonable answers to both the problem of good—materialistically inexplicable acts of loving sacrifice—and the problem of extreme evil, where people expend resources to inflict suffering

beyond any benefit they receive.

Alcorn also notes that God may already be restraining 99 percent of evil and suffering, and that acts of goodness may appear harsh: He gives the example of a 3-year-old boy who has swallowed poison and must be kept awake on the way to the hospital, so a parent has to slap him every time he falls asleep. He writes that if God were to eliminate any one evil, the result might be much worse: A child's disability might lead him and his parents to become servant-hearted rather than self-absorbed.

(Along the line of "things would have been worse," Alcorn synthesizes the famous *Star Trek* episode in which time-traveling Dr. McCoy in 1930 saves the life of peace advocate Edith Keeler, who then builds a pacifist movement that delays America's entry into World War II long enough to allow Germany to be first in developing an atomic bomb; Hitler then rules the world. To avoid that, Captain Kirk has to go back in time to make sure the young woman—whom he loves—dies.)

Alcorn also sees that what seems like pointless suffering may have a point we don't see. I think of that when contemplating our tragic abortion pandemic: Apparently useless except to reveal the breadth of human selfishness, it has nevertheless pushed some people to come to Christ. Much sacrificial effort by pro-life people has glorified God. Furthermore, reaction to *Roe v. Wade* eventually propelled political changes (including the election of Ronald Reagan) that led to the end of the Cold War and perhaps saved us from nuclear war.

But this is all speculation. We'll never know, at least in this life, why so many have died so young. At some point we need to return to two basics: the Old Testament teaching in Job and other books that God is much wiser than us, and the New Testament teaching that God did not watch from a distance but took on extreme suffering Himself two millennia ago.

Facing suffering

IN JUNE 2005, I REVIEWED DAVID Horowitz's *The End of Time*, which explores his thinking when hit with a prostate cancer diagnosis. Horowitz's typical books terrifically assault the errors of the left, but this book was different: Horowitz, without faith in God, tells his believing wife that he'll think about this most important of all questions—to which she replies, "I don't want you to think. I want you to open your heart."

Horowitz's latest, *A Cracking of the Heart* (Regnery), movingly reveals the opening involuntarily created when Horowitz's daughter Sarah died at age 44. Horowitz writes, "When death takes someone you love, you are left with a hole in

the heart that will never be filled. . . . Whenever I think of Sarah, tears well in my eyes, and my chest fills to the brim; and then I am overwhelmed by the terrible sorrow of our human lot."

Alcorn's book will not take away the pain of Horowitz or that of many others—but Alcorn says the hole can eventually be filled (although probably not for a long time). How? The Bible astoundingly promises that in the next life if not this one, God will wipe away the tears of all with faith in Him. Horowitz wrote in a note to me last month, "Faith can't be an intellectual act. You really have to be touched by it." True. Pray for touching. —M.O.

