
Affirming God in the Midst of Disability

BY THOMAS H. GRAVES

An encounter with personal disability brought Tom Graves to a perplexing impasse. As a philosopher of religion, how could he talk of God in words that were both true to his faith and honest with his disabled condition?

It began innocently enough as I stumbled and tripped while playing tennis. When that clumsiness was repeated several times, I longed to find a reason for my loss of athletic prowess, other than the fact that I was never that good anyway. My concern grew as I noticed a great deal of numbness in my left hand and my feet began to feel as if I were walking through sand. An orthopedic specialist diagnosed the problem as a result of bone spurs on my upper spine, but surgery did nothing to alleviate the symptoms. A neurologist then began a series of tests to determine if I had a brain tumor or some other serious malady of the nervous system.

I was thirty-six years old, at the prime of my life, with a loving wife and two young daughters. A few months earlier I was playing tennis, golf, softball, and jogging. Now I was scared to death, or I should say, I was scared of death. I wondered if I would live long enough to teach my daughters how to ride a bicycle. When the doctor concluded lengthy tests and informed me that I had multiple sclerosis, I remember thanking him, knowing what else he was looking for.

At that same time, the spring of 1983, I was teaching a course on the problem of evil. Suddenly I was no longer a spectator looking objectively at the many instances of chaos and suffering in human life. Now I found myself to be a very fragile participant in the game of life, wounded and afraid like so many others. One lives and thinks differently when one experiences the harsh limitations of human life.

My job as a minister and a professor of philosophy of religion was to

speak of God in a meaningful way. How could I now learn to talk of God in words that were both true to my faith and honest with my disabled condition? Like the biblical exiles I needed to learn to sing the Lord's song in a very strange land. My illness challenged and changed my thoughts at several points. Just as importantly, it led me to a much deeper spiritual experience.

As sophisticated as I thought I was, one of the first impulses that came to mind upon learning that I had multiple sclerosis was the question "What have I done to deserve this?" There was enough Calvinism in my background to make me aware of my inescapable sinful nature, if not human depravity. There was also something within me that insisted on the orderliness and fairness of creation. But to claim that all misfortune is retribution for our sin is not true biblically, is not true always in the world around us, and I felt was not an adequate explanation for my own situation. Bad things do happen to good people. Surely a faith that worships a man of sorrows who died on a cross cannot deny that fact. Evil, particularly natural evil, cannot be reduced in every instance to the realm of human sin.

Most importantly, my encounter with personal disability brought me to a refined definition of divine omnipotence. How we describe the character of God is distorted if we begin that discussion from the standpoint of absolute power. The central revelation of God throughout Scripture is that God is relational love, not manipulative power. When viewed from this vantage point we understand the nature of God, the creation of the world, and the purpose of human life in a dramatically different fashion.

First, the doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that the nature of Christ is consistent with the nature of God. The God we see in Jesus Christ is one who uses power perfectly, not one who monopolizes all power. God enjoys that degree of power that is commensurate with there being other effective agents of power in creation. God has so limited divine power as to allow freedom for persons so that we may come into relationship with God without coercion. A love compelled by force is no love at all. Isn't that what the Crucifixion is telling us? God is willing to sacrifice power in order to demonstrate God's love. God would rather die than stop loving us. It is God's love and not God's power that is omnipotent. The physical agony of human life is not the direct result of God's loving will. If neither my own sinful character nor the perfect character of God is the source of my disability and anguish, what is its source?

In dealing with the issue of natural evil I begin with two presuppositions: the environment out of which God creates is a realm of primordial chaos; and creation is not completed but is an ongoing process. Genesis 1:2 tells us that when God began to create "the earth was a formless void (*'tohu wabohu'*) and darkness covered the face of the deep." As Karl Barth insists, the "nothing" out of which God created was in fact "something." Barth refers to it as "*das nichtige*," or that to which God said "no" in the process of creation.¹ Edgar Sheffield Brightman refers to it as "the given" from which "surd evil" arises.² Nicholas Berdyaev uses the mystical imagery of "meonic freedom"

or “the ungrund” to describe this realm of freedom prior to creation.³ David Ray Griffin, disputing the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, postulates a primordial chaos out of which God creates.⁴ Whatever philosophical image one may choose to describe the environment of God’s creative act, it is clear that the language of Genesis refers to an unformed realm of chaotic existence from which God calls forth creation. The process of divine creation is one of bringing both order and intensity out of a realm of chaos. Nature at the point of creation is not yet perfected; chaotic elements and remnants of disorder remain in our unfinished universe.

Genesis 1:26-28 speaks of persons being created in the image and likeness of the creator and given dominion over all that was formed by God. Persons are charged with the responsibility for caring and having dominion over the earth, bringing all creation to its fullest expression. In keeping with the loving character of God, the biblical model rejects domination by power and the crude abuse of nature. Persons are invited, indeed have a duty, to join with God in an “eighth day of creation,” fulfilling our calling, in our feeble human way, to be co-creators with God. As Henri Nouwen commented, the most radical teaching of Jesus Christ is to strive to be like God.⁵ Our vocation as persons of faith is to express ourselves as fully as possible in our likeness to God, through loving creativity. Nature is an unfinished realm waiting on persons for its true destiny to be accomplished. This makes the natural order an arena in which the creative capacities of humanity can be fully and freely expressed.

Understandably our harsh encounter with the evils of this world can give rise to a cynical atheism insisting that a God of love and power would want to create a paradise of blissful perfection and that anything less is not worthy of our worship. On the contrary, I have found reflection on the issue of evil to be a pathway toward belief. As stated by John Hick, “human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort has a value in the eyes of the Creator which justifies even the long travail of the soul-making process.”⁶

Given our redefinitions of divine power, creation, and human purpose, one can argue that to allow human freedom, God accepts the agony and consequences of human sin; to provide an arena in which human creativity can be expressed, the natural order remains unfinished; and to provide meaning for human existence, persons are given responsibility to work with God in bringing the created order toward completion. Is that not the pathway to salvation? Rather than indicting God for the evils of human life and the shortcomings of the natural order, it is possible to see it as part of the divine plan to provide all that is necessary for free and creative personal life. I prefer living in that arena, even given all of its evil, to an antiseptically clean and perfected order where human life would be left without freedom or challenge.

From this perspective we can see the importance of the gospel proclamation: you are not alone. God is with us in our suffering. Our pain is felt in

the very heart of God. The Christian faith is a form of radical humanism, worshipping a God who provides all that is necessary for meaningful human life. That same God comes to us in the form of Jesus bearing the wounds and disabilities of a vulnerable human life. If we are called to be a co-creator with God, we also know that God comes to us as a co-sufferer. That is a God truly worthy of worship.

NOTES

1 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.3, (*The Doctrine of Creation: The Creator and His Creature*), edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. and T. Clark, 1969), 293.

2 Edgar Sheffield Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1940), 314.

3 Nicholas Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), 145.

4 David Ray Griffin, "Creation Out of Nothing, Creation Out of Chaos, and the Problem of Evil," in Stephen T. Davis, ed., *Encountering Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 108.

5 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Image Books, 1994), 121.

6 John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010 [1966]), 256.



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