The Lamb and the Führer

I can’t see the face of the Judge. Who is it?

You do not need to see him. You will hear His voice— but you will see other faces you will recognize.
*Just Thinking* is a teaching resource of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries and exists to engender thoughtful engagement with apologetics, Scripture, and the whole of life.

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The Lamb and the Führer

By Ravi Zacharias

“I want to raise a generation of young people, imperious, relentless and cruel.” With these words, Adolf Hitler spilled the blood of millions of people, his own as well as others, when he set himself as a god in the minds of his people. But nearly two thousand years before him, another walked this earth whose name is symbolic of love, peace, and life.
A LIFE AND DEATH CONVERSATION
as I traveled through the sites of the carnage of the Second World War, I was reminded afresh of the horror and the extent of human pain and suffering inflicted on so many by one man and those willing to follow him. The concentration camps, the Gestapo offices, and the gas ovens still speak today of the incalculable price that was paid. Any words that try to describe it become dwarfed because the story is so monstrous.

There is no name today more synonymous with power, wickedness, and unprecedented violence than his. But nearly two thousand years before him, another walked this earth whose name is symbolic of love, peace, and life. His was a name also associated with the spilling of blood—His own, shed for the sake of the world. He endured hell to open the way to heaven. What would a conversation between these two be like? There were voices in Hitler’s day that tried to stop him. One was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor, who went so far as to be part of a plot to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer believed that for the sake of the world, Hitler had to be removed, and he paid for that conviction with his life.

In this conversation that we imagine between Jesus and Hitler, Bonhoeffer joins in because he brings into focus the reality of the struggle that good men and women faced under national socialism. Violence, racism, power, lies, death, philosophy, evil are all given a face here. But then there is the face of love, individual worth, supreme goodness, power, truth, peace, and life in Jesus Christ. In the face of Bonhoeffer we see anguish, helplessness, and a will to change evil for good.

It was not difficult to find Hitler’s own words of self-justification for his actions. It was not that difficult either to find Bonhoeffer’s words that described the soul struggle he faced. But what would Jesus have said when ethics comes into conflict with an ethic that chose to kill to stop the killing? That part was harder, and it is in those words alone that the huge reality of those issues can be grasped.

So enter with me into Hitler’s bunker and listen in as the Führer, gun in hand, is about to end his life (synonymous in his mind with Germany itself), knowing that his Third Reich did not last a thousand years or bring a Final Solution, but in fact resulted in the destruction of his own country and much of Europe. How could good people have followed such an evil man? What is the origin of such violence? How does blood recompense for blood? Listen as Jesus, Hitler, and Bonhoeffer engage in a life-and-death discussion.

It is my earnest hope that, in a world now full of violence, the voice of Jesus will be heard again calling men and women to submit to His sacrifice so that we will not continue to sacrifice our own sons and daughters on the battlefields of human ego and ideological conflict.

Ravi Zacharias is founder and president of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries in Atlanta, GA.
BERLIN, OCTOBER 2013

AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENT DANIEL VISITS HIS FRIEND ERIC IN GERMANY...

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE NOW, BUT UNDERNEATH HERE WAS HIS ACTUAL BUNKER, CORRECT?

WHEN ONE COMES HERE AND SEES THAT NOTHING REMAINS, YOU REALIZE HOW THOROUGH WAS THE DESTRUCTION. EVERYTHING WAS RAZED.

YOU CAN GO TO ENGLAND AND SEE CHURCHILL’S CABINET WAR ROOMS ALMOST EXACTLY AS THEY WERE WHEN THE WAR ENDED.

BUT HERE IN BERLIN... WE ONLY HAVE DIRT AND STONES.

I AM SURE THERE IS A METAPHOR BURIED THERE SOMEWHERE...

“THE RUSSIANS WERE WITHIN A HALF MILE WHEN HITLER DECIDED TO END IT ALL.”

“EVEN THOUGH IT WAS HIS LAST STAND, THERE IS LITTLE OF THE REICH’S PRESENCE THAT REMAINS.”

THE “HALL OF SHAME”... THE LOCATION OF THE GESTAPO HEADQUARTERS...

THE SO-CALLED PEOPLE’S COURT...

WHICH WAS NEITHER FOR THE PEOPLE... OR REALLY A COURT.

EXACTLY.

SOME CALL IT A “TOPOGRAPHY OF TERROR”... WHERE ROBED AND UNIFORMED OFFICIALS KILLED WITHOUT FEELING.

THERE IS NOW A MEMORIAL HERE, BUT LET’S MOVE ON, YOUR VISIT WON’T BE COMPLETE WITHOUT SEEING NUREMBERG.”
WHOA! You guys don't do speed limits, do you?

We don't like driving in America. Why design a car to go fast and then crawl along at 55 or 60 miles per hour?

As my dad used to say, "The faster you move, the farther ahead you should be able to see."

I've driven with him—he didn't have to see very far.

No, I don't think he expects to see an Autobahn in heaven, either.

Hey—how about lunch, like McDonald's and not another Wiener Schnitzel.

You can take the boy out of...

Okay, okay... I'll dish on some breaded veal. I am sure the Russians didn't have a lot of choices when they arrived either.

Next exit... Nuremberg—we’ll have plenty of choices. That would go on record as the fastest 200 miles ever.

Welcome to the Autobahn, my friend.
NUREMBERG. Did you see the movies about the trial?

I saw Judgment at Nuremberg. About the Nazi judges being placed on trial.

NUREMBERG is also powerful and quite accurate. People often confuse the two movies.

I plan to watch them again when I get back. I couldn’t keep up with the suicides.

The closing statement of the chief justice is worth the three-hour movie.

It went with the obsession with power... don’t give the enemy the privilege of humiliating you.

You go on while I try to find a parking spot. Your tourist’s look just might incline them to let you in.

Whatever you do, don’t clown around with that Nazi salute.

You just took out the lighter side.

Germans are a people of laws and rules-- you’ll be a guest of the state.
Hurry— I have something to show you!

I can’t just park anywhere, the man in uniform. Forget the man in uniform— follow me— quick!

I can’t believe I am in this building...

You haven’t seen anything yet, we can look at the pictures later.

Do you ever wish you could just plug in to one of the walls and listen to the voices of the past?

I don’t believe it! This is it... this is the very room.

The clerk said it was okay, let’s not ask again.
WHAT SILENCE HAUNTS THIS ROOM. THERE WAS A DAY WHEN THE SCREAMS OF THE MURDERED WERE.

HEY! I AM NOT SURE WE ARE SUPPOSED TO BE IN HERE WITHOUT SOMEBODY IN AUTHORITY.

LET'S SIT DOWN AND PRETEND WE'RE HERE BY AUTHORITY.

I DONT LIKE THAT WORD- PRETEND. THAT'S THE WAY THE WHOLE THING GOT STARTED.

IT WAS ALL A CHARADE- CEREMONY, GOOSE STEPPING, THE SALUTE.

THAT ONE MAN COULD HAVE SUCH POWER TO SWAY AND DESTROY... I LOST MY UNCLE AND A GRANDMOTHER, AND SO DID I, DANIEL. STEP BACK AND LOOK AT THIS...

"THE TEMPTATION IN THE GARDEN."

"MOST VISITORS WOULD WONDER WHAT THAT HAS TO DO WITH THIS."

"EVERYTHING! THE TEMPTER SAID THEY WOULD BE AS GOD."
I CHILLING APPROPRIATENESS, I BELONG TO THE CHURCH BUT I KNOW LITTLE ABOUT THE BIBLE.

BUT SOME MINISTERS STOOD IN THE WAY OF HITLER-SOME EVEN TRIED TO ASSASSINATE HIM. EVERY GERMAN KNOWS THE NAME OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER.

THAT'S ANOTHER THING... CHURCH AND STATE.

THE STATE CHURCH SUCKS THE TRUE SPIRITUALITY OUT OF US.

LOOK ABOVE THE JUDGE'S CHAIR. THEY LOOK LIKE THE TEN COMMANDMENTS.

THERE ARE THREE COMMANDMENTS ON THE FIRST TABLET BUT SEVEN ON THE SECOND- IS THAT HOW THEY ARE USUALLY WRITTEN?

"I BELIEVE IT'S BECAUSE THE FIRST THREE DEAL WITH OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND THE LAST SEVEN OUR RELATIONSHIP TO FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS."

"WITHOUT THE FIRST YOU CANNOT EXPLAIN THE OTHERS."

I WAS SIMPLY FOLLOWING THE LAW OF THE LAND.

THERE IS A LAW THAT STANDS SUPREME ABOVE ALL OTHER LAW!
WHERE'S THE BUILDING WHERE THE NAZI WAR CRIMINALS WERE HELD AND EXECUTED?

 WASN'T IT ATTACHED TO HERE?

RIGHT BEHIND US—CONNECTED BY AN UNDERGROUND TUNNEL.

"THE SCENE IN THE MOVIE WAS QUITE SOBERING... ONE BY ONE THE ROPE PLACED AROUND THEIR NECKS, THEN THE FLOOR JUST GAVE WAY UNDERNEATH THEM."

"LITERALLY AND METAPHORICALLY—NO GROUND TO STAND ON."

I WONDER WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE IF HITLER WERE ON TRIAL IN THIS COURTROOM, AND GOD WERE THE JUDGE?

HITLER WOULD ANSWER TO NO ONE, EVEN GOD. HE DIDN'T DIALOGUE. ONLY MONOLOGUE.

DIALOGUE INVOLVES REASON AND A WILLINGNESS TO ADMIT THERE'S ANOTHER OPINION.

"THERE WAS NO OTHER VIEWPOINT TO HIM BECAUSE HE TRIED TO CREATE HIS OWN REALITY."

"WHEN HE FACED GOD, ONLY GOD'S REALITY WOULD SURVIVE."
THAT WOULD BE QUITE THE
SCENE. HITLER IN THE
DOCK, JESUS AS JUDGE,
BONHOEFFER AS WITNESS,
THE VOICES OF THE
BLOOD OF MILLIONS
CRYING OUT.

I'D LIKE TO BE ABLE TO
WITNESS THAT TALK
ABOUT THE TRIAL OF THE
CENTURY. THAT WOULD
BE THE MOTHER OF
ALL TRIALS.

THE LAMB AND
THE FLAMER... THE
ULTIMATE REVERSAL
OF METAPHORS ON
THE WAY TO FINDING
ULTIMATE POWER.
I had a friend who once said that if Hitler had asked Jesus for forgiveness at the end all would have been forgiven. I find that—I've thought of that too. What would've happened if he had fallen on his face... and... that would be bizarre.

I could write a script for this...

"My friends and I used to talk about it."

"I was the ring leader, filling in the missing content with the imaginary scenarios."

I'm listening.

Okay, but before I do that let's just think about those last hours in the bunker..."
There are some churches that have a way of getting under your skin. For me, it also happened to be a church that got clay under my fingernails.
There are some churches that have a way of getting under your skin. For me, it also happened to be a church that got clay under my fingernails.

In the late 70s, a diminishing, elderly congregation in Holland, Michigan, began the painful process of looking around the pews and admitting to themselves that they were a dying church within a neighborhood that had dramatically changed in the years since the church was established.¹

Deciding that they wanted to do something about the intensifying divide between church and city, these men and women started a recreation ministry with the hopes of meeting their neighbors, learning who they were, and inviting them to a church that was ready to sacrifice everything it knew to make room.

From week to week as the recreation lot grew with kids and activities, we invited local artists and amateur hobbyists to come and teach something of their craft to whoever was interested. One of these artists was a potter who brought clay and glazes, so someone had the mind to commission the kids to create some new communion plates and chalices for the church to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Having had their communion set vandalized in a series of burglaries in years prior, the act was as much Christ’s gift of reconciliation as the meal that would be served in it for years following.

Many of these kids had never taken communion before; many had never heard of the Lord’s Supper or been told the story of Jesus and his disciples in the upper room before he was crucified. So with muddied hands we told the story, and together that summer several sets of communion plates and cups were fashioned by kids eager to see them in use.

I have never seen more colorful, misshapen objects grace the altar of a church. Nor have I ever seen so many wide-eyed children—and adults—come to life at the communion table. The elders held the lopsided plates and leaking cups, inviting the church community to come to the table of one who also fashioned clay and dirtied his hands with a material world, one by whose love we continue to be shaped. The children had a physical reminder of their place in the church and in the vast fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And all of us were reminded that we are reconciled children the Father sees fit to feed, boldly enabled by the Spirit to share in the consuming mystery of the incarnate life of the Son of God. Our bodies and our affections were tuned to Christ in the Supper in a way that my mind has never quite been able to forget.

MEANING UNIMAGINED
Frequent social emphasis on “high” or “fine” art tends to make us see the arts as something put away or set apart, something extravagant or even wasteful in the ordinary world of untied shoelaces, racial tensions, and dying neighbors. We have learned to see a work of art as something to contemplate in and of itself, something fashioned for its own sake or at the artist’s personal whim, something to admire and then to go home.

Classically trained pianist and professor of theology Jeremy Begbie pushes us to see something more, both for the sake of our humanity and the good of our theology: “Although ‘perceptual contemplation’ is one of the uses to which some art can legitimately be put, to insist on it as the *sine qua non* of art is unhelpfully restrictive. Art plays an enormous variety of roles in human life—evoking emotion, expressing grief, praising, celebrating, etc.”²

The moments we seem most to know this is true are often as “set apart” as the art in a museum, but in a very different, deeply *experiential* sense of that phrase—as when the minor key of the
piano is able to say something at a child's funeral that words have just not been able to articulate, or in the wrenching juxtaposition of words in a George Herbert poem long held in memory: *Love is that liquor sweet and most divine, Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine.* Art, in this deeper, un-abstracted sense, holds the capacity to open up and encounter a material world; it invites reintegration of aspects of our humanity often severed and hints at meaning we had not imagined.

It is this sense of the arts that makes it invaluable for evangelism, for it takes seriously a God who chose not merely to create but to interact with that creation, to engage with humanity in nothing less than the beauty and mess of human-form himself. While art and theology have often held a tenuous relationship (and there is much that can be said about its history), many churches and ministries are now recognizing that our neglect of the arts has been to our own detriment. For those with artistic sympathies or a sense of theological protectiveness, this new interest in communication can feel much like playing host at a party where certain guests are best kept from mingling too much—a no-nonsense mother-in-law, for instance, and one’s eccentric aunt. Too much interaction seems only to spoil both parties. Far rarer are conversations that are at once both theologically sound and respectfully in tune with the integrity of the arts.

As with a God who chose the labored hope of human birth and the excruciation of a cross, the ministry of reconciliation is both beautiful and messy, mentally and physically demanding. Inviting artists back into a church that has kept them at bay, we might expect no less. But our theology will be the better for it. “[T]heology,” writes Begbie, “is the disciplined thinking and re-thinking of that good news or gospel from which Christian faith arises: the reconciling self-communication of the triune God, climaxing in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. The phrase ‘thinking and re-thinking’ here could easily be misunderstood as narrowly intellectualist—as if theology were ideally performed by pure minds, disembodied and detached from all practical interests, passions and commitments.... [But] theology as the pursuit of this wisdom, though undoubtedly intellectual, is integrally related to action, and indeed to every aspect of our humanity.”

This means that the best theology is no more abstract than the cross itself; it is about getting one’s hands dirty and becoming truly human in Christ, stained by the blood of the one we follow with heart, mind, soul, and body.

This also means that art, in such a venture, is not simply a means of putting
a beautiful gloss on our already-settled theology. The image of the lopsided, artful chalices was no mere analgesic prop for a theological lesson more purely articulated elsewhere. The entire experience of molding, painting, communing, and partaking of the sacred meal within a community that desperately needed the reconciling gift of the human and risen Christ was itself theology. All of it was the ground and grammar of Christ’s nourishing presence in the Lord’s Supper; all of it was the Spirit’s transforming movement of neighbors into reconciliation. Every hand-dirtying part of it was the good news of a triune God in clay and paint, bread and wine, spirit and truth.

For me, the sacramental meals taken and tasted from those childlike communion sets—including communion served from the borrowed chalices at my own wedding—continue to offer promises of Christ I had not suspected, long after the juice has left my tongue. Several churches later, in fact, the palpable gift of Christ within these misshapen, vulnerable clay vessels became all the more compelling as we approached the altar of a congregation that chose to switch to white grape juice, having tired of red stains on their carpets. Artists—indeed, like children and unpredictable neighbors—will add a messy, earth-bound dimension to a congregation. But I believe, as my former church discovered of all of the red stains of Christ’s blood spilled over the carpets that year, we will be thankful for it.

A POWERFUL APOLOGETIC

Along with the university and the marketplace, the arts have been named as one of RZIM’s areas of focus since the beginning. For those of us writing, speaking, or standing alongside the church worldwide, we are grateful for this foresight on the part of Ravi Zacharias. One of the most frequent requests from the scores of letters that come in each day involves the arts in some form: artists writing with stories of rejection or isolation, churches curious or fearful of art’s role, philosophical questions of beauty’s presence in a hostile world. The arts indeed offer a language in venues where more “traditional” theological language has been tuned out. Beauty is a powerful apologetic. And, where but in the history of Jesus Christ can we find beauty in brokenness, beauty in the transformation of the disorder of creation, in the hands of a God of self-giving love?

With a growing number of Christians worldwide, RZIM is deeply aware that the arts have a unique role in presenting the promises of God to a world in dire need of a promise that moves beyond abstraction. Thankfully, mercifully, the ways in which God’s self-giving love approach us—mind, soul, body, senses—are as multivalent as the good news God has given us to profess. Theology through the arts has a remarkable ability to remind us that being human—which the Son took so very seriously he forever joined himself to us in flesh—is a sacred reality. We have the incredible gift of a God who shows us precisely what that means in a beautiful, clay vessel broken and spilled for all.

Jill Carattini is Managing Editor of “A Slice of Infinity” at RZIM.

1 The story of Maple Avenue Church has recently been told by John D. Cox in The City in Its Heart: The First 100 Years of Maple Avenue Ministries (Holland, Michigan: Van Raalte, 2014).
3 For a thorough overview of the arts and its reception in church history as well as a helpful way forward, see again Voicing Creation’s Praise.
If God, *Why Suffering*?

By Vince Vitale

According to Christianity, what God values above all is relationship. But for relationship to be meaningful, it must be freely chosen; for relationship to be freely chosen, there must be the possibility of it being rejected; and wherever there is the possibility of rejecting relationship, there is also the possibility of pain and suffering.
THE REALITY OF EVIL
In one of the first significant conversations I had on the topic of suffering, my Aunt Regina expressed to me how difficult it was to see her son Charles, my cousin, struggle with a serious mental illness. Being more concerned at the time with the question than the questioner, I started spouting some of my abstract, philosophical ideas about why God might allow suffering. But after listening very graciously, my aunt turned to me and said, “But Vince, that doesn’t speak to me as a mother.”

Suffering is very real and very personal, and since that conversation with my aunt I am always hesitant to address it briefly. In what follows, I will try to provide some starting points for further thought and prayer, but please forgive me if anything I say comes across as if I am not taking seriously any real-life suffering you may be experiencing. My hope is that will not be the case, and that amid the suffering of this world each of us will find strength, comfort, and meaning in the community of those who have put their trust in Jesus Christ.

Let me begin to sketch seven approaches to thinking about the challenge of suffering.

1. THE OBJECTIVE REALITY OF EVIL

The challenge is often framed in this way: if a loving and powerful God exists, He would not allow evil to exist. Evil does exist; therefore, there must be no God.

For evil to pose this problem for belief in God, evil itself must be real. But there is a serious question about whether atheism can account for the objective reality of the evil that motivates the problem of evil in the first place. If you need a good God to account for evil, then you can’t disprove that good God with evil.

I recently came across an interview with Richard Dawkins in which the interviewer was challenging him about the implications of his naturalistic worldview. The interviewer said, “Ultimately, your belief that rape is wrong is as arbitrary as the fact that we’ve evolved five fingers rather than six.” Dawkins responded, “You could say that, yeah.”

I guess you could. I certainly don’t want to, and I don’t think it’s rational to, and having an objective, unchanging standard for morality in the existence of a loving God can help explain why we don’t need to reach Dawkins’s disturbing conclusion. If a good and loving God exists, then there is something we can appeal to beyond shifting cultural trends and arbitrary genetic programming as the basis of morality— as the basis for saying that some things really are objectively good and right, and some things really are objectively evil and wrong.

Alternatively, if what we call morality is just a byproduct of naturalistic evolution, then to say that something is moral or good is just to say that it is conducive for the survival of the human species. But that is not the morality we actually believe in. People are not morally valuable only insofar as they can be put to use for the survival of the species. No. Each and every individual has an intrinsic and inalienable moral worth. And this worth is no less when old age or disability or disease or any number of other things threatens to make us less useful for the evolutionary goal of survival.
Naturalistic evolution cannot explain the intrinsic dignity and worth of every single person. What can explain this is that each person is created in the image of a good God, and is fully known and unconditionally loved by Him.

2. THE LIMITS OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE
One of the assumptions smuggled into the thought that suffering disproves the existence of God is this:

If God has good reasons for allowing suffering, we should know what those reasons are.

But why think that?
When parents decide to move their family from one city to another, this can genuinely be very difficult on a young child. It may be experienced by the child as the absolute worst suffering that could ever occur. In the moment, the child might be certain that all happiness is behind him, that his parents hate him, and that for all practical purposes his life is over.

And yet even such outrage on the part of a child does not mean that the child’s parents are wrong to make the move, and it does not mean that they don’t love him. In fact, it’s very likely that it was precisely the good of their children that weighed heavily in the parents’ decision.

You can see the analogy: if parents’ reasons are sometimes beyond what a child can fully grasp, why then should we be surprised when some of God’s reasons are beyond what we can fully grasp?

This general approach is referred to as Skeptical Theism in academic philosophy. But it’s not a new idea:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.
“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

If God is as great as Christians claim He is, then sometimes not fully grasping the fullness of his reasons is exactly what we should expect. And if it’s exactly what we should expect to find if God does exist, then our finding it can’t be strong evidence that God does not exist.

3. A RESPONSE OF FREEDOM
What kind of world God would have made depends on what God values. According to Christianity, what God values above all is relationship. But for relationship to be meaningful, it must be freely chosen; for relationship to be freely chosen, there must be the possibility of it being rejected; and wherever there is the possibility of rejecting relationship, there is also the possibility of pain and suffering.

The Bible affirms this truth from its very first pages. We find a story of people who are in intimate relationship with God, and who know what He has asked of them. But then they hear this voice in their ears, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the

For evil to pose this problem for belief in God, evil itself must be real. But there is a serious question about whether atheism can account for the objective reality of the evil that motivates the problem of evil in the first place. If you need a good God to account for evil, then you can’t disprove that good God with evil.
garden?” (Genesis 3:1). And they begin to doubt God. They begin to doubt that He knows what’s best for them. They begin to doubt that He is for them. Ultimately, they begin to doubt what He has actually said—His word.

And then they sin.

They do what they know deep down they should not do. Not a big sin, just eating a piece of fruit that they were told not to eat. No big deal, right? But it starts them down a path. First we’re told that they felt shame. They were convinced that God wouldn’t want anything to do with them anymore, and so they hid themselves from God. Then they began accusing each other. Adam pointed at Eve and said, “She did it!” (in essence pointing his finger at God as well by referring to Eve as “the woman you put here with me”). Eve pointed at the serpent and said, “He did it!”

From temptation to doubt to disobedience to shame to hiding to finger-pointing to suffering—is there really a question about whether this story speaks the truth about the human heart? When I read it, I have to admit that it resounds with the truth about me.

But here’s the most amazing part of the Fall story. The first persons have rejected God. They’ve decided they’d rather be their own gods. And how does God respond? He goes looking for them. He pursues them; He calls out to them: “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9).

Then, after their first interaction with God after they had sinned, Adam names his wife “Eve.” It’s a name of great honor. It is often understood to mean “breath” or “life” and it is given to her “because she would become the mother of all the living” (Genesis 3:20). Symbolically, it connects her with God’s breathing of life into Adam. And even the spellings of the names Eve and Yahweh show similarities in the original Hebrew. They have the same ending. In English, it would be something like a daughter Hanna having a mother named Joanna.

This is probably not the name Eve expected to be called after helping to cause the Fall of all humanity! But even then, in her moment of great sin, she gets the honor of a name that symbolically connects her with God Himself.

Even amidst the consequences of the Fall, how generous and loving must God’s interaction with them have been for Adam to choose that name for his wife? Next we’re told that God “made garments of skin for Adam and [Eve].” In an ancient Near Eastern culture, this is the exact opposite of what should have happened. Their clothes should have been torn to symbolize their disgrace. Instead, God makes garments for them. And not only that, but the text gives this beautiful detail: “and [He] clothed them.” Imagine the intimacy of God pulling a shirt over your head and carefully guiding your arms through the sleeves, before kneeling down to tie your shoelaces.

God dressed Adam and Eve himself so that they would not be ashamed, foreshadowing that one day He would clothe us in Christ (Galatians 3:27), with the best robe (Luke 15:22), with power from on high (Luke 24:49). Right from the very beginning, it is in God’s response to suffering that we see the love of God most clearly, a love that refuses to give up on us even when we use our free will to cause great suffering.
4. WHAT IT TAKES TO BE YOU
It’s typical to think of the problem of evil like this: we picture ourselves in this
world of suffering, then we picture ourselves in a world with far less suffering.
And then we wonder, “Shouldn’t God have created us in the other world—the
world with far less suffering?” That’s a reasonable thought.

But it’s a thought that relies on a philosophical mistake. It relies on the
assumption that it would still be you and me who would exist in that other
world. And that is highly controversial. Let me explain.

There was a pivotal moment early on in my parents’ relationship. They were
on their second date. They were standing on the Brooklyn Bridge, looking at the
picturesque New York City skyline, and my dad noticed a ring on my mom’s fin-
ger. So he asked about it, and she said, “Oh, that’s just some ring one of my old
boyfriends gave me. I just wear it ‘cause I think it looks nice.”

“Oh, yeah, it is nice,” my dad responded. “Let me see it.”

So my mom took it off and handed it to him, and my dad hurled it off the
bridge and watched it sink to the bottom of the East River! “You’re with me now,”
he declared. “You won’t be needing that anymore.”

And my mom loved it!

Now it was a pretty risky move my dad made hurling my mom’s ring off the
Brooklyn Bridge. She loved it, but what if she hadn’t? What if she had concluded
that my dad had lost it and then run off with her old boyfriend instead? What
would that have meant for me? (If you

I might be tempted to think that if Mom had wound up with
her old boyfriend I could have been better off. I might have been
taller. I might have been better looking. But actually, that’s not
right. “I” never would have existed.

I can believe it, fifty years on, my dad is still trying to get my mom to reveal
who gave her that ring. Mom flatly
refuses to say!

I might be tempted to think that if
Mom had wound up with her old boyfriend
I could have been better off. I might have been
taller. I might have been better looking. Maybe the other guy was royalty.
That would have been cool! I could’ve
lived in a castle!

But actually, that’s not right. There’s
a problem with wishing my mom wound
up with the other guy, and the problem is
this: “I” never would have existed.

Maybe some other child would have
existed. And maybe he would have been
taller and better looking and lived in a
castle. But part of what makes me who I am—the individual that I am—is my
beginning: the parents I have, the sperm
and egg I came from, the combination of
genes that’s true of me.

Asking “Why didn’t God create me
in a world with less suffering?” is similar
to saying, “I wish my mom had married
the other guy.” I’m sure my mom and her
old boyfriend would have had some very
nice kids, but “I” would not have been
one of them.

We often wish we could take some
piece of suffering out of our world while
keeping everything else the same. But it
doesn’t work that way. Changing anything
changes everything—and everyone.

Why didn’t God create a different
world? Well, it depends on what God was
after. It depends on what God values.
And what if one of the things He values,
values greatly, is you, the people you love,
and each person who will ever live?
Imagine the intimacy of God pulling a shirt over your head and carefully guiding your arms through the sleeves, before kneeling down to tie your shoelaces.

Sometimes we wish God had made a very different sort of world, but in doing so we unwittingly wish ourselves out of existence. And so the problem of suffering is reframed in the form of a question:

Could God have wronged you by creating a world in which you came to exist and are offered eternal life, rather than creating a different world in which you never would have lived?

5. “THE BEST LIVES” THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

For a fifth response, think of what is, in your opinion, one of the greatest lives ever lived.

Consider it in detail. Think of the person’s character and how it was formed. Think of the person’s relationships. Think of his or her great triumphs, their sacrifices, their steadfastness for what is good and true.

Now, try in your imagination to subtract from that person’s life all possibility of suffering. Subtract the suffering that shaped the culture and family they were born into, the suffering that formed their character, the suffering they fought against, the suffering that they carried others through.

What happened to the life you were picturing? All of a sudden it doesn’t look anything like the great life that you were initially so inclined to celebrate.

Without the possibility of significant suffering, practically every great true story in history would be false. No one would ever have made a significant sacrifice for anyone else. No great moments of forgiveness and reconciliation. No opportunities to stand for justice against injustice. No compassion (because nothing to be compassionate about), no courage (because no dangerous situations requiring courage), no heroes, no such thing as laying down one’s life for another. Is it so obvious that God would create that world rather than our own?

Criticism without alternative is empty. It’s easy to get mad at the world God has made. It’s much harder to say the world God should have made instead.

6. THE GOD WHO SUFFERS WITH US

A sixth response to the objection from suffering I take, somewhat ironically, from Friedrich Nietzsche. He wrote:

“The gods justified human life by living it themselves — the only satisfactory [response to the problem of suffering] ever invented.”

Nietzsche is actually writing of the ancient Greeks here, and in his bias he does not make the connection to Christianity. But as a Christian, I am very pleased to agree with him and then point emphatically to the cross where Jesus died.

The night before his death, as Jesus wrestled with what He knew the next day would bring, Jesus said to his friends, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow, to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38). Think about it. The God of the Universe, the Creator of all things, saying He is overwhelmed with sorrow, even to death...
At the Cross, we see the absolute uniqueness of the Christian response to suffering. In Islam, the idea of God suffering is nonsense—it is thought to make God weak. In Buddhism, to reach divinity is precisely to move beyond the possibility of suffering. Only in Christ do we have a God who is loving enough to suffer with us.

If you’ve ever experienced deep depression or thought about dying, Jesus is right there with you. There is no depth of agony and helplessness we can experience in this life that He doesn’t understand.

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The loving parent is not the one who never allows suffering in a child’s life. The loving parent is the one who is willing to suffer alongside their children. And in Christianity this is exactly what we find.

7. A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE
Finally, the challenge of suffering is in part a challenge of perspective, and it’s important to remember that our current perspective is not the full perspective.

The Bible says that the eternal life that God offers to every person will be one where “God will wipe every tear from our eyes,” where there will be “no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4).

Imagine aliens who somehow managed to tap into a video feed from earth, but all they could see was the hospital delivery room when I was being born. They watched as the doctors forcefully told my mom to do things that made her scream in pain. And then when she could take no more, the doctors got out a knife and cut right into my mom’s stomach. They took me out—blood everywhere—and even though my mom was reaching out for me and screaming for me, the doctors immediately rushed me away from her. What would the aliens think of the doctors?

If all the aliens saw were the first few moments of my life, they might think that the doctors were utterly evil. Only from a fuller perspective would they be able to see that the doctors actually cared for my mother extremely well, and in fact saved my life.

On the Christian understanding of reality, what we currently see is only the first few moments of life—literally just the birthing process of human history! We will always come up short if we attempt to find the full explanation for suffering in this life alone. This life is only the smallest fraction of our lives. We are going to live forever. And even though right now we live in a harsh, broken world, Jesus promises that one day “everyone who calls on [Him]” will live in a world that will be good to us (see e.g., Romans 10:13, Acts 2:21, Joel 2:32).

“DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?”
When things get worse before they get better, God is with us. And as we look to the future, we can trust in the words of
Jesus: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26).

Recently I shared these words with the father of my oldest friend, Chris. I grew up right next door to them. As I write this, his father, Joe, is suffering from a brain tumor, and the doctors have given him two days to a week left to live.

When I walked in to see him, I didn't know if he would want to talk about his approaching death. Joe had always been strong and capable. He had a voice so deep that no matter what he was speaking about, it resounded with confidence and authority, leaving little room for vulnerability.

But as soon as Joe saw me, he said, “Hey, Vince. Good, I'm glad you're here. I told Chris I wanted to talk to you.” Joe went on to tell me that although he had always been confident that God exists in some way, he was finding himself increasingly scared about what comes next.

As we spoke, what became clear to me was that Joe’s understanding of the central message of Christianity, of what it takes to be right with God, was that you should try to do more good than bad in your life, and then just hope that in the end your good deeds will outweigh your bad deeds. If they do, something wonderful awaits. But if they don’t, you’re in trouble. And as Joe reflected back over his life, he recognized that if that was the case, then he, like the rest of us, had reason to fear.

Never was I so incredibly thankful to be sitting before someone as a Christian. Other ways of seeing the world would have had nothing to say. As an atheist, I would have had to say there is no hope at all beyond the grave. If I adhered to almost any other religion, I would have had to tell Joe that he was basically right and had every reason to fear what was next.

Only as a Christian could I explain to Joe for the first time that while Christianity does say that God wants us to do good, that is not what makes us right with God. I was able to share with him that the message of Christianity is that what makes us right with God has nothing to do with anything we do or ever could do, but rather with what Jesus has already done—once, and in full, and for all. I explained that if we trust in Jesus Christ, we no longer need to fear judgment, because on the cross Jesus has already taken the judgment for everything we have ever done or will ever do wrong.

I explained this at length, and when I asked Joe if this made sense, he responded—in classic New Jersey fashion—“That’s a hell of a realization.” Emphatically he said it again, “That’s a hell of a realization,” and then continued, “Sixty-nine years and I never thought of that. I thought Christianity was one thing, but it was something else entirely.” There was an extended pause, and then Joe said, “You know, Vince, you spend your whole life trying to make up for your [mess ups], but this finally explains how we can deal with guilt.”

I asked Joe if he wanted to pray with me to accept this gift from God—to trust in Christ’s sacrifice and not in our own works—and he said he did, and with great conviction he thrust out his arm to me. We clasped hands, and we wept, and we prayed, and as we finished praying he exclaimed aloud, “Amen.”

Joe asked me if my wife, Jo, knew this great truth about Christianity as well. I said she did, and he said, “It must be a happy life.” And then, after a thoughtful pause, “Now I’m actually looking forward to what’s next.”

When Joe’s family saw him the next day and asked how he was, for the first time in a long time he responded, “Wonderful.” The transformation in him was so visible that his family called me
Each one of us is going to deal with significant suffering in our lives. And, one day, each of us is going to have to deal with the reality of death. When suffering comes, when death comes, who will bear it with us? Who will see us through it?

immediately and wanted to know every word that I had shared with him.

Life after death, on its own, does not bring hope. Only grace brings hope. I know of no grace as extravagant as the grace of Jesus Christ. And as grace upon grace—because Jesus has already done everything necessary for us to be right with God—this greatest of all hopes can be received with a simple heartfelt prayer.

I have suggested that the rationality of Christian faith is not undermined by the existence of evil and suffering. But the challenge suffering poses to belief in God is not the only problem of suffering. There’s also the problem of how we’re going to deal with suffering, and that’s a problem for every one of us, regardless of what we do or do not believe about God.

Some think the problem of suffering should push us away from God. For me, it’s precisely because I feel the problem of suffering so severely that I am led to trust a God who can do something about it.

Each one of us is going to deal with significant suffering in our lives. And, one day, each of us is going to have to deal with the reality of death. When suffering comes, when death comes, who will bear it with us? Who will see us through it?

Jesus will, if we ask Him to. He won’t force Himself into our lives. But if we invite Him, then we will never be alone in our suffering, and we can trust that we will spend eternity in a place where suffering will be no more.

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2 In the original Hebrew, the names are ḫwרח (“Eve”) and ḫwיה (“Yahweh”). I do not mean to imply here that Adam knew the name “Yahweh” when he named Eve.

3 Friedrich W. Nietzsche and Francis Golffing (translator), The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 30. This quotation is taken from The Birth of Tragedy.
We are living in an era when apologetics is indispensable, but at the same time, we need a Christian apologetic that is not merely heard—it must also be seen. The field of apologetics deals with the hard questions posed to the Christian faith. Having had deep questions myself, I listen carefully to the questions raised. I always bear in mind that behind every question is a questioner. The convergence of intellectual and existential struggles drives a person to a brutal honesty in the questions they have.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is beautiful and true, yet oftentimes one will ask, “How can it be true that there is only one way?” Odd, isn’t it, that we don’t ask the same questions of the laws of nature or of any assertion that lays claim to truth. We are discomfited by the fact that truth, by definition, is exclusive. That is what truth claims are at their core. To make an assertion is to deny its opposite. Rather than complain that there is only one way, shouldn’t we be delighted that there is one way?

The question really is, how do we really know this is the truth?

Whether Hitler or Hugh Hefner, religious or irreligious, everyone has a worldview. A worldview basically offers answers to four necessary questions: origin, meaning, morality, and destiny. In turn, these answers must be correspondingly true on particular questions and, as a whole, all answers put together must be coherent.

Taking it a step further, the three tests for truth must be applied to any worldview: logical consistency, empirical adequacy, and experiential relevance. When submitted to these tests, the Christian message is utterly unique and meets the demand for truth.

Consider the empirical test of the person, teaching, and work of Jesus Christ. A look at human history shows why He was who He claimed to be and why millions follow Him today. A comparison of Jesus’s teachings with any other claimant to divine or prophetic status quickly shows the profound differences in their claims and demonstrations. In fact, none except Jesus even claimed to be the divine Savior. His offer of grace and forgiveness by being the perfect sacrifice of our offense is profoundly unique.

I position the sequence of fact and deduction in the following way: Love is the supreme ethic. Where there is the possibility of love, there must be the reality of free will. Where there is the reality of free will, there will inevitably be the possibility of sin. Where there is sin, there is the need for a Savior. Where there is a Savior, there is the hope for redemption. Only in the Judeo-Christian worldview does this sequence find its total expression and answer. The story from sin to redemption is only in the gospel with the ultimate provision of a loving God.

But the question can be pushed back further. Does this not all assume that there is a God? Yes, it does, and there are four stages in the argument. The first is that no matter how we section physical
concrete reality, we end up with a quantity that cannot explain its own existence. If all material quantities cannot explain their own existence, the only possibility for self-explanation would be something that is non-material.

Secondly, wherever we see intelligibility, we find intelligence behind it. Thirdly, we intuitively know that our moral reasoning points to a moral framework within the universe. The very fact that the problem of evil is raised either by people or about people intimates that human beings have intrinsic worth. Fourthly, the human experience in history and personal encounter sustains the reality of the supernatural.

There you have it. Who is God? He is the nonphysical, intelligent, moral first cause, who has given us intrinsic worth and who we can know by personal experience.

The verification of what Jesus taught and described and did make belief in Him a very rationally tenable and an existentially fulfilling reality. From cosmology to history to human experience, the Christian faith presents explanatory power in a way no other worldview does. Our faith and trust in Christ is reasonably grounded and experientially sustained.

I often put it this way: God has put enough into this world to make faith in Him a most reasonable thing. But He has left enough out to make it impossible to live by sheer reason alone. Faith and reason must always work together in that plausible blend.

Many of you may be familiar with my own story. I was born to Indian parents and raised in India. My ancestors were priests from the highest caste of Hinduism in India’s Deep South. But that was several generations ago. I came to Christ after a life of protracted failure and unable to face the consequences, sought to end it all. It was on a bed of suicide that a Bible was brought to me and in a cry of desperation, I invited Jesus Christ into my life. It was a prayer, a plea, a commitment, and a hope.

Love is the supreme ethic. Where there is the possibility of love, there must be the reality of free will. Where there is the reality of free will, there will inevitably be the possibility of sin.

That was fifty years ago. I hardly knew what lay ahead of me, except that I was safe in Christ’s hands. Now as the years have gone by and in 2014 we celebrate thirty years of ministry at RZIM, I marvel at the grace and protection of God and the doors He has opened for our team. And more and more, I am convinced that Jesus Christ alone uniquely answers the deepest questions of our hearts and minds.

Warm Regards,

Ravi
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HELPING THE THINKER BELIEVE. HELPING THE BELIEVER THINK.
“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

—Isaiah 55:8–9