

*Where Is God When Children Are Abused?*

Psalm 35:17-25; Job 1:6-19; Matthew 4:1-11

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“How long, O Lord, will you look on? (Ps 35:17). You have seen, O Lord, do not be silent! O Lord, do not be far from me! Wake up!” (22-23).

A little over a year ago, in Paradise, California, little Lydia Schatz, aged seven, was beaten to death by her adoptive parents. According to the official report, she was beaten because she mispronounced a word during her home schooling session. She was beaten because her parents...her parents... said that God wished it; and because the book they followed, “To Train Up a Child” by No Greater Joy Ministries, no less, encouraged them to. For seven consecutive hours Kevin and Elizabeth Schatz flogged their daughter with a plumbing supply tube fashioned after a Biblical rod, lashing Lydia again and again ultimately to her death. Court records indicate that the only time they ceased striking her was for prayer, but evidently little Lydia’s prayers were never answered.

“How long, O Lord, will you look on? You have seen, O Lord, do not be silent! O Lord, do not be far from me! Wake up!”

A little over a day ago, in Maaret al-Numan, Syria, Sheikh Mohammed Fardoun lost 18 family members in a single blast... eighteen... when an airstrike leveled his aunt’s house. Nearby, a 12 year-old girl lost her pregnant mom and both of her siblings when a shell exploded into their home. The UN estimates that more than 1,400 children have been killed inside Syria over the past year, and many more maimed: boys as young as ten imprisoned and tortured.

“How long, O Lord, will you look on? You have seen, O Lord, do not be silent! O Lord, do not be far from me! Wake up!”

Just how many souls throughout history have whispered or screamed this prayer only to be met with divine silence? Where is God when children are abused, when predators roam campuses, when mothers emotionally damage and fathers physically scar? Where is God when anyone is abused; when these unspeakable horrors occur? And what possible answers can we even dare to articulate when confronted with his huge and most damning of questions?

Well, many answers have been given, but to unpack each of them would have us lingering us on a topic none of us want to linger on. So, let us examine the three most popular solutions, identifying their strengths and indeed their weaknesses.

- Solution #1: Life is a test and nothing happens devoid of reason. Our fates have been determined, our paths and challenges elected by God. And it’s what we make of those paths, and indeed the hardships, that will ultimately judge how our life is to be measured. Therefore, God might not prevent child abuse, but will be at work in the abuse so to improve him/her down the road.

According to the internet authority... *Yahoo! Answers*... this is the best resolution to our big question. And certainly, there are annals upon annals of anecdotal evidence that could verify this claim. For we all know people who have matured and bettered themselves after going through a rough time; people who have surrendered control to God after they had first destroyed their body with controlled substances; children even who have emerged happier and well-adjusted after treading through the muddiest rivers of parental divorce. Sure, we can all name people like that, and praise God that we can!

But... what about Lydia and those 1,400 in Syria, and all those who have shared their story; what exactly was the test for them when there was no chance or opportunity for passing? How can one's life be considered an exam when before they can even write their name they've already been erased? See, this answer which says that life is a designed test only really works for those counted amongst the living, those who have survived or those who remain... and yet even for them, it doesn't always mean that life is at all still worth living.

Take the book of Job for example. Even though in the end Job is "rewarded" for all of the abuse and heartache he had to go through, he still died *old and full of days*, in what can only be inferred as a state of reflective disharmony. And lest we forget, Job's beginning (the designated resource for "life being a test") wasn't that all that pleasant either. For you might recall from our text this morning that poor Job found himself squarely in the middle of a divine bragging contest.

Picking up from verse seven: Satan appears before God talking a little trash, boasting a little about where he's been and what he's been up to, and God is like, yeah, "But what about my servant, Job. You haven't gotten to him!" Satan answers, "Yeah, that's because you've put a wall around him; of course he's got nothing wrong or anything to complain about." Overtaken with bravado God says, "Even if I take those walls down, you still couldn't touch him; he'll only ever worship me." And thus a divine wage was forged between God and Satan simply to prove a point. God... yes, God handed Job over to become evil's pawn, all to see if he could pass a test and prove him right. And because of this test, Job lost everything... his livestock, his servants, his wife, his children. Yeah, that's a necessary test there, God, benevolent through and through.

Even if we take the scholarly approach and dive deeper into the text, God still emerges as the man behind the curtain of Job's suffering. For you see, the translation "Satan" is rather loose in its academic integrity as the Hebrew word employed here is actually *ha'satan*, or *the satan*. Not a proper name, but rather a title describing a function. Thus, several commentaries suggest that it'd be more accurate to think of *ha'satan*/Satan not as the Devil, nor as a divine adversary, but rather as God's divine instrument. So that when you read verse seven and *hasatan's* response to where he's been and what he's been up to, and you wonder why it's so casual in tone, it's because he's simply reporting back to his boss who had put him there to begin with – to carry out his appointed role as accuser and judge of the righteousness of humanity.

Is this really then the best answer to our question? Do we really want to believe that God has commissioned *ha'satan* to accuse and judge us, to even inflict pain and death upon our loved ones, just to see if we can pass a test so God can cover his celestial bets?

No thanks.

- Solution #2: Satan is real and has dominion over this Earth. God and Satan are fighting for our allegiances, and we have been given the freedom to choose right over wrong, good over evil, God over the Devil. Therefore, when children are abused, it is either because Satan has won influence over our corruptible humanity, or that a corruptible soul has freely elected to pursue evil.

Obviously, the first half of this answer presupposes that you believe in the Devil's existence, which is a question in and of itself. Kind of like the Screwtape Letters played out in real life, many believe that the root of our evil stems explicitly from foreign persuasions beyond our control.

Additionally, it supposes that God is not necessarily stronger than the Devil, rather that both have legitimate power when vying over our earthly consciences. Our text from Matthew, especially in verses 8-10, supports this claim. You might remember that as Jesus is in the wilderness, he is taken to a high mountain and shown all of the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. Satan says, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me (v.9)," implying then that these kingdoms are under his command, not Christ's, nor God's.

Now, the first problem with this answer is that if God is omnipotent, as we say he is, then why not just remove Satan and his temptations from this world? Why stay on equal footing? Knowing that we are corruptible in our humanity, why allow for such a demon to roam the Earth, controlling both individuals and empires that can be put to such ill use? Or is this once again all part of a grand test, to see who among us will be strong enough to dismiss Satan as Christ himself did in the wilderness? But that, in and of itself, would imply that God has indeed allowed Satan to do as he pleases, perpetrating abuses wherever he chooses. So either way, God here is either impotent or indifferent and surely that's a theological problem.

The next problem is that this answer provides child abusers with an excuse clause. "It wasn't me! It was Satan that made me do it!" It strips us of our accountability and responsibility to our other, for it suggests that the evil we've done wasn't really our own but that from the supernatural forces that surround and supposedly control us. It also suggests that God is tied up in a corner when Satan is coercing someone to abuse a child, or commit any other sin for that matter.

The last problem harkens back to the problems we had with the first answer; namely, that if God is the giver of free will, then God willfully opened the door for sinful behavior to exist, including the darkest forms of child abuse. In doing so, it puts into question God's omniscience and benevolence, for God should have known what was to come when that freedom escaped from his Pandora's box.

It's because of the inconsistencies and uncomfortable conclusions of these first two answers that many find comfort in solution number three.

- Solution #3. Either a) God does not exist; b) has retired; or c) is active in a manner that is unorthodox to how we normally conceive of him.

a) is uncomfortably clean and simple, for it argues that God allows child abuse to occur simply because there is no God to begin with. And with God and cosmic benevolence out of the picture, then so goes an objective and universal code for morality. And without an objective morality, then there is nothing left to impede these abuses outside of the threat of societal law.

Knowing however, that the majority of us here are not atheists, let us examine parts b) and c) and finally get out of here. The idea that God has retired is not new, nor however is it usually preached. For it looks at the world, witnesses all of the evil and despair, and says there is simply no way that God can still be active, for that would suggest that God has been willfully blind, or at least impotent, to the millions who unjustly suffer day in and day out. Rather, God must be rendered something radically different than that which has been normally conceived.

And scripture actually supports this radical rethinking. For in John 14, perhaps our most radical gospel, Christ tells the disciples during his farewell discourse that when he leaves, the Advocate/Spirit of Truth will come and it will be this spirit that lives both with and *in* them. Christ makes it clear however that this spirit will teach and comfort, but it will not act. It will internally aid, but it will not force their hand or their mouth. More, Christ tells that the world at large will not even see or know that this spirit exists, principally because there will always be those who freely choose both sin and hatred and thereby reject it. Thus, the Advocate will only abide in those who are pure and innocent, those who righteously believe, those who live according to Christ's commandments of love and peace.

Accordingly, the reason why child abuse persists is because God and Jesus have left our world and that only the Advocate remains -- who is not known by everybody; who does not determine or impose upon our actions; but who rather comforts as it abides within.

Now, is this really the best answer? I don't know...

Well why wouldn't Christ just return and make it easy? I don't know...

Why won't God intervene then; I mean, how long can he look on in silence!? I don't know...

But this Advocate isn't enough... I know...

Where is God when children are abused?

I can't say with any certainty, nor can anyone I think. But I do believe that our unseen God is in fact there with them... in spirit... abused and crying with them; suffering with them; living; dying and yes, even being reborn with them.

God is present *within* our children, perhaps just not in the manner or strength we would always hope.

Amen.