

BOOK REVIEW
*IF GOD IS GOOD: FAITH IN THE
MIDST OF SUFFERING AND EVIL*

by Randy Alcorn

(Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2009), 512 pages

Theologians call this “theodicy”—“a vindication of God’s justice in tolerating the existence of evil.” Alcorn does this better than any other single book I’ve read, and I’ve read a fair representation of them: *Disappointment with God* and *Where Is God When It Hurts* by Philip Yancey, *When God Doesn’t Make Sense*, by James Dobson, *Deliver Us from Evil* and *Cries of the Heart* by Ravi Zacharias, *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants*, by Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *If God Disappears* by David Sanford, *A Grief Observed* and *The Problem of Pain* by C. S. Lewis, and *Where Is God When Bad Things Happen?* by Luis Palau. What sets Alcorn’s book apart from the pack is the extensiveness of his coverage; he turns over nearly every possible stone: the inadequate schemes of Open Theism, Free Will vs. Sovereignty of God, the unsatisfying views of Annihilationism, atheism’s inability to explain extreme evil, and the perversion of the Health and Wealth Gospel.

The research behind this book is stunning. Every chapter is end-noted. Citations abound from theologians, philosophers, biographers, historians, missiologists, novelists, film-makers, personal interviewees, correspondents, poets, and more. It abounds in quotations, illustrations, and anecdotes. It is frequently technical and scholarly and at other times pastoral and warmly personal. At all times it is accessible to the average reader. The length of the book will be daunting to most readers (512 pages), but I encourage you to purchase it nevertheless for two reasons: 1) The chapters are short (there are 45 chapters) and they are packaged in 11 clearly titled sections. 2) It is easy for the reader to go directly to desired topics via the descriptive section and chapter titles and the extensive topical and Scripture indexes. If the reader chooses not to read the entire book, it is nevertheless a powerful reference tool. For instance, if a friend tells you that God can’t exist because of the Holocaust or Cambodia’s Killing Fields, go to chapter 12, *Non-Theistic Worldviews Lack a Substantial Basis for Condemning Evil* (“It’s difficult to argue the problem of evil when your worldview provides no basis for believing in evil.”), chapter 13, *The Unbeliever’s Problem of Goodness* (“People speak of gratuitous evil. But what about gratuitous good...?”), and chapter 14, *The Unbeliever’s Problem of Extreme Evil*.

A common argument against the biblical nature of God is the classic syllogism that God cannot be both good and powerful in the face of evil of suffering. If he is good, he would stop the suffering, but since he does not, he must be powerless to do so. If he is powerful, he would stop the suffering, but since he does not, he must not be good. Or, as atheists claim, he isn’t there at all. Open theists have added a third possibility: God possesses limited knowledge. Since he does not know what men and angels will do, he simply does the best he can after the fact. Alcorn dedicates a chapter to each of these arguments. Chapter 16 will be very helpful to readers who have not yet understood the arguments of open theism.

Section 6 treats the essential topics of divine sovereignty and human free will. Alcorn unpacks this issue comprehensibly and strategically. He well demonstrates that genuine free will must allow for the existence of evil. He equally argues that the sovereign God never allows any suffering to be wasted, but rather uses it masterfully to accomplish his good purposes and to produce good out of it as claimed in Romans 8:28. In fact, he argues that, with God, there is no such thing as “pointless

suffering.” (chapter 35) I resonate strongly with Alcorn’s probing of the evil in *my* heart. I may indict God for allowing Hitler. I wish God had immediately stopped and judged Hitler, don’t you? But I don’t want God to intervene and judge my smaller sins. I want a “pass.” How hypocritical of me! If God is going to clean up on sin, then I had better prepare for Hell myself! Alcorn quotes D. A. Carson, “Do you really want nothing but totally effective, instantaneous justice? Then go to hell.” (page 332)

Here is sample passage:

You won’t find the strongest Christian churches in the world in affluent America or Europe, where the problem of evil has the most traction. In Sudan, Christians are severely persecuted, raped, tortured, and sold into slavery. Yet many have a vibrant faith in Christ. People living in Garbage Village in Cairo make up one of the largest churches in Egypt. Hundreds of thousands of India’s poor are turning to Christ. Why? Because the caste system and fatalism of Hinduism give them no answers. So they turn to a personal God who loves them and understands suffering. I have interviewed numbers of people who take comfort in knowing that this life is the closest they will ever come to Hell. (page 103)

The reader will reconnect with the stories of the Auca Five, Corrie ten Boom, and missionary John Patton. There are also new stories here of the providence of God that thrill the heart: Adoptee Aina Flood (pages 370 and 377), Eric Liddell’s prison camp ministry to children (pages 442-443), Lee Ezell and her rape pregnancy (page 353), and the evangelistic fruit following the martyrdom of a missionary father and his two sons (pages 436-437). The reader meets with sufferers of cancer, car wrecks, ALS, rape, and domestic abuse—and hears their stories of finding the compassion and comfort of God in the most hellish experiences. Alcorn himself has been dogged by abortion activists with resulting impoverishment and jailing. He is an insulin-dependent diabetics. He has lost friends and family members to death, some tragically. These are all stories of robust faith.

This book is rich with Scripture and it is interpreted and applied with thoroughness and wisdom. Where appropriate, Hebrew and Greek lexical notes are added. The Scripture index fills seven pages of three columns each.

A Spurgeon quote summarizes a central theme of this book well: I am afraid that all the grace that I have got out of my comfortable and easy times and happy hours, might almost lie on a penny. But the good that I have received from my sorrows, and pains, and griefs, is altogether incalculable.... Affliction is the best bit of furniture in my house. It is the east book in a minister’s library.” (page 416)

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