THE CASE FOR Faith

A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity

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The Case for Faith

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The Challenge of Faith

Christian theism must be rejected by any person with even a shred of respect for reason.

George H. Smith, atheist[1]

Christian faith is not an irrational leap. Examined objectively, the claims of the Bible are rational propositions well supported by reason and evidence.

Charles Colson, Christian[2]

William Franklin Graham steadied himself by gripping both sides of the podium. He was eighty years old, fighting Parkinson's disease, but he stared intently at the throngs inside the RCA Dome in Indianapolis and spoke in a steady, forceful voice. There was no hint of hesitation, no uncertainty or ambiguity. His sermon was essentially the same simple and direct message he had been preaching for fifty years.

He referenced the chaos and violence around the world, and he zeroed in on the anguish, pain, and confusion in the hearts of individuals. He talked about sin, about forgiveness, about redemption, and about the loneliness, despair, and depression that weigh so many people down.

"All of us want to be loved," he said in his familiar North Carolina cadence as he approached the conclusion of his talk. "All of us want somebody to love us. Well, I want to tell you that God loves you. He loves you so much that he gave us his Son to die on the cross for our sins. And he loves you so much that he will come into your life and change the direction of your life and make you a new person, whoever you are.

"Are you sure that you know Christ? There comes a moment in which the Spirit of God convicts you, calls you, speaks to you about

opening your heart and making certain of your relationship to God. And hundreds of you here tonight are not sure. You'd like to be sure. You'd like to leave here tonight knowing that if you died on the way home, you would be ready to meet God."

So he urged them to come. And they did—at first, there was a trickle of people, and then the floodgates opened, with individuals, couples, and entire families pouring into the empty space in front of the platform. Soon they were shoulder-to-shoulder, the crowd wrapping around the sides of the stage, nearly three thousand in all. Some were weeping, gripped by somber conviction; others stared downward, still stewing in shame over their past; many were smiling from ear to ear—liberated, joyous . . . home, finally.

One married woman was typical. "My mom died of cancer when I was young, and at the time I thought I was being punished by God," she told a counselor. "Tonight I realized that God loves me—it is something I've known but couldn't really grasp. Tonight a peacefulness came into my heart."[3]

What is faith? There would have been no need to define it for these people on that sultry June night. Faith was almost palpable to them. They reached out to God almost as if they were expecting to physically embrace him. Faith drained them of the guilt that had oppressed them. Faith replaced despondency with hope. Faith infused them with new direction and purpose. Faith unlocked heaven. Faith was like cool water soaking their parched soul.

But faith isn't always that easy, even for people who desperately want it. Some people hunger for spiritual certainty, yet something hinders them from experiencing it. They wish they could taste that kind of freedom, but obstacles block their paths. Objections pester them. Doubts mock them. Their hearts want to soar to God; their intellects keep them securely tied down.

They see the television coverage of the crowds who have come forward to pray with Billy Graham and they shake their heads. If it were only that simple, they sigh to themselves. If only there weren't so many questions.

For Charles Templeton—ironically, once Billy Graham's pulpit partner and close friend—questions about God have hardened into

bitter opposition toward Christianity. Like Graham, Templeton once spoke powerfully to crowds in vast arenas and called for people to commit themselves to Jesus Christ. Some even predicted Templeton would eventually eclipse Graham as an evangelist.

But that was a long time ago. That was before the crippling questions. Today Templeton's faith — repeatedly punctured by persistent and obstinate doubts — has leaked away. Maybe forever.

Maybe.

From Faith to Doubt

The year was 1949. Thirty-year-old Billy Graham was unaware that he was on the brink of being catapulted into worldwide fame and influence. Ironically, as he readied himself for his breakthrough crusade in Los Angeles, he found himself grappling with uncertainty — not over the existence of God or the divinity of Jesus but over the fundamental issue of whether he could totally trust what his Bible was telling him.

In his autobiography, Graham said he felt as if he were being stretched on a rack. Pulling him toward God was Henrietta Mears, the bright and compassionate Christian educator who had a thorough understanding of modern scholarship and an abounding confidence in the reliability of the Scriptures. Yanking him the other way was Graham's close companion and preaching colleague, thirty-three-year-old Charles Templeton.[4]

According to Templeton, he became a Christian fifteen years earlier when he found himself increasingly disgusted with his lifestyle on the sports staff of the Toronto *Globe*. Fresh from a night out at a sleazy strip joint, feeling shoddy and unclean, he went to his room and knelt by his bed in the darkness.

"Suddenly," he would recall later, "it was as though a black blanket had been draped over me. A sense of guilt pervaded my entire mind and body. The only words that would come were, 'Lord, come down. Come down. . .' " And then:

> Slowly, a weight began to lift, a weight as heavy as I. It passed through my thighs, my torso, my arms and shoulders, and lifted

> off. An ineffable warmth began to suffuse my body. It seemed that a light had turned on in my chest and that it had cleansed me. . . . I hardly dared breathe, fearing that I might alter or end the moment. And I heard myself whispering softly over and over again, "Thank you, Lord. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." Later, in bed, I lay quietly at the center of a radiant, overwhelming, all-pervasive happiness.[5]

After abandoning journalism for the ministry, Templeton met Graham in 1945 at a Youth for Christ rally. They were roommates and constant companions during an adventurous tour of Europe, alternating in the pulpit as they preached at rallies. Templeton founded a church that soon overflowed its 1,200-seat sanctuary. *American Magazine* said he "set a new standard for mass evangelism."[6] His friendship with Graham grew. "He's one of the few men I have ever loved in my life," Graham once told a biographer.[7]

But soon doubts began gnawing at Templeton. "I had gone through a conversion experience as an incredibly green youth," he recalled later. "I lacked the intellectual skills and the theological training needed to buttress my beliefs when — as was inevitable — questions and doubts began to plague me. . . . My reason had begun to challenge and sometimes to rebut the central beliefs of the Christian faith."[8]

A Triumph of Faith

Now, there was the skeptical Templeton, a counterpoint to the faith-filled Henrietta Mears, tugging his friend Billy Graham away from her repeated assurances that the Scriptures are trustworthy. "Billy, you're fifty years out of date," he argued. "People no longer accept the Bible as being inspired the way you do. Your faith is too simple."

Templeton seemed to be winning the tug-of-war. "If I was not exactly doubtful," Graham would recall, "I was certainly disturbed." He knew that if he could not trust the Bible, he could not go on. The Los Angeles crusade — the event that would open the door to Graham's worldwide ministry — was hanging in the balance.

Graham searched the Scriptures for answers, he prayed, he pon-

dered. Finally, in a heavy-hearted walk in the moonlit San Bernardino Mountains, everything came to a climax. Gripping a Bible, Graham dropped to his knees and confessed he couldn't answer some of the philosophical and psychological questions that Templeton and others were raising.

"I was trying to be on the level with God, but something remained unspoken," he wrote. "At last the Holy Spirit freed me to say it. 'Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—by *faith*! I'm going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be Your inspired Word.' "

Rising from his knees, tears in his eyes, Graham said he sensed the power of God as he hadn't felt it for months. "Not all my questions were answered, but a major bridge had been crossed," he said. "In my heart and mind, I knew a spiritual battle in my soul had been fought and won."[9]

For Graham, it was a pivotal moment. For Templeton, though, it was a bitterly disappointing turn of events. "He committed intellectual suicide by closing his mind," Templeton declared. The emotion he felt most toward his friend was pity. Now on different paths, their lives began to diverge.

History knows what would happen to Graham in the succeeding years. He would become the most persuasive and effective evangelist of modern times and one of the most admired men in the world. But what would happen to Templeton? Decimated by doubts, he resigned from the ministry and moved back to Canada, where he became a commentator and novelist.

Templeton's reasoning had chased away his faith. But are faith and intellect really incompatible? Is it possible to be a thinker and a Bible-believing Christian at the same time? Some don't believe so.

"Reason and faith are opposites, two mutually exclusive terms: there is no reconciliation or common ground," asserts atheist George H. Smith. "Faith is belief without, or in spite of, reason."[10]

Christian educator W. Bingham Hunter takes the opposite view. "Faith," he said, "is a rational response to the evidence of God's self-revelation in nature, human history, the Scriptures and his resurrected Son."[11]

For me, having lived much of my life as an atheist, the last thing I want is a naive faith built on a paper-thin foundation of wishful thinking or make-believe. I need a faith that's consistent with reason, not contradictory to it; I want beliefs that are grounded in reality, not detached from it. I need to find out once and for all whether the Christian faith can stand up to scrutiny.

It was time for me to talk face to face with Charles Templeton.

From Minister to Agnostic

Some five hundred miles north of where Billy Graham was staging his Indianapolis campaign, I tracked Templeton to a modern high-rise building in a middle-class neighborhood of Toronto. Taking the elevator to the twenty-fifth floor, I went to a door marked "Penthouse" and used the brass knocker.

Under my arm I carried a copy of Templeton's latest book, whose title leaves no ambiguity concerning his spiritual perspective. It's called *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*. The often-acerbic tome seeks to eviscerate Christian beliefs, attacking them with passion for being "outdated, demonstrably untrue, and often, in their various manifestations, deleterious to individuals and to society."[12]

Templeton draws upon a variety of illustrations as he strives to undermine faith in the God of the Bible. But I was especially struck by one moving passage in which he pointed to the horrors of Alzheimer's disease, describing in gripping detail the way it hideously strips people of their personal identity by rotting their mind and memory. How, he demanded, could a compassionate God allow such a ghastly illness to torture its victims and their loved ones?

The answer, he concluded, is simple: Alzheimer's would not exist if there were a loving God. And because it does exist, that's one more bit of persuasive evidence that God does not.[13] For someone like me, whose wife's family has endured the ugly ravages of Alzheimer's, it was an argument that carried considerable emotional punch.

I wasn't sure what to expect as I waited at Templeton's doorstep. Would he be as combative as he was in his book? Would he be bitter toward Billy Graham? Would he even go through with our interview?

When he had consented in a brief telephone conversation two days earlier, he had said vaguely that his health was not good.

Madeleine Templeton, fresh from tending flowers in her rooftop garden, opened the door and greeted me warmly. "I know you've come all the way from Chicago," she said, "but Charles is very sick, I'm sorry to say."

"I could come back another time," I offered.

"Well, let's see how he's feeling," she said. She led me up a red-carpeted staircase into their luxury apartment, two large and frisky poodles at her heels. "He's been sleeping. . . ."

At that moment, her eighty-three-year-old husband emerged from his bedroom. He was wearing a dark brown, lightweight robe over similarly colored pajamas. Black slippers were on his feet. His thinning gray hair was a bit disheveled. He was gaunt and pale, although his blue-gray eyes appeared alert and expressive. He politely extended his hand to be shaken.

"Please excuse me," he said, clearing his throat, "but I'm not well." Then he added matter-of-factly: "Actually, I'm dying."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

His answer almost knocked me on my heels. "Alzheimer's disease," he replied.

My mind raced to what he'd written about Alzheimer's being evidence for the nonexistence of God; suddenly, I had an insight into at least some of the motivation for his book.

"I've had it . . . let's see, has it been three years?" he said, furrowing his brow and turning to his wife for help. "That's right, isn't it, Madeleine?"

She nodded. "Yes, dear, three years."

"My memory isn't what it was," he said. "And, as you may know, Alzheimer's is always fatal. Always. It sounds melodramatic, but the truth is I'm doomed. Sooner or later, it will kill me. But first, it will take my mind." He smiled faintly. "It's already started, I'm afraid. Madeleine can attest to that."

"Look, I'm sorry to intrude," I said. "If you're not feeling up to this . . ."

But Templeton insisted. He ushered me into the living room, brightly decorated in a contemporary style and awash in afternoon

sunshine, which poured through glass doors that offered a breathtaking panoramic view of the city. We sat on adjacent cushioned chairs, and in a matter of minutes Templeton seemed to have mustered fresh energy.

"I suppose you want me to explain how I went from the ministry to agnosticism," he said. With that, he proceeded to describe the events that led to the shedding of his faith in God.

That was what I had expected. But I could never have anticipated how our conversation would end.

The Power of a Picture

Templeton was fully engaged now. Occasionally, I could see evidence of his Alzheimer's, such as when he was unable to recall a precise sequence of events or when he'd repeat himself. But for the most part he spoke with eloquence and enthusiasm, using an impressive vocabulary, his rich and robust voice rising and lowering for emphasis. He had an aristocratic tone that sounded nearly theatrical at times.

"Was there one thing in particular that caused you to lose your faith in God?" I asked at the outset.

He thought for a moment. "It was a photograph in *Life* magazine," he said finally.

"Really?" I said. "A photograph? How so?"

He narrowed his eyes a bit and looked off to the side, as if he were viewing the photo afresh and reliving the moment. "It was a picture of a black woman in Northern Africa," he explained. "They were experiencing a devastating drought. And she was holding her dead baby in her arms and looking up to heaven with the most forlorn expression. I looked at it and I thought, 'Is it possible to believe that there is a loving or caring Creator when all this woman needed was *rain*?' "

As he emphasized the word *rain*, his bushy gray eyebrows shot up and his arms gestured toward heaven as if beckoning for a response.

"How could a loving God *do this* to that woman?" he implored as he got more animated, moving to the edge of his chair. "Who runs the rain? I don't; you don't. *He* does—or that's what I thought. But when I saw that photograph, I immediately knew it is not possible for this to

happen and for there to be a loving God. There was no way. Who else but a fiend could destroy a baby and virtually kill its mother with agony —when all that was needed was *rain*?"

He paused, letting the question hang heavily in the air. Then he settled back into his chair. "That was the climactic moment," he said. "And then I began to think further about the world being the creation of God. I started considering the plagues that sweep across parts of the planet and indiscriminately kill—more often than not, painfully—all kinds of people, the ordinary, the decent, and the rotten. And it just became crystal clear to me that it is not possible for an intelligent person to believe that there is a deity who loves."

Templeton was tapping into an issue that had vexed me for years. In my career as a newspaper reporter, I hadn't merely seen photos of intense suffering; I was a frequent first-hand observer of the underbelly of life where tragedy and suffering festered—the rotting inner cities of the United States; the filthy slums of India; Cook County Jail and the major penitentiaries; the hospice wards for the hopeless; all sorts of disaster scenes. More than once, my mind reeled at trying to reconcile the idea of a loving God with the depravity and heartache and anguish before my eyes.

But Templeton wasn't done. "My mind then went to the whole concept of hell. My goodness," he said, his voice infused with astonishment, "I couldn't hold someone's hand to a fire for a moment. Not an instant! How could a loving God, just because you don't obey him and do what he wants, torture you forever—not allowing you to die, but to continue in that pain for eternity? There is no criminal who would do this!"

"So these were the first doubts you had?" I asked.

"Prior to that, I had been having more and more questions. I had preached to hundreds of thousands of people the antithetical message, and then I found to my dismay that I could no longer believe it. To believe it would be to deny the brain I had been given. It became quite clear that I had been wrong. So I made up my mind that I would leave the ministry. That's essentially how I came to be agnostic."

"Define what you mean by that," I said, since various people have offered different interpretations of that term.

"The atheist says there is no God," he replied. "The Christian and Jew say there is a God. The agnostic says, 'I cannot know.' Not *do not* know but *cannot* know. I never would presume to say flatly that there is no God. I don't know everything; I'm not the embodiment of wisdom. But it is not possible for me to believe in God."

I hesitated to ask the next question. "As you get older," I began in a tentative tone, "and you're facing a disease that's always fatal, do you—"

"Worry about being wrong?" he interjected. He smiled. "No, I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I have spent a lifetime thinking about it. If this were a simplistic conclusion reached on a whim, that would be different. But it's impossible for me—*impossible*—to believe that there is any thing or person or being that could be described as a loving God who could allow what happens in our world daily."

"Would you *like* to believe?" I asked.

"Of course!" he exclaimed. "If I could, I would. I'm eighty-three years old. I've got Alzheimer's. I'm dying, for goodness' sake! But I've spent my life thinking about it and I'm not going to change now. Hypothetically, if someone came up to me and said, 'Look, old boy, the reason you're ill is God's punishment for your refusal to continue on the path your feet were set in'—would that make any difference to me?"

He answered himself emphatically: "No," he declared. "*No*. There cannot be, in our world, a loving God."

His eyes locked with mine. "*Cannot* be."

The Illusion of Faith

Templeton ran his fingers through his hair. He had been talking in adamant tones, and I could tell he was beginning to tire. I wanted to be sensitive to his condition, but I had a few other questions I wanted to pursue. With his permission, I continued.

"As we're talking, Billy Graham is in the midst of a series of rallies in Indiana," I told Templeton. "What would you say to the people who've stepped forward to put their faith in Christ?"

Templeton's eyes got wide. "Why, I wouldn't interfere in their lives at all," he replied. "If a person has faith and it makes them a better individual, then I'm all for that—even if I think they're nuts. Having been a Christian, I know how important it is to people's lives—how it alters their decisions, how it helps them deal with difficult problems. For most people, it's a boon beyond description. But is it because there is a God? No, it's not."

Templeton's voice carried no condescension, and yet the implications of what he was saying were thoroughly patronizing. Is that what faith is all about—fooling yourself into becoming a better person? Convincing yourself there's a God so that you'll become motivated to ratchet up your morality a notch or two? Embracing a fairy tale so you'll sleep better at night? *No, thank you*, I thought to myself. If that's faith, I wasn't interested.

"What about Billy Graham himself?" I asked. "You said in your book that you feel sorry for him."

"Oh, no, no," he insisted, contrary to his writings. "Who am I to feel sorry for what another man believes? I may regret it on his behalf, if I may put it that way, because he has closed his mind to reality. But would I wish him ill? Not for anything at all!"

Templeton glanced over to an adjacent glass coffee table where Billy Graham's autobiography was sitting.

"Billy is pure gold," he remarked fondly. "There's no feigning or fakery in him. He's a first-rate human being. Billy is profoundly Christian—he's the genuine goods, as they say. He sincerely believes—unquestionably. He is as wholesome and faithful as anyone can be."

And what about Jesus? I wanted to know what Templeton thought of the cornerstone of Christianity. "Do you believe Jesus ever lived?" I asked.

"No question," came the quick reply.

"Did he think he was God?"

He shook his head. "That would have been the last thought that would have entered his mind."

"And his teaching—did you admire what he taught?"

"Well, he wasn't a very good preacher. What he said was too simple.

He hadn't thought about it. He hadn't agonized over the biggest question there is to ask."

"Which is . . ."

"Is there a God? How could anyone believe in a God who does, or allows, what goes on in the world?"

"And so how do you assess this Jesus?" It seemed like the next logical question—but I wasn't ready for the response it would evoke.

The Allure of Jesus

Templeton's body language softened. It was as if he suddenly felt relaxed and comfortable in talking about an old and dear friend. His voice, which at times had displayed such a sharp and insistent edge, now took on a melancholy and reflective tone. His guard seemingly down, he spoke in an unhurried pace, almost nostalgically, carefully choosing his words as he talked about Jesus.

"He was," Templeton began, "the greatest human being who has ever lived. He was a moral genius. His ethical sense was unique. He was the intrinsically wisest person that I've ever encountered in my life or in my readings. His commitment was total and led to his own death, much to the detriment of the world. What could one say about him except that this was a form of greatness?"

I was taken aback. "You sound like you really care about him," I said.

"Well, yes, he's the most important thing in my life," came his reply. "I . . . I . . . I," he stuttered, searching for the right word, "I know it may sound strange, but I have to say . . . I *adore* him!"

I wasn't sure how to respond. "You say that with some emotion," I said.

"Well, yes. Everything good I know, everything decent I know, everything pure I know, I learned from Jesus. Yes . . . yes. And tough! Just look at Jesus. He castigated people. He was angry. People don't think of him that way, but they don't read the Bible. He had a righteous anger. He cared for the oppressed and exploited. There's no question that he had the highest moral standard, the least duplicity, the greatest

compassion, of any human being in history. There have been many other wonderful people, but Jesus is Jesus."

"And so the world would do well to emulate him?"

"Oh, my goodness, yes! I have tried—and try is as far as I can go—to act as I have believed he would act. That doesn't mean I could read his mind, because one of the most fascinating things about him was that he often did the opposite thing you'd expect—"

Abruptly, Templeton cut short his thoughts. There was a brief pause, almost as if he was uncertain whether he should continue.

"Uh … but … no," he said slowly, "he's the most …" He stopped, then started again. "In my view," he declared, "he is the most important human being who has ever existed."

That's when Templeton uttered the words I never expected to hear from him. "And if I may put it this way," he said as his voice began to crack, *"I … miss … him!"*

With that, tears flooded his eyes. He turned his head and looked downward, raising his left hand to shield his face from me. His shoulders bobbed as he wept.

What was going on? Was this an unguarded glimpse into his soul? I felt drawn to him and wanted to comfort him; at the same time, the journalist in me wanted to dig to the core of what was prompting this reaction. Missed him *why*? Missed him *how*?

In a gentle voice, I asked, "In what way?"

Templeton fought to compose himself. I could tell it wasn't like him to lose control in front of a stranger. He sighed deeply and wiped away a tear. After a few more awkward moments, he waved his hand dismissively. Finally, quietly but adamantly, he insisted: "Enough of that."

He leaned forward to pick up his coffee. He took a sip, holding the cup tightly in both hands as if drawing warmth from it. It was obvious that he wanted to pretend this unvarnished look into his soul had never happened.

But I couldn't let it go. Nor could I gloss over Templeton's pointed but heartfelt objections about God. Clearly, they demanded a response.

For him, as well as for me.

On the Road to Answers

1.6 billion [Christians] can be wrong. . . . My claim is simply that . . . rational people should give up these beliefs.

Michael Martin, atheist[1]

Today, it seems to me, there is no good reason for an intelligent person to embrace the illusion of atheism or agnosticism, to make the same intellectual mistakes I made. I wish . . . I had known then what I know now.

Patrick Glynn, atheist-turned-Christian[2]

A short time after the interview with Charles Templeton, my wife, Leslie, and I began driving back to Chicago, spending much of the way in an animated discussion about my enigmatic encounter with the former evangelist.

Frankly, I needed some time to process the experience. It had been an unusual interview, ranging all the way from the resolute rejection of God to an emotional desire to reconnect with the Jesus he used to worship.

"It sounds like you really like Templeton," Leslie remarked at one point.

"I do," I said.

The truth is that my heart went out to him. He hungers for faith; he conceded as much. As someone facing death, he has every incentive to want to believe in God. There's an undeniable pull toward Jesus that clearly comes from deep inside him. But then there are those formidable intellectual barriers that stand squarely in his path.

Like Templeton, I've always been someone who has grappled with questions. In my former role as legal affairs editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, I had been notorious for raising what I called *"Yes, but"* objections.

Yes, I could see that the evidence in a trial was pointing toward a certain verdict, *but* what about that inconsistency, or this flaw, or that weak link? *Yes*, the prosecutor may have presented a convincing case for the defendant's guilt, *but* what about his alibi or the lack of fingerprints?

And the same was true of my personal investigation of Jesus. I started out as an atheist, utterly convinced that God didn't create people but that people created God in a pathetic effort to explain the unknown and temper their overpowering fear of death. My previous book, *The Case for Christ*, described my nearly two-year examination of the historical evidence that pointed me toward the verdict that God really exists and that Jesus actually is his unique Son. (For a summary of those findings, please see the appendix.)

But that hadn't been enough by itself to completely settle the matter for me. There were still those nagging objections. *Yes*, I could see how the historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection can support a verdict that he's divine, *but* what about the flurry of problems that raises? I called these conundrums "The Big Eight":

- If there's a loving God, why does this pain-wracked world groan under so much suffering and evil?
- If the miracles of God contradict science, then how can any rational person believe that they're true?
- If God really created the universe, why does the persuasive evidence of science compel so many to conclude that the unguided process of evolution accounts for life?
- If God is morally pure, how can he sanction the slaughter of innocent children as the Old Testament says he did?
- If Jesus is the only way to heaven, then what about the millions of people who have never heard of him?
- If God cares about the people he created, how could he consign so many of them to an eternity of torture in hell just because they didn't believe the right things about him?
- If God is the ultimate overseer of the church, why has it been rife with hypocrisy and brutality throughout the ages?
- If I'm still plagued by doubts, then is it still possible to be a Christian?

These are among the most commonly posed questions about God. In fact, they were some of the very issues discussed by Charles Templeton in my interview with him and in his book. And just like with Templeton, these obstacles also once stood solidly between me and faith.

Overcoming Objections

While I could relate to many of the objections that Templeton had raised, at the same time I wasn't naïve enough to accept each of them at face value. It was clear that some of his obstacles to faith shouldn't be impediments at all.

For example, Templeton was plain wrong about Jesus considering himself to be a mere human being. Even if you go back to the earliest and most primitive information about him—data that could not have been tainted by legendary development—you find that Jesus undoubtedly saw himself in transcendent, divine, and messianic terms.[3]

In fact, here's an irony: the very historical documents that Templeton relied upon for his information about the inspiring moral life of Jesus are actually the exact same records that repeatedly affirm his deity. So if Templeton is willing to accept their accuracy concerning Jesus' character, then he also ought to consider them trustworthy when they assert that Jesus claimed to be divine and then backed up that assertion by rising from the dead.

In addition, the resurrection of Jesus could not have been a legend as Templeton claimed. The apostle Paul preserved a creed of the early church that was based on eyewitness accounts of Jesus' return from the dead—and which various scholars have dated to as early as twenty-four to thirty-six months after Jesus' death.[4] That's far too quick for mythology to have tainted the record. The truth is that nobody has ever been able to show one example in history of a legend developing that quickly and wiping out a solid core of historical truth.[5]

As I systematically documented in *The Case for Christ*, the eyewitness evidence, the corroborating evidence, the documentary evidence, the scientific evidence, the psychological evidence, the "fingerprint" or prophetic evidence, and other historical data point powerfully toward the conclusion that Jesus really is God's one and only Son.

Yes, but . . .

What about those nettlesome issues that hinder Templeton from embracing the faith that he admittedly desires so much to have? They haunted me. They were the same issues that had once perplexed me — and as Leslie and I drove along the interstate toward home, some of them began to nag at me anew.

Traveling the Same Path

Leslie and I were quiet for a while. I gazed out the window at the undulating meadows of the Canadian countryside. Finally, Leslie said, "It sounds like your interview ended a little abruptly. What did Templeton say before you left?"

"Actually, he was very warm. He even gave me a tour of his apartment," I told her. "It was like he didn't want me to leave. But no matter how much I tried, I couldn't get him to reengage in discussing his feelings about Jesus."

I thought for a moment before continuing. "He did say one other thing that struck me. Just as I was getting ready to leave, he looked me in the eyes — very intensely — and shook my hand and said with great sincerity, 'We've been on the same path.' "

Leslie nodded. "You *have* been," she said. "You're both writers, you've both been skeptics." Then she added with a smile, "And you're both too hardheaded to buy into faith until you're sure it's not riddled with holes."

She was right. "But, you know, his mind seemed so closed," I said. "He insisted there *cannot* be a loving God. And yet at the same time, his heart seemed so open. In a way, I think he wants Jesus just as much as the people who came forward in Indianapolis. Only he can't have him. At least, he doesn't think so. Not with his objections."

Leslie and I spent the night in a Michigan hotel and finally arrived home before noon the following day. I lugged our suitcase up the stairs and tossed it onto the bed. Leslie unzipped it and began taking out clothes.

"At least we're home for a while," she remarked.

"Well, not quite," I said.

I couldn't let Templeton's questions go. They resonated too deeply with my own. So I decided to retrace and expand upon my spiritual journey in a different direction than I had pursued when I wrote *The Case for Christ*, which was an investigation of the historical evidence for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I wanted to determine once again whether there are soul-satisfying responses when Christianity is confronted with life's harshest and most perplexing questions that send nagging doubts into our hearts and minds. Can faith really stand up to reason? Or will rigorous intellectual scrutiny chase God away?

I resolved to track down the most knowledgeable and ardent defenders of Christianity. My intent was not to take a cynical or confrontational approach by badgering them with nitpicking questions or seeing whether I could trick them into painting themselves into a rhetorical corner. This wasn't a game to me.

I was sincerely interested in determining whether they had rational answers to "The Big Eight." I wanted to give them ample opportunity to spell out their reasoning and evidence in detail so that, in the end, I could evaluate whether their positions made sense. Most of all, I wanted to find out whether God was telling the truth when he said, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."[6]

I picked up the telephone. It was time to make plans to hit the road in search of answers.

Charles Templeton would have expected nothing less.

OBJECTION #1

Since Evil and Suffering Exist, a Loving God Cannot

Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to; or he cannot and does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, and does not want to, he is wicked. But, if God both can and wants to abolish evil, then how comes evil in the world?

Epicurus, philosopher

The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has been in every generation. Its distribution and degree appear to be entirely random and therefore unfair. Sensitive spirits ask if it can possibly be reconciled with God's justice and love.

John Stott, theologian[1]

As an idealistic young reporter fresh out of journalism school, one of my first assignments at the *Chicago Tribune* was to write a thirty-part series in which I would profile destitute families living in the city. Having been raised in the homogenized suburbs, where being "needy" meant having only one Cadillac, I quickly found myself immersed in Chicago's underbelly of deprivation and desperation. In a way, my experience was akin to Charles Templeton's reaction to the photo of the African woman with her deceased baby.

Just a short drive from Chicago's Magnificent Mile, where stately Tribune Tower rubs shoulders with elegant fashion boutiques and luxury hotels, I walked into the tiny, dim, and barren hovel being shared by sixty-year-old Perfecta de Jesus and her two granddaughters. They had lived there about a month, ever since their previous cockroach-infested tenement erupted in flames.

Perfecta, frail and sickly, had run out of money weeks earlier and had received a small amount of emergency food stamps. She stretched the food by serving only rice and beans with bits of meat for meal after meal. The meat ran out quickly. Then the beans. Now all that was left was a handful of rice. When the overdue public-aid check would finally come, it would be quickly consumed by the rent and utility bills, and the family would be right back where it started.

The apartment was almost completely empty, without furniture, appliances, or carpets. Words echoed off the bare walls and cold wooden floor. When her eleven-year-old granddaughter, Lydia, would set off for her half-mile walk to school on the biting cold winter mornings, she would wear only a thin gray sweater over her short-sleeved, print dress. Halfway to school, she would give the sweater to her shivering thirteen-year-old sister, Jenny, clad in just a sleeveless dress, who would wrap the sweater around herself for the rest of the way. Those were the only clothes they owned.

"I try to take care of the girls as best I can," Perfecta explained to me in Spanish. "They are good. They don't complain."[2]

Hours later, safely back in my plush lakefront high-rise with an inspiring view of Chicago's wealthiest neighborhoods, I felt staggered by the contrast. If there is a God, why would kind and decent people like Perfecta and her grandchildren be cold and hungry in the midst of one of the greatest cities in the world? Day after day as I conducted research for my series, I encountered people in circumstances that were similar or even worse. My response was to settle deeper into my atheism.

Hardships, suffering, heartbreak, man's inhumanity to man — those were my daily diet as a journalist. This wasn't looking at magazine photos from faraway places; this was the grit and pain of life, up close and personal.

I've looked into the eyes of a young mother who had just been told that her only daughter had been molested, mutilated, and murdered. I've listened to courtroom testimony describing gruesome horrors that had been perpetrated against innocent victims. I've visited noisy and chaotic prisons, the trash heaps of society; low-budget nursing homes where the elderly languish after being abandoned by their loved ones; pediatric hospital wards where emaciated children fight vainly against

the inexorable advance of cancer; and crime-addled inner cities where drug trafficking and drive-by shootings are all too common.

But nothing shocked me as much as my visit to the slums of Bombay, India. Lining both sides of the noisy, filthy, congested streets, as far as the eye could see, were small cardboard and burlap shanties, situated right next to the road where buses and cars would spew their exhaust and soot. Naked children played in the open sewage ditches that coursed through the area. People with missing limbs or bodies contorted by deformities sat passively in the dirt. Insects buzzed everywhere. It was a horrific scene, a place where, one taxi driver told me, people are born on the sidewalk, live their entire lives on the sidewalk, and die a premature death on the sidewalk.

Then I came face-to-face with a ten-year-old boy, about the same age as my son Kyle at the time. The Indian child was scrawny and malnourished, his hair filthy and matted. One eye was diseased and half closed; the other stared vacantly. Blood oozed from scabs on his face. He extended his hand and mumbled something in Hindi, apparently begging for coins. But his voice was a dull, lifeless monotone, as if he didn't expect any response. As if he had been drained of all hope.

Where was God in that festering hellhole? If he had the power to instantly heal that youngster, why did he turn his back? If he loved these people, why didn't he show it by rescuing them? Is this, I wondered, the real reason: because the very presence of such awful, heart-wrenching suffering actually disproves the existence of a good and loving Father?

Making Sense of Suffering

Everyone has encountered pain and sorrow. Heart disease claimed my father when he should have had many years left to see his grandchildren grow up. I kept a vigil at a neonatal intensive care unit as my newborn daughter battled a mysterious illness that both threatened her life and baffled her doctors. I've rushed to the hospital after the anguished call of a friend whose daughter had been hit by a drunk driver, and I was holding their hands at the moment life slipped away from her. I've had to break the news to a friend's two small children that their mother had committed suicide. I've seen childhood buddies succumb to cancer, to

Lou Gehrig's disease, to heart ailments, to car accidents. I've seen Alzheimer's ravage the mind of a loved one. I'm sure you could tell similar stories of personal pain.

We recently emerged from a century unprecedented in its cruelty and inhumanity, where victims of tyrants like Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and Mao Tse-tung are numbered in the tens of millions. The vastness of the cruelty numbs our minds, but then occasionally we come across a story that personalizes the horror and makes us shudder anew.

Like the account I was reading recently of an Italian journalist during World War II who was visiting a smiling Ante Pavelic, the pro-Nazi leader of Croatia. Pavelic proudly showed him a basket of what looked like oysters. It was, he said, a gift from his troops—forty pounds of human eyes. A small memento from their slaughter of Serbs, Jews, and Gypsies.[3]

We read stories like that—horrible evils like the Holocaust, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the genocide of Rwanda, and the torture chambers of South America—and we can't help but wonder: *Where is God?* We watch television coverage of earthquakes and hurricanes in which thousands perish, and we wonder: *Why didn't God stop it?* We read the statistic that one thousand million people in the world lack the basic necessities of life, and we wonder: *Why doesn't God care?* We may suffer ourselves with persistent pain or aching loss or seemingly hopeless circumstances, and we wonder: *Why doesn't God help?* If he is loving and if he is all-powerful and if he is good, then surely all of this suffering should not exist. And yet it does.

What's worse, it's often the innocent who are victimized. "If only villains got broken backs or cancers, if only cheaters and crooks got Parkinson's disease, we should see a sort of celestial justice in the universe," wrote agnostic-turned-Christian Sheldon Vanauken.

> But, as it is, a sweet-tempered child lies dying of a brain tumor, a happy young wife sees her husband and child killed before her eyes by a drunken driver; and … we soundlessly scream at the stars, "Why? Why?" A mention of God—of God's will—doesn't help a bit. How could a good God, a loving God, do that? How could he even let it happen? And no answer comes from the indifferent stars.[4]

Christian author Philip Yancey begins his celebrated book on suffering with a chapter appropriately titled, "A Problem That Won't Go Away."[5] This is not just an intellectual issue to be debated in sterile academic arenas; it's an intensely personal matter that can tie our emotions into knots and leave us with spiritual vertigo—disoriented, frightened, and angry. One writer referred to the problem of pain as "the question mark turned like a fishhook in the human heart."[6]

In fact, this is the single biggest obstacle for spiritual seekers. I commissioned George Barna, the public-opinion pollster, to conduct a national survey in which he asked a scientifically selected cross-section of adults: "If you could ask God only one question and you knew he would give you an answer, what would you ask?" The top response, offered by 17 percent of those who said they had a question, was: "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?"[7]

Charles Templeton also demanded an answer to that question. His retreat from faith began with that *Life* magazine photo of the African mother holding her child who had died because of a simple lack of rain. In his book denouncing Christianity, Templeton recounts a litany of tragedies from ancient and modern history, and then declares:

> "A loving God" could not possibly be the author of the horrors we have been describing—horrors that continue every day, have continued since time began, and will continue as long as life exists. It is an inconceivable tale of suffering and death, and because the tale is fact—is, in truth, the history of the world—it is obvious that there cannot be a loving God.[8]

Cannot? Does the presence of suffering necessarily mean the absence of God? Is this obstacle to faith insurmountable? To believe wholeheartedly in a loving and omnipotent Father, do I have to paper over the reality of evil and pain around me? As a journalist, that was simply not an option. I had to account for all the facts, for all the evidence, minimizing nothing.

I was discussing these issues with Leslie at a sensitive time in her life. Her uncle had just died, and her aunt had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and terminal cancer. Rocked by that turbulence, Leslie was wary of anyone who might try to give easy answers.

"If someone thinks he can wrap everything up in a neat little package and put a fancy theological bow on it," she cautioned, "go somewhere else."

I knew she was right. That's why I placed a call to Boston College and asked to make an appointment with the author of *Making Sense Out of Suffering*—a book whose title summed up exactly what I was seeking to do.

THE FIRST INTERVIEW: Peter John Kreeft, PhD

I like to refer to Peter Kreeft as "the un-philosopher." Not that he isn't a philosopher; in fact, he's a first-rate philosophical thinker, with a doctorate from Fordham University, postgraduate study at Yale University, and thirty-eight years of experience as a philosophy professor at Villanova University and (since 1965) Boston College. He has taught such courses as metaphysics, ethics, mysticism, sexuality, and Oriental, Greek, medieval, and contemporary philosophy, earning such honors as the Woodrow Wilson and Yale-Sterling fellowships.

Still, if you were to conjure up a mental image of a stereotypical philosopher, Kreeft would probably not come to mind. Unfairly or not, philosophers are generally imagined to be a bit boring, speaking in vague and convoluted sentences, residing in the cloistered ivory towers of academia, and being serious to the point of dour.

In contrast, Kreeft gives real-world answers in an engaging and even entertaining way; communicates crisply, often with a memorable twist of a phrase; wears a bemused grin and can't restrain himself from cracking jokes about even the most sacrosanct subject; and, although he's sixty-two years old, can frequently be found at any given beach pursuing his hobby of surfing. (In a forthcoming book, one of his chapter titles is "I Surf, Therefore I Am.")

Kreeft, a Catholic also widely read by Protestants, has written more than forty books, including *Love Is Stronger Than Death*, *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing*, *Prayer: The Great Conversation*, *A Refutation of Moral Relativism*, and *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (with Ronald K. Tacelli). His whimsical imagination is especially evident in *Between Heaven and Hell*, which envisions C. S. Lewis, John F. Kennedy, and

Aldous Huxley, after death, arguing about Christ, and *Socrates Meets Jesus*, in which the ancient thinker becomes a Christian at Harvard Divinity School.

I encountered Kreeft's offbeat sense of humor even before I walked into his office. While the other sixteen office doors on his drab and dimly lit corridor were undefaced, Kreeft's was festooned with Doonesbury and Dilbert cartoons and other tongue-in-cheek mementos—a drawing of a bull with a slash through it, a photo of Albert Einstein playfully sticking out his tongue, and a cartoon in which Satan greets people in hell by saying: "You'll find that there's no right or wrong here—just what works for you."

What drew me to Kreeft was his insightful book about suffering, in which he skillfully weaves a journey of discovery through Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; through Augustine, Kierkegaard, and Dostoyevski; through *Star Trek*, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, and *Hamlet*; and through Moses, Job, and Jeremiah. All along the way, there are clues that eventually, ultimately, finally, converge on Jesus and the tears of God.

I arrived early and waited for Kreeft in the hallway. He soon arrived fresh from a philosophical conclave that was being held elsewhere in Boston. His brown tweed jacket, thick glasses, and neatly combed dark gray hair gave him a fatherly appearance. He sat behind his desk (under a sign that said, "No Dumping"), and we started by casually chatting about his beloved Boston Red Sox—an appropriate subject given our topic of suffering.

But then I turned a corner. There was no other approach than to hit Kreeft head-on with Templeton's blunt objections to Christianity, embodied by that *Life* magazine photo of an anguished mother clutching her dead infant in drought-ravaged Africa.

A Bear, a Trap, a Hunter, and God

Confronting Kreeft with the same emotional intensity that Templeton had displayed to me, I described the photo and then quoted the former evangelist word for word:

I thought, "Is it possible to believe that there is a loving or caring

> Creator when all this woman needed was rain?" How could a loving God do this to that woman? Who runs the rain? I don't; you don't. He does—or that's what I thought. But when I saw that photograph, I immediately knew it is not possible for this to happen and for there to be a loving God. There was no way. Who else but a fiend could destroy a baby and virtually kill its mother with agony—when all that was needed was rain?… And then I began … considering the plagues that sweep across parts of the planet and indiscriminately kill … and it just became crystal clear to me that it is not possible for an intelligent person to believe that there is a deity who loves.

I looked up from my notes. The professor's eyes were riveted on me. Facing him squarely, leaning forward in my chair for emphasis, I said in a rather accusatory tone: "Dr. Kreeft, you're an intelligent person and you believe in a deity who loves. How in the world would you respond to Templeton?"

Kreeft cleared his throat. "First of all," he began, "I'd focus on his words, 'it is not possible.' Even David Hume, one of history's most famous skeptics, said it's just *barely* possible that God exists. That's at least a somewhat reasonable position—to say that there's at least a small possibility. But to say there's *no* possibility that a loving God who knows far more than we do, including about our future, could possibly tolerate such evil as Templeton sees in Africa—well, that strikes me as intellectually arrogant."

That took me aback. "Really?" I asked. "How so?"

"How can a mere finite human be sure that infinite wisdom would not tolerate certain short-range evils in order for more long-range goods that we couldn't foresee?" he asked.

I could see his point but needed an example. "Elaborate a bit," I prodded.

Kreeft thought for a moment. "Look at it this way," he said. "Would you agree that the difference between us and God is greater than the difference between us and, say, a bear?"

I nodded.

"Okay, then, imagine a bear in a trap and a hunter who, out of sympathy, wants to liberate him. He tries to win the bear's confidence, but

he can't do it, so he has to shoot the bear full of drugs. The bear, however, thinks this is an attack and that the hunter is trying to kill him. He doesn't realize that this is being done out of compassion.

"Then, in order to get the bear out of the trap, the hunter has to push him further into the trap to release the tension on the spring. If the bear were semiconscious at that point, he would be even more convinced that the hunter was his enemy who was out to cause him suffering and pain. But the bear would be wrong. He reaches this incorrect conclusion because he's not a human being."

Kreeft let the illustration soak in for a moment. "Now," he concluded, "how can anyone be certain that's not an analogy between us and God? I believe God does the same to us sometimes, and we can't comprehend why he does it any more than the bear can understand the motivations of the hunter. As the bear could have trusted the hunter, so we can trust God."

Faith and Prejudice

I paused to think about Kreeft's point, but he continued before I could reply.

"However," he said, "I certainly don't want to demean Templeton. He's responding in a very honest and heartfelt way to the fact that something counts against God. Only in a world where faith is difficult can faith exist. I don't have faith in two plus two equals four or in the noonday sun. Those are beyond question. But Scripture describes God as a hidden God. You have to make an effort of faith to find him. There are clues you can follow.

"And if that weren't so, if there were something more or less than clues, it's difficult for me to understand how we could really be free to make a choice about him. If we had absolute proof instead of clues, then you could no more deny God than you could deny the sun. If we had no evidence at all, you could never get there. God gives us just enough evidence so that those who want him can have him. Those who want to follow the clues will.

"The Bible says, 'Seek and you shall find.'[9] It doesn't say everybody will find him; it doesn't say nobody will find him. *Some* will find. Who?

Those who seek. Those whose hearts are set on finding him and who follow the clues."

I jumped in. "Wait a minute—a moment ago you admitted that 'something counts against God'—that evil and suffering *are* evidence against him," I pointed out. "Aren't you conceding, therefore, that evil disproves God's existence?" I thumped my hand on his desk. "Case closed!" I declared with a mock air of triumph.

Kreeft recoiled a bit at my outburst. "No, no," he insisted, shaking his head. "First of all, evidence is not necessarily certain or conclusive. I'm saying in this world there is evidence against and evidence for God. Augustine put it very simply: 'If there is no God, why is there so much good? If there is a God, why is there so much evil?'

"There's no question that the existence of evil is one argument against God—but in one of my books I summarize twenty arguments that point persuasively in the other direction, in favor of the existence of God.[10] Atheists must answer all twenty arguments; theists must only answer one. However, each of us gets to cast a vote. Faith is active; it demands a response. Unlike reason, which bows down faithfully to the evidence, faith is prejudiced."

That last word jumped out at me. "What do you mean, 'prejudiced'?"

"Suppose a policeman came into this room and said they just captured my wife in the act of murdering thirteen neighbors by chopping off their heads, and they have witnesses. I would laugh at him. I would say, 'No, this cannot be. You do not know her as I do.' He would say, 'Where's your evidence?' I'd say, 'It's of a different kind than yours. But there is evidence that this could not be.' So I'm prejudiced.

"However, my prejudice is a *reasonable* prejudice because it's based on the evidence I've gathered in my very real experience. So someone who knows God has evidence—and therefore prejudices based on that evidence—which someone who does not know God does not have."

Evil as Evidence *for* God

Kreeft stopped for a few seconds before adding this unexpected and counter-intuitive remark: "Besides, the evidence of evil and suffering can go both ways—it can actually be used in *favor* of God."

I sat up straight in my chair. "How," I demanded, "is *that* possible?"

"Consider this," Kreeft said. "If Templeton is right in responding to these events with outrage, that presupposes there really is a difference between good and evil. The fact that he's using the standard of good to judge evil — the fact that he's saying quite rightly that this horrible suffering isn't what ought to be — means that he has a notion of what ought to be; that this notion corresponds to something real; and that there is, therefore, a reality called the Supreme Good. Well, that's another name for God."

That sounded suspiciously like philosophical sleight of hand. Warily, I summarized Kreeft's point to see if I understood it. "You mean that unintentionally Templeton may be testifying to the reality of God because by recognizing evil he's assuming there's an objective standard on which it's based?"

"Right. If I give one student a ninety and another an eighty, that presupposes that one hundred is a real standard. And my point is this: if there is no God, where did we get the standard of goodness by which we judge evil as evil?

"What's more, as C. S. Lewis said, 'If the universe is so bad . . . how on earth did human beings ever come to attribute it to the activity of a wise and good Creator?' In other words, the very presence of these ideas in our minds — that is, the idea of evil, thus of goodness and of God as the origin and standard of goodness — needs to be accounted for."

An interesting counter-punch, I mused. "Are there any other ways in which you believe evil works against atheism?" I asked.

"Yes, there are," he replied. "If there is no Creator and therefore no moment of creation, then everything is the result of evolution. If there was no beginning or first cause, then the universe must have always existed. That means the universe has been evolving for an infinite period of time — and, by now, everything should already be perfect. There would have been plenty of time for evolution to have finished and evil to have been vanquished. But there still is evil and suffering and imperfection — and that proves the atheist wrong about the universe."

"Then atheism," I said, "is an inadequate answer to the problem of evil?"

"It's an easy answer — maybe, if I may use the word, a cheap answer,"

he said. "Atheism is cheap on people, because it snobbishly says nine out of ten people through history have been wrong about God and have had a lie at the core of their hearts.

"Think about that. How is it possible that over ninety percent of all the human beings who have ever lived — usually in far more painful circumstances than we — could believe in God? The objective evidence, just looking at the balance of pleasure and suffering in the world, would not seem to justify believing in an absolutely good God. Yet this has been almost universally believed.

"Are they all crazy? Well, I suppose you can believe that if you're a bit of an elitist. But maybe, like Leo Tolstoy, we have to learn from the peasants. In his autobiography, he wrestles with the problem of evil. He saw life had more suffering than pleasure and more evil than good and was therefore apparently meaningless. He was so despairing that he was tempted to kill himself. He said he didn't know how he could endure.

"Then he said, in effect, 'Wait a minute — most people *do* endure. Most people have a life that's harder than mine and yet they find it wonderful. How can they do that? Not with explanations, but with faith.' He learned from the peasants and found faith and hope.[11]

"So atheism treats people cheaply. Also, it robs death of meaning, and if death has no meaning, how can life ultimately have meaning? Atheism cheapens everything it touches — look at the results of communism, the most powerful form of atheism on earth.

"And in the end, when the atheist dies and encounters God instead of the nothingness he had predicted, he'll recognize that atheism was a cheap answer because it refused the only thing that's not cheap — the God of infinite value."

A Problem of Logic

Kreeft had made some interesting initial points, but we had been dancing around the subject a bit. It was time to cut to the core of the issue. Pulling out some notes that I had scrawled on the airplane, I challenged Kreeft with a question that crystallized the controversy.

"Christians believe in five things," I said. "First, God exists. Second, God is all-good. Third, God is all-powerful. Fourth, God is all-wise.

And, fifth, evil exists. Now, how can all of those statements be true at the same time?"

An enigmatic smile crept onto Kreeft's face. "It looks like they can't be," he conceded. "I remember a liberal preacher who once tried to dissuade me from taking up with the fundamentalists. He said, 'There's a logical problem here—you can be intelligent, or you can be honest, or you can be a fundamentalist, or any two of the three, but not all three.' And my fundamentalist friend said, 'I'd say, you can be honest, or you can be intelligent, or you can be liberal, or any of the two, but not all three.'"

I laughed at the story. "We have the same kind of logical problem here," I said.

"That's right. It seems you have to drop one of those beliefs. If God is all-powerful, he can do anything. If God is all-good, he wants only good. If God is all-wise, he knows what is good. So if all of those beliefs are true—and Christians believe they are—then it would seem that the consequence is that no evil can exist."

"But evil *does* exist," I said. "Therefore, isn't it logical to assume that such a God doesn't exist?"

"No, I'd say one of those beliefs about him must be false, or we must not be understanding it in the right way."

It was time to find out. With a sweep of my hand, I invited Kreeft to examine these three divine attributes—God being all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing—one at a time in light of the existence of evil.

ATTRIBUTE #1: God Is All-Powerful

"What does it mean when we say that God is all-powerful?" Kreeft asked, and then he answered his own question: "That means he can do everything that is meaningful, everything that is possible, everything that makes any sense at all. God cannot make himself to cease to exist. He cannot make good evil."

"So," I said, "there are some things he can't do even though he's all-powerful."

"Precisely *because* he is all powerful, he can't do some things. He can't make mistakes. Only weak and stupid beings make mistakes. One

such mistake would be to try to create a self-contradiction, like two plus two equals five or a round square.

"Now, the classic defense of God against the problem of evil is that it's not logically possible to have free will and no possibility of moral evil. In other words, once God chose to create human beings with free will, then it was up to them, rather than to God, as to whether there was sin or not. That's what free will means. Built into the situation of God deciding to create human beings is the chance of evil and, consequently, the suffering that results."

"Then God is the creator of evil."

"No, he created the *possibility* of evil; people actualized that potentiality. The source of evil is not God's power but mankind's freedom. Even an all-powerful God could not have created a world in which people had genuine freedom and yet there was no potentiality for sin, because our freedom includes the possibility of sin within its own meaning. It's a self-contradiction—a meaningless nothing—to have a world where there's real choice while at the same time no possibility of choosing evil. To ask why God didn't create such a world is like asking why God didn't create colorless color or round squares."

"Then why didn't God create a world without human freedom?"

"Because that would have been a world without humans. Would it have been a place without hate? Yes. A place without suffering? Yes. But it also would have been a world without love, which is the highest value in the universe. That highest good never could have been experienced. Real love—our love of God and our love of each other—must involve a choice. But with the granting of that choice comes the possibility that people would choose instead to hate."

"But look at Genesis," I said. "God did create a world where people were free and yet there was no sin."

"That's precisely what he did," Kreeft said. "After creation, he declared that the world was 'good.' People were free to choose to love God or turn away from him. However, such a world is necessarily a place where sin is freely possible—and, indeed, that potentiality for sin was actualized not by God, but by people. The blame, ultimately, lies with us. He did his part perfectly; we're the ones who messed up."

"Rabbi Harold Kushner reaches a different conclusion in his

bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*," I pointed out. "He says God isn't all-powerful after all — that he would *like* to help, but he just isn't capable of solving all the problems in the world. He said, 'Even God has a hard time keeping chaos in check.' "[12]

Kreeft raised an eyebrow. "For a rabbi, that's hard to understand, because the distinctively Jewish notion of God is the opposite of that," he said. "Surprisingly — against the evidence, it seems — the Jews insisted that there is a God who is all-powerful and nevertheless all good.

"Now, that doesn't seem as reasonable as paganism, which says if there is evil in the world, then there must be many gods, each of them less than all-powerful, some of them good, some of them evil, or if there's one God, then he's facing forces he can't quite control. Until Judaism's revelation of the true God, that was a very popular philosophy."

"You don't think much of Kushner's God," I said, more as a statement than a question.

"Frankly, that God is hardly worth believing in. Do I have a big brother who's doing what he can but it's not very much? Well, who cares?" he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Practically speaking, that's the same as atheism. Rely on yourself first and then maybe God, maybe not.

"No, the evidence is that God *is* all-powerful. The point to remember is that creating a world where there's free will and no possibility of sin is a self-contradiction — and that opens the door to people choosing evil over God, with suffering being the result. The overwhelming majority of the pain in the world is caused by our choices to kill, to slander, to be selfish, to stray sexually, to break our promises, to be reckless."

ATTRIBUTE #2: God Is All-Knowing

I asked Kreeft to move on to the next divine quality — God's omniscience. He pushed back his chair to get more comfortable, then looked off to the side as he collected his thoughts once more.

"Let's begin this way," he said. "God, if he is all-wise, knows not only the present but the future. And he knows not only present good and evil but future good and evil. If his wisdom vastly exceeds ours, as

the hunter's exceeds the bear's, it is at least possible — contrary to Templeton's analysis — that a loving God could deliberately tolerate horrible things like starvation because he foresees that in the long run that more people will be better and happier than if he miraculously intervened. That's at least intellectually possible."

I shook my head. "That's still hard to accept," I said. "It sounds like a cop-out to me."

"Okay, then, let's put it to the test," Kreeft replied. "You see, God has specifically shown us very clearly how this can work. He has demonstrated how the very worst thing that has ever happened in the history of the world ended up resulting in the very best thing that has ever happened in the history of the world."

"What do you mean?

"I'm referring to dei-cide," he replied. "The death of God himself on the cross. At the time, nobody saw how anything good could ever result from this tragedy. And yet God foresaw that the result would be the opening of heaven to human beings. So the worst tragedy in history brought about the most glorious event in history. And if it happened there — if the ultimate evil can result in the ultimate good — it can happen elsewhere, even in our own individual lives. Here, God lifts the curtain and lets us see it. Elsewhere he simply says, 'Trust me.'

"All of which would mean that human life is incredibly dramatic, like a story for which you don't know the ending rather than a scientific formula. In fact, let's follow this dramatic story line for a minute.

"Suppose you're the devil. You're the enemy of God and you want to kill him, but you can't. However, he has this ridiculous weakness of creating and loving human beings, whom you *can* get at. Aha! Now you've got hostages! So you simply come down into the world, corrupt humankind, and drag some of them to hell. When God sends prophets to enlighten them, you kill the prophets.

"Then God does the most foolish thing of all — he sends his own Son and he plays by the rules of the world. You say to yourself, 'I can't believe he's that stupid! Love has addled his brains! All I have to do is inspire some of my agents — Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas, the Roman soldiers — and get him crucified.' And that's what you do.

"So there he hangs on the cross — forsaken by man and seemingly

by God, bleeding to death and crying, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' What do you feel now as the devil? You feel triumph and vindication! But of course you couldn't be more wrong. This is *his* supreme triumph and your supreme defeat. He stuck his heel into your mouth and you bit it and that blood destroyed you.

"Now, if that is not a freak occurrence, but it's a paradigm of the human situation, then when we bleed and when we suffer, as Christ did, maybe the same thing is happening. Maybe this is God's way of defeating the devil.

"At the time of the crucifixion, the disciples couldn't see how anything good could result; similarly, as we face struggles and trials and suffering, we sometimes can't imagine good emerging. But we've seen how it did in the case of Jesus, and we can trust it will in our case too. For instance, the greatest Christians in history seem to say that their sufferings ended up bringing them the closest to God—so this is the best thing that could happen, not the worst."

ATTRIBUTE #3: God Is All-Good

That left us with God's attribute of goodness.

"*Good* is a notoriously tricky word," Kreeft began, "because even in human affairs there's such a wide range of meaning. But the difference, once again, between us and God is certainly greater than the difference between us and animals, and since good varies enormously between us and animals, it must vary even more enormously between us and God."

"Granted," I said. "But if I sat there and did nothing while my child got run over by a truck, I wouldn't be good in any sense of the word. I'd be an evil father if I did that. And God does the equivalent of that. He sits by and refuses to perform miracles to take us out of dangers even greater than being hit by a truck. So why isn't he bad?"

Kreeft nodded. "It looks like he is," he said. "But the fact that God deliberately allows certain things, which if we allowed them would turn us into monsters, doesn't necessarily count against God."

I couldn't see his reasoning. "You'll have to explain why that is," I said.

"Okay, let me give you an analogy in human relationships," he

replied. "If I said to my brother, who's about my age, 'I could bail you out of a problem but I won't,' I would probably be irresponsible and perhaps wicked. But we do that with our children all the time. We don't do their homework for them. We don't put a bubble around them and protect them from every hurt.

"I remember when one of my daughters was about four or five years old and she was trying to thread a needle in Brownies. It was very difficult for her. Every time she tried, she hit herself in the finger and a couple of times she bled. I was watching her, but she didn't see me. She just kept trying and trying.

"My first instinct was to go and do it for her, since I saw a drop of blood. But wisely I held back, because I said to myself, 'She can do it.' After about five minutes, she finally did it. I came out of hiding and she said, "Daddy, daddy—look what I did! Look at what I did!' She was so proud she had threaded the needle that she had forgotten all about the pain.

"That time the pain was a good thing for her. I was wise enough to have foreseen it was good for her. Now, certainly God is much wiser than I was with my daughter. So it's at least possible that God is wise enough to foresee that we need some pain for reasons which we may not understand but which he foresees as being necessary to some eventual good. Therefore, he's not being evil by allowing that pain to exist.

"Dentists, athletic trainers, teachers, parents—they all know that sometimes to be good is *not* to be kind. Certainly there are times when God allows suffering and deprives us of the lesser good of pleasure in order to help us toward the greater good of moral and spiritual education. Even the ancient Greeks believed the gods taught wisdom through suffering. Aeschylus wrote: 'Day by day, hour by hour / Pain drips upon the heart / As, against our will, and even in our own despite / Comes Wisdom from the awful grace of God.'

"We know that moral character gets formed through hardship, through overcoming obstacles, through enduring despite difficulties. Courage, for example, would be impossible in a world without pain. The apostle Paul testified to this refining quality of suffering when he wrote that 'suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.'[13]

"Let's face it: we learn from the mistakes we make and the suffering they bring. The universe is a soul-making machine, and part of that process is learning, maturing, and growing through difficult and challenging and painful experiences. The point of our lives in this world isn't comfort, but training and preparation for eternity. Scripture tells us that even Jesus 'learned obedience through suffering'[14]—and if that was true for him, why wouldn't it be even more true for us?"

Kreeft let the question hang in the air for a moment while his mental gears whirred. Then he continued. "Suppose we didn't have any suffering at all," he added. "Suppose we had drugs for every pain, free entertainment, free love—everything but pain. No Shakespeare, no Beethoven, no Boston Red Sox, no death—no meaning. Impossibly spoiled little brats—that's what we'd become.

"It's like that old Twilight Zone television show where a gang of bank robbers gets shot and one of them wakes up walking on fluffy clouds at the golden gate of a celestial city. A kindly white-robed man offers him everything he wants. But soon he's bored with the gold, since everything's free, and with the beautiful girls, who only laugh when he tries to hurt them, since he has a sadistic streak.

"So he summons the St. Peter figure. 'There must be some mistake.' 'No, we make no mistakes here.' 'Can't you send me back to earth?' 'Of course not, you're dead.' 'Well, then, I must belong with my friends in the Other Place. Send me there.' 'Oh, no, we can't do that. Rules, you know.' 'What is this place, anyway?' 'This is the place where you get everything you want.' 'But I thought I was supposed to *like* heaven.' 'Heaven? Who said anything about heaven? Heaven is the Other Place.' The point is that a world without suffering appears more like hell than heaven."

That seemed hyperbolic. "Do you really believe that?" I asked.

"Yes, I do. In fact, if you don't, then pretend you're God and try to create a better world in your imagination. Try to create utopia. But you have to think through the consequences of everything you try to improve. Every time you use force to prevent evil, you take away freedom. To prevent all evil, you must remove all freedom and reduce people to puppets, which means they would then lack the ability to freely choose love.

"You may end up creating a world of precision that an engineer might like—*maybe*. But one thing's for sure: you'll lose the kind of world that a Father would want."

The Megaphone of Pain

Clue by clue, Kreeft was shedding more and more light on the mystery of suffering. But each new insight seemed to spawn new questions.

"Evil people get away with hurting others all the time. Certainly God can't consider that fair," I said. "How can he stand there and watch that happen? Why doesn't he intervene and deal with all the evil in the world?"

"People *aren't* getting away with it," Kreeft insisted. "Justice delayed is not necessarily justice denied. There will come a day when God will settle accounts and people will be held responsible for the evil they've perpetrated and the suffering they've caused. Criticizing God for not doing it right now is like reading half a novel and criticizing the author for not resolving the plot. God will bring accountability at the right time—in fact, the Bible says one reason he's delaying is because some people are still following the clues and have yet to find him.[15] He's actually delaying the consummation of history out of his great love for them."

"But in the meantime, doesn't the sheer amount of suffering in the world bother you?" I asked. "Couldn't God curtail at least some of the more horrific evil? One philosopher formulated an argument against God this way: First, there is no reason that would justify God in permitting so much evil rather than a lot less; second, if God exists, then there must be such a reason; so, three, God does not exist."

Kreeft was sympathetic to the problem, but wasn't buying that solution. "That's like saying it's reasonable to believe in God if six Jews die in a Holocaust, but not seven. Or sixty thousand but not sixty thousand and one, or 5,999,999, but not six million," he said. "When you translate the general statement 'so much' into particular examples like that, it shows how absurd it is. There can't be a dividing line.

"It's true that there are some instances where quantity does becomes quality. For example, boiling water: once a temperature of 212 degrees

is reached, you get a new state—gas—and gas laws rather than liquid laws apply. But suffering isn't like that. At what point does suffering disprove the existence of God? No such point can be shown. Besides, because we're not God, we can't say how much suffering is needed. Maybe every single element of pain in the universe is necessary. How can we know?"

I chuckled. "I suppose a person could say, 'If *I'm* having the pain, then that's too much suffering in the world!' "

Kreeft laughed. "Aha, of course!" he exclaimed. "That's the subjective 'too much.' That's a classic case of anthropomorphism. If I were God, I wouldn't allow this much pain; God couldn't possibly disagree with me; God did allow this pain; and therefore there is no God."

"You said a moment ago that some pain might be necessary. That indicates there is a meaning to suffering," I said. "If so, what is it?"

"One purpose of suffering in history has been that it leads to repentance," he said. "Only after suffering, only after disaster, did Old Testament Israel, do nations, do individual people turn back to God. Again, let's face it: we learn the hard way. To quote C. S. Lewis: 'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.'[16] And, of course, repentance leads to something wonderful—to blessedness, since God is the source of all joy and all life. The outcome is good—in fact, better than good.

"Simply put, I believe that suffering is compatible with God's love if it is medicinal, remedial, and necessary; that is, if we are very sick and desperately need a cure. And that's our situation. Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. . . . I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.' "[17]

"But good people suffer just as much—or sometimes more—than the bad," I pointed out. "That's what's so striking about the title of Kushner's book: *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. How is that fair?"

"Well, the answer to that is that there are no good people," Kreeft replied.

"What about that old saying, 'God don't make no junk?' "

"Yes, we're ontologically good—we still bear God's image—but morally we're not. His image in us has been tarnished. The prophet Jer-

emiah said that 'from the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain,'[18] and the prophet Isaiah said, 'all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.'[19] Our good deeds are stained with self-interest and our demands for justice are mixed with lust for vengeance. Ironically, it's the best people who most readily recognize and admit their own shortcomings and sin.

"We are good stuff gone bad, a defaced masterpiece, a rebellious child. Lewis pointed out that we're not just imperfect people who need growth, but we're rebels who need to lay down our arms. Pain and suffering are frequently the means by which we become motivated to finally surrender to God and to seek the cure of Christ.

"That's what we need most desperately. That's what will bring us the supreme joy of knowing Jesus. Any suffering, the great Christians from history will tell you, is worth that result."

Bearing the Pain

I sat back in my chair and reflected on what Kreeft had said so far. Some of his arguments were stronger than others, but at least he wasn't merely offering canned explanations. The clues seemed to be leading somewhere.

I decided to ask him about a quote from Augustine, who said: "Since God is the highest good, he would not allow any evil to exist in his works unless his omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil." After reading him those words, I said, "Does that mean suffering and evil contain the potential for good?"

"Yes, I believe all suffering contains at least the opportunity for good," came his response, "but not everyone actualizes that potential. Not all of us learn and benefit from suffering; that's where free will comes in. One prisoner in a concentration camp will react quite differently from another, because of the choice each one makes to respond to the environment.

"But just about every human being can reflect on his or her past and say, 'I learned from that hardship. I didn't think I would at the time, but I'm a bigger and better person for having endured it and persevered.' Even people without religious faith are aware of that dimension

of suffering. And if we can bring good out of evil even without bringing God into the picture, you can imagine how much more, with God's help, evil can work out for the greater good."

Bringing God into the picture, however, raised another issue: if he loves people, how could he emotionally tolerate the ongoing onslaught of pain and suffering? Wouldn't it overwhelm him? I pulled out Templeton's book and read Kreeft this quote:

> Jesus said, "Are not five sparrows sold for a penny, and not one of them is forgotten before God; and are you not of more value than many sparrows?" But if God grieves over the death of one sparrow, how could even his eternal spirit bear the sickness, suffering, and death of the multiplied millions of men, women, children, animals, birds, and other sensate creatures, in every part of the world, in every century since time began?[20]

"I think Mr. Templeton is anthropomorphizing God by saying, 'I couldn't imagine how any intelligent being could bear this,'" Kreeft said. "And, yes, he's right—we *can't* imagine it. But we can believe it. God does, in fact, weep over every sparrow and grieve over every evil and every suffering. So the suffering that Christ endured on the cross is literally unimaginable. It's not just what you and I would have experienced in our own finite human agony, physical and mental, but all the sufferings of the world were there.

"Let's go back to Templeton's photo of the starving woman in Africa—all she needed was rain. *Where is God?* He was entering into her agony. Not just her physical agony, but her moral agony. *Where is God? Why doesn't he send the rain?* God's answer is the Incarnation. He himself entered into all that agony, he himself bore all of the pain of this world, and that's unimaginable and shattering and even more impressive than the divine power of creating the world in the first place.

"Just imagine every single pain in the history of the world, all rolled together into a ball, eaten by God, digested, fully tasted, eternally. In the act of creating the world, God not only said, let there be pretty little bunny rabbits and flowers and sunsets, but also let there be blood and guts and the buzzing flies around the cross. In a sense, Templeton is

right. God is intimately involved in the act of creating a world of suffering. He didn't do it—we did it—yet he did say, 'Let this world be.'

"And if he did that and then just sat back and said, 'Well, it's your fault after all'—although he'd be perfectly justified in doing that—I don't see how we could love him. The fact that he went beyond justice and quite incredibly took all the suffering upon himself, makes him so winsome that the answer to suffering is—" Kreeft's eyes darted around the room as he searched for the right words. "The answer," he said, "is . . . how could you not love this being who went the extra mile, who practiced more than he preached, who entered into our world, who suffered our pains, who offers himself to us in the midst of our sorrows? What more could he do?"

I said, "In effect, then, the answer to Templeton's question about how could God bear all that suffering is—he did."

"He did!" Kreeft declared. "God's answer to the problem of suffering is that he came right down into it. Many Christians try to get God off the hook for suffering; God put himself on the hook, so to speak—on the cross. And therefore the practical conclusion is that if we want to be with God, we have to be with suffering, we have to not avoid the cross, either in thought or in fact. We must go where he is and the cross is one of the places where he is. And when he sends us the sunrises, we thank him for the sunrises; when he sends us sunsets and deaths and sufferings and crosses, we thank him for that."

I bristled. "Is it possible, really, to thank God for the pain that befalls us?"

"Yes. In heaven, we will do exactly that. We will say to God, 'Thank you so much for this little pain I didn't understand at the time, and that little pain that I didn't understand at the time; these I now see were the most precious things in my life.'

"Even if I don't find myself emotionally capable of doing that right now, even if I cannot honestly say to God in the middle of pain, 'God, thank you for this pain,' but have to say instead, 'Deliver me from evil,' that's perfectly right and perfectly honest—yet I believe that's not the last word. The last words of the Lord's prayer aren't 'deliver us from evil;' the last words are, 'Thine is the glory and the honor.'

"I do think that any fairly mature Christian can look back on his or

her life and identify some moment of suffering that made them much closer to God than they had ever thought possible. Before this happened, they would have said, 'I don't really see how this can accomplish any good at all,' but after they emerge from the suffering, they say, 'That's amazing. I learned something I never thought I could have learned. I didn't think that my weak and rebellious will was capable of such strength, but God, with his grace, gave me the strength for a moment.' If it weren't for suffering, it wouldn't have been possible.

"The closeness to God, the similarity to God, the conformity to God, not just the feeling of being close to God but the ontological real closeness to God, the God-likeness of the soul, emerges from suffering with remarkable efficiency."

"You mentioned heaven," I said. "And the Bible does talk about our sufferings in this world being light and momentary compared to what God's followers will experience in heaven. How does the heaven part play into all this story?"

Kreeft's eyes widened. "If it weren't for that, there would hardly be a story," he said. "Excise all the references to heaven from the New Testament and you have very little left. Saint Teresa said, 'In light of heaven, the worst suffering on earth, a life full of the most atrocious tortures on earth, will be seen to be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel.' That's a challenging or even an outrageous statement! But she didn't speak from the kind of insulated bubble that so many of us live in; she spoke from a life full of suffering.

"The apostle Paul uses another outrageous word in a similar context when he's comparing earthly pleasures with the pleasure of knowing Christ. He said the privileges of Roman citizenship, of being a Pharisee of the Pharisees, of being highly educated, as to the law blameless—all of this, as compared to knowing Christ, is 'dung.'[21] That's a very bold word!

"Similarly, compared with knowing God eternally, compared to the intimacy with God that Scripture calls a spiritual marriage, nothing else counts. If the way to that is through torture, well, torture is nothing compared with that. Yes, it's enormous in itself, but compared to that, it's nothing.

"So the answer to Templeton is, yes, you're perfectly right in saying

that this photograph of the African woman is outrageous. This lack of rain, this starvation, is indeed outrageous in itself. And in one sense, the answer is not to figure it out; one answer is to look in the face of God and compare those two things.

"On the one side of the scale, this torture or all the tortures of the world; on the other side of the scale, the face of God — the God available to all who seek him in the midst of their pain. The good of God, the joy of God, is going to infinitely outweigh all of the sufferings — and even the joys — of this world."

The Power of God's Presence

I was glad that Kreeft had brought the conversation back around to the woman from Templeton's photograph. I didn't want the interview to get too far afield from her. She personalized the issue of suffering, standing as a powerful representative of the world's one billion destitute people.

"If she were here right now," I said to Kreeft, "what would you say to her?"

Kreeft didn't hesitate. "Nothing," he said simply.

I blinked in disbelief. *"Nothing?"*

"Not at first, anyway," he said. "I'd let her talk to me. The founder of an organization for the multiply handicapped says that he works with the handicapped for a very selfish reason: they teach him something much more valuable than he could ever teach them. Namely, who he is. That sounds sentimental, but it's true.

"One of my four children is moderately handicapped, and I've learned more from her than from the other three. I've learned that I'm handicapped and that we're all handicapped, and listening to her helps me to understand myself.

"So the first thing we'd need to do with this woman is to listen to her. To be aware of her. To see her pain. To feel her pain. We live in a relative bubble of comfort, and we look at pain as an observer, as a philosophical puzzle or theological problem. That's the wrong way to look at pain. The thing to do with pain is to enter it, be one with her, and then you learn something from it.

"In fact, it's significant that most objections to the existence of God

from the problem of suffering come from outside observers who are quite comfortable, whereas those who actually suffer are, as often as not, made into stronger believers by their suffering."

That's a phenomenon many writers have noted. After wide-ranging research into the topic of suffering, Philip Yancey wrote, "As I visited people whose pain far exceeded my own . . . I was surprised by its effects. Suffering seemed as likely to reinforce faith as to sow agnosticism."[22] Scottish theologian James S. Stewart said: "It is the spectators, the people who are outside, looking at the tragedy, from whose ranks the skeptics come; it is not those who are actually in the arena and who know suffering from the inside. Indeed, the fact is that it is the world's greatest sufferers who have produced the most shining examples of unconquerable faith."[23]

"Why is that?" I asked Kreeft.

His response was crisp. "Free will," he said. "There's a story of the two rabbis in a concentration camp. One had lost his faith and said there is no God; the other had kept his faith and said, 'God will rescue us.' Both were in a line to enter the death showers. The believer looked around and said, 'God will rescue us,' but when it became his turn to go in, his last words were: 'There is no God.'

"Then the unbelieving rabbi, who had constantly heckled the other rabbi's faith, entered the gas chamber with the prayer 'Shema Israel' on his lips. He became a believer. Free will, both ways. Why do some people in starving Africa or concentration camps become believers and some lose their faith? That's a mystery of human unpredictability."

"Let's go back to the woman," I replied. "You said we should listen and react to her, which sounds like a good thing. But there must be more."

"Yes," he said. "We would want to be Jesus to her, to minister to her, to love her, to comfort her, to embrace her, to weep with her. Our love—a reflection of God's love—should spur us to help her and others who are hurting."

Kreeft gestured toward the hallway. "On my door there's a cartoon of two turtles. One says, 'Sometimes I'd like to ask why he allows poverty, famine, and injustice when he could do something about it.' The other turtle says, 'I'm afraid God might ask me the same question.'

Those who have Jesus' heart toward hurting people need to live out their faith by alleviating suffering where they can, by making a difference, by embodying his love in practical ways."

"That cartoon reminds me of the way God likes to turn questions around," I commented.

"Yes, he's constantly doing that. This happened to Job. Job was wondering who God was, because it looked as if God was a cosmic sadist. At the end of the book of Job, the all-time classic on the problem of suffering, God finally shows up with the answer—and the answer is a question.

"He says to Job, 'Who are you? Are you God? Did you write this script? Were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth?' And Job realizes the answer is no. Then he's satisfied. Why? *Because he sees God!* God doesn't write him a book. He could have written the best book on the problem of evil ever written. Instead, he shows himself to Job."

"And that satisfied him—"

"Yes! It *has* to—that's what's going to satisfy us forever in heaven. I think Job gets a foretaste of heaven at the end of the book of Job, because he meets God. If it were only words that God gave him, that would mean that Job could dialogue and ask God another question and God would give a good answer and Job would ask another question the next day and the next day, because Job was a very demanding philosopher. This would go on and on and never end. What could make it end? God's presence!

"God didn't let Job suffer because he lacked love, but because he *did* love, in order to bring Job to the point of encountering God face to face, which is humanity's supreme happiness. Job's suffering hollowed out a big space in him so that God and joy could fill it.

"As we look at human relationships, what we see is that lovers don't want explanations, but presence. And what God is, essentially, is presence—the doctrine of the Trinity says God is three persons who are present to each other in perfect knowledge and perfect love. That's why God is infinite joy. And insofar as we can participate in that presence, we too have infinite joy. So that's what Job has—even on his dung heap, even before he gets any of his worldly goods back—once he sees God face to face.

"As I said, this makes sense even among human beings. Let's say Romeo and Juliet have a much deeper and more mature love than in Shakespeare's play. Let's say that what Romeo wants most in all the world is Juliet. And let's say that he has lost all his friends and possessions, and he's bleeding and he thinks Juliet is dead.

"Then he sees Juliet rise up and say, 'Romeo, where are you? I'm not dead; are you?' Is Romeo completely happy? Yes. *Completely* happy? Yes. Does he mind at all that he's bleeding and tattered and poor? Not at all! He would much rather be in love in the South Bronx than divorced in Honolulu."

Every Tear, His Tear

We were clearly moving toward the climax of our discussion. The clues Kreeft had mentioned at the outset of our interview were converging, and I could sense an increasing passion and conviction in his voice. I wanted to see more of his heart—and I wouldn't be disappointed.

"The answer, then, to suffering," I said in trying to sum up where we've come, "is not an answer at all."

"Correct," he emphasized, leaning forward as he pleaded his case. "It's the Answerer. It's Jesus himself. It's not a bunch of words, it's *the* Word. It's not a tightly woven philosophical argument; it's a person. *The* person. The answer to suffering cannot just be an abstract idea, because this isn't an abstract issue; it's a personal issue. It requires a personal response. The answer must be someone, not just something, because the issue involves someone—God, where are you?"

That question almost echoed in his small office. It demanded a response. To Kreeft, there is one—a very real one. A living One.

"Jesus is there, sitting beside us in the lowest places of our lives," he said. "Are we broken? He was broken, like bread, for us. Are we despised? He was despised and rejected of men. Do we cry out that we can't take any more? He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Do people betray us? He was sold out himself. Are our tenderest relationships broken? He too loved and was rejected. Do people turn from us? They hid their faces from him as from a leper.

"Does he descend into all of our hells? *Yes*, he does. From the depths

of a Nazi death camp, Corrie ten Boom wrote: 'No matter how deep our darkness, he is deeper still.' He not only rose from the dead, he changed the meaning of death and therefore of all the little deaths—the sufferings that anticipate death and make up parts of it.

"He is gassed in Auschwitz. He is sneered at in Soweto. He is mocked in Northern Ireland. He is enslaved in the Sudan. He's the one we love to hate, yet to us he has chosen to return love. Every tear we shed becomes his tear. He may not wipe them away yet, but he will."

He paused, his confident tone downshifting to tentative. "In the end, God has only given us partial explanations," he said slowly, a shrug in his voice. "Maybe that's because he saw that a better explanation wouldn't have been good for us. I don't know why. As a philosopher, I'm obviously curious. Humanly, I wish he had given us more information."

With that, he looked fully into my face.

"But he knew Jesus was more than an explanation," he said firmly. "He's what we really need. If your friend is sick and dying, the most important thing he wants is not an explanation; he wants you to sit with him. He's terrified of being alone more than anything else. So God has not left us alone."

Kreeft leaned back in his chair and let himself relax. There was only one more thing he wanted me to know.

"And for that," he said, *"I love him."*

Drawing Good from Evil

Less than an hour later, everything was quiet in the car as it snaked through Boston's rain-slickened streets on the way back to the airport. My friend Marc Harrienger, a long-time Boston resident, had graciously volunteered to drive me to and from Kreeft's office. Looking out the window at nothing in particular, I was reviewing the interview in my mind. Most of all, I was wondering how that African woman would have responded to the philosopher's earnest words.

Marc had sat through the interview, listening intently from a wooden chair propped up against the wall. This was not a topic of idle speculation to him.

He broke the silence in the car. "It's true," he said.

"What's true?" I asked.

"What Kreeft said—it's true. I know it. I've lived it."

Several years earlier, Marc had been shoveling snow on his driveway when his wife said she was going to move the car and asked him to watch their young daughter. As the car backed out, they were suddenly thrust into the worst nightmare that parents can imagine: their toddler was crushed beneath a wheel.

Like the African woman, Marc has known what it's like to hold a dying child in his arms. While I wasn't able to talk with that grieving mother, I could converse with him.

So deep was Marc's initial despair that he had to ask God to help him breathe, to help him eat, to help him function at the most fundamental level. Otherwise, he was paralyzed by the emotional pain. But he increasingly felt God's presence, his grace, his warmth, his comfort, and very slowly, over time, his wounds began to heal.

Having experienced God at his point of greatest need, Marc would emerge from this crucible a changed person, abandoning his career in business to attend seminary. Through his suffering—though he never would have chosen it, though it was horribly painful, though it was life-shattering at the time—Marc has been transformed into someone who would devote the rest of life to bringing God's compassion to others who are alone in their desperation.

In the pulpit for the first time, Marc was able to draw on his own experiences with God in the depths of sorrow. People were captivated because his own loss had given him special insights, empathy, and credibility. In the end, dozens of them responded by saying they too wanted to know this Jesus, this God of tears. Now other hearts were being healed because of Marc's having been broken. From one couple's despair emerges new hope for many.

"Sometimes skeptics scoff at the Bible saying that God can cause good to emerge from our pain if we run toward him instead of away from him," Marc said. "But I've watched it happen in my own life. I've experienced God's goodness through deep pain, and no skeptic can dispute that. The God who the skeptic denies is the same God who held our hands in the deep, dark places, who strengthened our marriage, who deepened our faith, who increased our reliance on him, who gave

us two more children, and who infused our lives with new purpose and meaning so that we can make a difference to others."

I asked gently, "Do you wish you had more answers about why suffering happens in the first place?"

"We live in a broken world; Jesus was honest enough to tell us we'd have trials and tribulations.[24] Sure, I'd like to understand more about why. But Kreeft's conclusion was right—the ultimate answer is Jesus' presence. That sounds sappy, I know. But just wait—when your world is rocked, you don't want philosophy or theology as much as you want the reality of Christ. He *was* the answer for me. He was the very answer we needed."

The existence of pain and suffering are powerful accusations against God. The question, however, is whether the evidence succeeds in convicting him. I thought Kreeft's deft analysis and analogies went a long way toward undermining this formidable obstacle to faith, but many other kinds of objections remained. This was just the beginning of a long journey of discovery, and I decided to withhold my final verdict until all the obstacles to faith were confronted and all the facts were in.

In the meantime, prominent British pastor John R. W. Stott, who acknowledged that suffering is "the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith," has reached his own conclusion:

> I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross.... In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over

it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering. 'The cross of Christ … is God's only self-justification in such a world' as ours.[25]

Deliberations

Questions for Reflection or Group Study

1. How have difficulties, challenges, and even pain shaped your character and values? How are you different today as a result of the problems you've had to face in life? Can you ever imagine thanking God someday for how suffering has molded you? Kreeft said, "I believe all suffering contains at least the opportunity for good." Was that true in your case?

2. What were Kreeft's strongest points? What were his weakest? If you had an opportunity to question him, what would you ask? Based on his other observations, how do you think he might respond to your question?

3. If you were God, how would you have designed the world differently? As you remove suffering or evil and tinker with people's free will, think through the consequences that would result. How would people form character in your utopia? Would they be motivated to seek God in the midst of their pleasures? If you supernaturally intervened to eliminate evil, where would you draw the line—to prevent murder? Child abuse? Theft? Slander? Evil thoughts that may prompt evil actions? At what point are people turned into puppets who lack free will and therefore cannot truly express love?

4. If Marc were to sit down with the woman in the *Life* magazine photo, what three things do you think he would say to her? How do you believe she might respond?

For Further Evidence

More Resources on This Topic

Peter Kreeft. *Making Sense Out of Suffering.* Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant, 1986.

Philip Yancey. *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990.

Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes. *When God Weeps.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997.

Luis Palau. *Where Is God When Bad Things Happen?* New York: Doubleday, 1999.

The Case for Faith

A JOURNALIST INVESTIGATES THE TOUGHEST OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIANITY

By Lee Strobel

Was God telling the truth when he said, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart”? In his #1 bestseller *The Case for Christ*, Lee Strobel examined the claims of Christ, reaching the hard-won verdict that Jesus is God’s unique son.

In *The Case for Faith*, Strobel turns his skills to the most persistent emotional objections to belief—the eight “heart barriers” to faith. This Gold Medallion-winning book is for those who may be feeling attracted to Jesus but who are faced with difficult questions standing squarely in their path. For Christians, it will deepen their convictions and give them fresh confidence in discussing Christianity with even their most skeptical friends.

“Everyone—seekers, doubters, fervent believers—benefits when Lee Strobel hits the road in search of answers, as he does again in *The Case for Faith*. In the course of his probing interviews, some of the toughest intellectual obstacles to faith fall away.” **–Luis Palau, evangelist, radio host, speaker, best-selling author**

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