

Where is God?

I heard this question posed last year on an Easter Sunday radio broadcast of a debate between an atheist scholar and a Christian scholar. As they exchanged arguments for and against the existence of God, it was clear to me that they both had great intellect. At first, the tone of the debate was very cool and measured, but gradually it became more intense and more passionate. The Christian and the atheist continued for some time in a point-counterpoint fashion, attempting to deconstruct and debunk one another's arguments. Finally, in a sudden burst of emotion (and I daresay frustration), the atheist said, "Hold it! Where is God? I can't see Him in this world. You show me where He is, and I'll believe."

We all know that intellectuals aren't the only ones asking questions like that—*billions* of people whose vision is obscured by the rawness of their own pain and suffering ask that question every day. A mother in a third-world country whose children who are beleaguered with hunger and disease, can hardly bear the desperation, frustration, and impotence she feels. She cannot provide for her babies, and fears they will soon die. She lifts weary, tear-filled eyes heavenward, and asks, "Where is God?"

Only days ago, a young husband and his wife were celebrating the expectation of a new life in their home. Dreams about the joy of holding a baby in their arms, dreams of what sort of person this new life might turn out to be, are suddenly shattered by a miscarriage. The husband holds his broken, disconsolate wife in his arms, weighed down by the injustice of it all. Why us? Why *our* baby? Why *anyone's* baby? In a wash of his own grief and bitterness, he asks, "Where is God?"

A young woman endures the haunting memories of sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her father as a child. Seeking love and fulfillment, relishing the attention she gets from it, and eager for the money she can earn, she starts dancing in a strip-club. Before long, she has crossed a thin line—now her body is not merely the object of lustful fantasy. She is altogether an object. She has become a prostitute. And in a rare moment of reflection late one night, she begins to sob at what has become of her life. She feels utterly cheap, worthless—she thinks of taking her own life. In her anguish, she doubts that life has any meaning apart from the woundedness that is consuming her.

"Where is God?"

I begin our study in the Gospel of Luke in this way, because I believe that Luke wrestles with this very question. For Luke, the problem of suffering and evil are what necessitate the existence and activity of God through a Savior. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus Christ begins his ministry with a glorious announcement:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord (Luke 4:17-19).

The following chapters catalog what happens when this Proclaimer of Liberty encounters the very poor and downtrodden to whom He was sent. In His ministry, Jesus meets a woman who has suffered with severe hemorrhaging for 12 years, a paralytic, a prostitute weighed down by guilt and shame, a religious official whose daughter is sick and dying, societal outcasts who are regarded by most as unlovable and undesirable, a man with a withered hand, an elderly woman so afflicted that she is bent in two and cannot stand up straight—all people who endured great pain and suffering just as we do in the modern era. All people who probably asked many times in their lives, "Where is God?" Even John the Baptist, who was praised by Jesus Himself, wonders where God is. While imprisoned for preaching against the sinfulness of King Herod, John sends a delegation to Jesus asking, "Are you the Expected One, or do we look for someone else? Where is God?" (Luke 7:20). Jesus answers by ministering in power to those who suffer, healing their diseases and hurts. People who once asked in anguish, "Where is God?" now rejoice because of Jesus Christ, saying, "God has visited His people!"

But Luke goes even further in dealing with the problem of suffering and evil. Over the course of His ministry, Jesus begins to talk about the awful suffering He Himself must endure. Eventually He is betrayed by one of His own followers. The very people He embraced and sought to bless want Him dead. He suffers rejection and beatings. He is falsely accused. He is spat upon and reviled. And ultimately, forsaken by all those He loved, He is killed on a cruel cross. To those who suffer in this world, who wonder where God is in their pain and suffering, He says, *Surely I understand what you are going through.*

In the wake of His death, Jesus' followers are bewildered and disillusioned. This One who had proclaimed liberty and the favorable year of the Lord, this One who had alleviated the

suffering of so many, was now seemingly consumed and destroyed by suffering and evil. And as you can imagine, they too began to wonder, “Where is God?”

His answer to them is the same answer to you within the sound of my voice who are asking the same question: that answer is an empty tomb. A resurrected Christ. A living Savior who actively loves and cares about you this moment. A message that the pain and suffering of this world can *never* overcome the power and love of God.

I close with two charges. The first is to Christians. To turn our backs on all those who ask, for whatever reason, “Where is God?” is to deny the Christ that has been deposited in us by His Spirit. Will you recommit on this Easter Sunday, to join Him in preaching good news to the poor, in releasing those who are held captive, and in setting free those who are downtrodden? Will you recommit to letting the world know that God has a powerful answer to their pain and suffering? The second charge is to any of you who might be considering the claims of Christ. He called Himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He *is* the answer to every last need or hurt you could ever possibly have. Take a look at the Gospel of Luke, and see if He doesn’t answer you in a powerful way when you ask, “Where is God?”

Now may the Lord bless you, and keep you, and grant you peace both now and forevermore. Amen.