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A Puzzlement

The wonderful old Hollywood movie, *The King and I*, had Yul Brynner as the King of Siam, stand with hands on hips, and thoughtfully consider how to impart some understanding of the world to his children. After recalling all the things that are remarkable, troubling, awe-inspiring, and bewildering about life, he concludes by announcing, “It is a puzzlement.” Indeed, most of us would agree that a great deal of life is a puzzlement. How do we come to grips with its most important dimensions? How do we convey them to others?

Historically, one of the greatest of all human puzzlements, especially for religious people, is the problem of suffering and evil. There is a whole category of theological effort devoted to analyzing this puzzle, and it is called theodicy. Basically, the theodicy question could be stated this way: If God is good and all-powerful, why does evil still exist? Jewish and Christian scriptures offer several slants and explanations for this conundrum, and we are familiar with them, aren't we? For example, one perspective is that God's ways are vastly superior to our own and so we are not meant to understand them. Other perspectives claim that suffering is a punishment from God, or that suffering teaches us, or purifies us, or tests us. Another possibility is raised that suffering is only a temporary and unimportant problem, for when the Kingdom of God is finally established, all suffering and evil will cease to exist. But the variety of answers to this dilemma, and the manner in which the problem of suffering has been taken up in every generation by theologian after theologian, suggest that ultimate and conclusive answers to this puzzle are hard to come by.

In recent years quite a few authors have taken an almost gleeful delight in noting the troubling aspects of the theodicy question for God's defenders. And they state that their own atheism is in part predicated on the problem of explaining suffering and evil.

But surprisingly enough, in our experience across the years of working with people who have suffered what are sometimes enormous losses, we almost never hear this question raised as an objection to belief in God. Quite the contrary. When people are in the midst of grief or losses, or have been struck by suffering or by a brush with evil, they so often turn directly to God for comfort and strength and new hope. God's believers seem to trust that while there are matters that will forever remain a puzzlement, God's astonishing love and God's will to support and save us is not in doubt.

Maybe this question of suffering's existence and its meaning has never troubled you. Or maybe, if you are like most people, there have come times in your life when old answers don't suffice, and you wonder anew about this question, turning to your faith for help. What does your faith help you to understand about suffering's cause and its meaning? If it is a puzzlement – we hope that God's ever-seeking love for you is not!