**God, Evil, & Suffering: What We Shall Say!**

Thomas Long in “What Shall We Say?” has a helpful framework for responding to suffering. He uses The Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat found in Matthew 13.

**Matthew 13:24-43**  24 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' 28 He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29 But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30 Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

31 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

33 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

34 Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. 35 This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."

36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." 37 He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38 the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

1. **A Response of Protest:** 
   1. 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? **Where, then, did these weeds come from?'**
   2. **Matthew 27:46**  46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (See also Psalm 22)
   3. “Who are we to file charges against God? A theodicy of protest, however, is not a cool and reasoned response to the problem of evil; it is the visceral response of people who trust God and feel betrayed.”[[1]](#footnote-1)
      1. “A theodicy of protest both acknowledges and yearns for the love of God”[[2]](#footnote-2)
2. **An Enemy Has Done This:** 
   1. This is the OPPOSITE of “It is all part of God’s plan.”
      1. Our response must be able to engage horrendous, meaningless, absurd evil
   2. Jesus says: and the enemy who sowed them is the devil;
      1. It is best not to understand this devil as a literal creature lurking in the darkness.
      2. “The demonic is the relentless will to undo which points to the understanding of the tragic character of human history, its uncanny ability to destroy creatively—that is, to destroy in ever-new ways.”[[3]](#footnote-3)
   3. “Whatever it is ‘out there’ in creation, and also ‘in here’ in the human heart – the powers of death, the random and absurd forces of evil, ‘the pestilence that stalks in the darkness… the destruction that wastes at noon day’ (Psalm 91:6) – **it is not only our enemy; it is God’s enemy too.”**
3. **Can We Fix it?** 
   1. The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29 But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.
      1. Who has the wisdom to sort good from evil? Who among us is not entangled in evil?
   2. Ok… Can God fix it? – Yes, but not in the way you are asking.
      1. “God cannot root out evil, but not because God lacks the power. God cannot root out evil because engaging the world in this way would require a different god. A god who used power in this way, in the way we often imagine God should do it, would not be true to God’s own character, would not be the God we know in Jesus Christ.” [[4]](#footnote-4)
4. **Will It Always Be This Way? NO!**
   1. God will judge and God will ultimately set things right.
      1. 30 Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.
      2. **Revelation 21:3-4**  3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."
      3. **Romans 12:19-21**  19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, **"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."** 20 No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
         1. Miroslav Volf: Nonviolence requires belief in Divine Vengeance.
   2. God is not waiting – The kingdom of God is at hand
      1. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed…
      2. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."
5. **Response of Accompaniment** 
   1. Douglas John Hall – Theologia crucis leads inevitably to an ecclesia crucis.
      1. A theology of the cross leads to a church of the cross.
      2. Protest is not only to God but also Against Evil & Sin. – Advocacy.
   2. “No doubt it is a human thing to wish to avoid suffering and to regard the lack of suffering as a mark of special favor, or at least good fortune. Conversely, it is also a human and healthy thing to eschew unnecessary suffering, and to be skeptical of those who go out of their way to find crosses to bear! But once the church confesses faith in a God who through sacrificial identification with a suffering creation heals its brokenness from within, it commits itself to a life in which suffering will have considerable prominence.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Summary: When responding to the issues of suffering and evil in this world we must be mindful of two different messages: The Pastoral Response & The Intellectual Response**

**Pastoral Response: (Seeks to Comfort the Afflicted and Accompany on the Journey)**

1. **Silence**
2. **Protest –** “This breaks my heart too. This is not right or good.”
3. **Accompaniment –** “I am here for you and I believe that some how God is here for you too. You are not alone. God has not forgotten you.”
4. **Response to WHY? – Mystery –** “I wish I knew. I cannot fully understand it either.”
5. **An Offering of Hope –** (Read Scripture) – I believe that God is angered/saddened by this suffering too. I believe that God will make things right. In the cross, Jesus puts an end to meaninglessness, suffering, absurdity, sinfulness, & death – These things do not get the last word. The Father’s response to all those terrible things is to raise Jesus from the dead, forever. Resurrection is also our hope.

**The Intellectual Response: (Seeks to Address the “Why” of Suffering and Evil.)**

1. **We are created with limits**
2. **This is a dynamic world –** sometimes we get in the way of the wild creation
3. **Sin is real –** our sinfulness affects others and creation
   1. God grants us the freedom to sin against each other & against God
   2. The sin of others can have dramatic impact on our lives
   3. Sinful acts can have lasting & cumulatively sinful effects on communities
4. **God does respond but not in the way we expect.**
   1. God comes in Love as a Suffering Servant in Jesus Christ
   2. Power is expressed in love and humility rather that force and might
   3. God is at work now but that present work also takes the form of the cross.
      1. God meets people in suffering and grants hope
   4. God (through the Holy Spirit) sends the church to be advocates, co-sufferers, and hope announcers.
5. **The inner-workings of God’s purposes will remain a mystery.**
   1. God remains Holy & Other
   2. In Jesus Christ, God reveals God’s self for the sake of faith.

1. Thomas Long “What Shall We Say?” pg 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Walter Sundberg referencing Paul Tillich : The Demonic in Christian Thought pg 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thomas Long “What Shall We Say?” pg 141 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. DJH “God & Human Suffering” pg 144 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)