

Made For Adversity

Romans 9:24

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

"Well, I'd believe in a loving God if it weren't for the problem of evil." That's a well-known statement that we've probably made ourselves and we certainly heard others make. The real reason why we don't want to believe in a loving God is, we don't want anyone else to run our lives and this problem of evil that we call one of our intellectual problems is usually just a smoke screen to cover our own unwillingness to admit that there's anyone else who has a right to run our lives. Yet you know that that's a well known intellectual objection that we've made ourselves to believing in God, and that others make.

How could a loving God allow evil to continue to exist in His world? If He is loving and almighty and good, then He surely could not do that. If He allows it to exist then it must be because He can't stop it. So, He isn't almighty and if He wills it to exist then He cannot be loving, so that's the problem we have.

How could a loving almighty God let evil exist in His world? How could He ever allow an archipelago of prison camps to destroy millions and millions of people in Russia? How could He ever allow an evil man like Hitler to gas millions and millions of Jews? And yet we all know why in our own experience.

Every one of us here who has had responsibility for bringing up children or even those of us who have been responsible for teaching children or for training and guiding any other person, know that there are two ways you can do it. One -- you can imprison them in a protected sterile environment where evil cannot possibly get at them. Or secondly, you can allow them to go out to school, out into society, out into the world and to exercise their own free wills to reject the powers and influences of evil as they come to them. You know which choice we have all made.

We know there is no possibility of producing a live, whole human being with a free will who will be able to choose what is best for him unless you send them out into the midst of influences, of powers and forces that are not always the best for him because at least it gives him the opportunity to exercise his free will. We all have made the choice. All of us here have made the choice already in our schools, in the way we run our families -- we have made the choice.

We have determined that freedom of the will is a more precious thing than freedom from pain or freedom from suffering. We've said that freedom of the will is something that is worth preserving above everything else. We in our country of course, especially stand for freedom. Really that's the same situation God was faced with once He determined that He would create people who would be like Himself: free, have free wills and who would therefore be free to choose to be His friends and to live in love with Him forever. Once God determined that, He opened the gate to the Hitlers and the Stalins. He opened the gate to the Machiavellis. He opened the door to the possibility of some people refusing to choose His friendship, refusing to choose His love and determining to live for themselves and therefore to inflict tremendous pain and suffering on others.

Loved ones, do you see that the first time God would ever have come down into that bunker in Berlin and coerced Hitler's will, even if nobody had known about it, the first moment God had come down

into that headquarters that Hitler had in Berlin and had coerced his will even a little, to stop the command to kill even one person, that moment free will would have disappeared from the face of the earth and the possibility of us ever coming to love God because we chose to and wanted to, would have been forever removed from life here on earth and probably in the universe itself?

So once the Father determined to create us for the very best that He knew, to be people who loved Him freely because they wanted to and not because they had no other alternatives, that moment God opened the way to many of us refusing that and in fact making ourselves God and therefore producing evil in this universe and that really is what has happened.

So there are many theists. A theist is one who believes that there is some kind of supreme being but they don't know what He or it is like. So many theists accept the existence of evil as a necessary nuisance or a necessary inconvenience or a necessary unpleasantness, if we are going to have the possibility of free will here in the universe. That's the attitude they take.

They say, "All right, it's a less than the best way to ensure that we have free will to choose. It's not the best we could hope for, it's a nuisance, evil is a necessary nuisance and inconvenience. It's a necessary phenomenon that we have to put up within our world if we're going to have the possibility of free will here."

The interesting thing is that many of us who call ourselves children of God, we have that same attitude to evil. We have the same attitude as theists. We say, "Well, it's certainly not the best but we have to put up with it if we're going to have free will. So evil is an unpleasant experience that we have to face", and it's interesting that that reflects in our day-to-day attitude to all kinds of little evils that come into our lives, not just the big evils like communism overwhelming the country or being inflicted with sickness of some kind but the little inconveniences that come into our lives day-by-day, that's the kind of attitude we have to them.

We have the kind of attitude that comes from feeling that evil is a necessary nuisance and inconvenience that we would be better without. That's why we get irritated and why we get exasperated when we can't find the sweater or the shoes that we placed carefully in one position in our bedroom for the appointment that we had to make tonight and the chaotic carelessness of our roommate has taken care of our perfect placing of that sweater or shoes. That's why we get irritated or exasperated with them.

We think, "This is an unfair intrusion on the otherwise perfect, flawless plan that God has for my life." That's why we regard ourselves as valiant martyrs when we find we have relatives -- even husbands or wives -- but relatives of any kind that irk us and that frustrate our lives and that limit the possibilities of our futures. That's why we get exasperated with them. Why we think we are valiant martyrs to put up with them. Because actually we are taking a theistic attitude to evil that it is a necessary evil, that it is a necessary inconvenience and nuisance that spoils the otherwise flawless, perfect, cloudless plan that God has for our lives and that's why we get exasperated and irritated when the flat occurs on our way to the barbeque. That's why we get irked and exasperated when we find someone doing something that affects our lives adversely.

We regard it as something that we should just not have to put up with. I mean, our dear God certainly didn't intend us to be inconvenienced in this way, and so we have an attitude that resents every impact that evil or inconvenience makes upon our lives. We're always involved in the old cry of Adam, you know, "Oh well, it wasn't me Lord. It was the woman that Thou gavest to be with me in

the garden. She gave me of the fruit and I did eat."

It is interesting how many of us here spend how many hours each week pointing out how somebody else has caused us to experience this or to have to do that. It's interesting how many of us spend our lives blaming other people or blaming other circumstances or blaming other events and we're very sharp, we put it all under the general heading of evil. It's evil. Evil powers are trying to spoil my life and that's why I fail.

It is very interesting you know, that's completely different from the attitude that our dear Father takes towards evil. Our dear Father in heaven and Jesus, His Son, they never regard anything as something to be resented. They never regard anything as something that cannot be handled. They never regard anything -- especially as pervasive a thing as evil -- as something that you should not work into the whole plan for your life and in fact that's what God has done. He has taken a whole positive attitude to evil and He expresses it, you remember, if you like to look at it in Romans 9:22. And it is so different loved ones, from our carping, complaining attitude.

Romans 9:22, "What if God, desiring to show His wrath and to make known His power", -- so He certainly wants to do that. He doesn't agree with evil. He didn't create evil. He doesn't want it. He hates with all His heart every angry word that has been spoken, every wrathful act that has destroyed a life. So He wants to show His wrath and to make known His power when He faces a person like Hitler or He faces something that's coming into your life and spoiling it but, "What if God, desiring to show His wrath and to make known His power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction."

So God faces them with absolute patience. He accepts them as part of the permissive plan that He has now allowed to come about in the universe and that's the negative side finished with. That's the only amount of negativeness that God expresses, that's it finished with, all the rest is positive. Why? "In order to make known the riches of His glory for the vessels of mercy, which He has prepared beforehand for glory."

In other words, God allows powers of evil to continue so that He may have the opportunity to lend His life and His strength and His courage to the victims of that evil, so that they, in turn, will become more like Him and so God and Jesus have none of this down at the mouth, let's grin and bear it, let's put up with an attitude to evil. They embrace it with joy because they devise another plan for it and what Satan and others intend for your harm, God intends for your good.

So God allows Hitler to imprison Corrie Ten Boom in a concentration camp so that she will reach up to Jesus for the love which He alone can give her for the Gestapo and for her warders and then she expresses that love to them in her own life and in her books and the general result is that the very character of God is more fully and strongly expressed in His world than it would have been, had God destroyed Hitler the moment He was born and that's the attitude that God and Jesus take to evil.

They accept evil in the world as something that they did not originally plan but as something that is a necessary component of free will, and then they work it into the beautiful plan that they have for us in our own lives, and it was the same with the Jews, you remember. That's what they did with the Jews.

It's Exodus 16. You remember God could presumably have destroyed Pharaoh and Jews would not have had to endure any kind of slavery at all, and you remember the Jews of course complained and said, "Oh

we wish we died in Egypt. We have now nothing to eat."

Exodus 16:6, "So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, 'At evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord because He has heard your murmurings against the Lord.'" So they said, "You'll see the glory of the Lord in the morning", and then Exodus 16:13, you remember how it came about.

Exodus 16:13, "In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning dew lay round about to camp. And when the dew had gone up there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as hoarfrost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it?' For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, 'It is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat'".

So God allowed the Jews to be enslaved in Egypt and allowed Pharaoh to drive them out so that they had to go into the wilderness, so that they would be without any food, so that God Himself could allow His life to become glory, which means a tangible, touchable, visible proof that God's life is real and that's exactly what happened.

The very thing they needed was bread, that's what God's life became and so God allowed them to endure what the vessels of wrath had inflicted upon them so that He could lend to them His life in a way that would be real, just the same way as Thomas put his fingers into Jesus' hands and felt for himself, "Yeah, this is the glory of the Lord. This is the Lord alive in our world, in an empirical way that I can see and touch", just as he put his hands into Jesus' side and said, "Yeah, I can feel, this is not a ghost, this is a real live human being, this is touchable, tangible proof that God is alive", so that is what God did with the Jews.

He allowed Pharaoh to continue to exist. He endured that vessel of wrath. He allowed evil to continue to exist and instead of destroying free will, by destroying that power of evil, He Himself came into the situation and made available to the victim of that power of evil, His own life in a tangible, touchable way and now we come to today's verse loved ones and it's Romans 9:24.

Romans 9:23-24, "in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which He has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles." So God allows the power of evil to continue in the Jewish lives so that he can make known His life in a tangible way that they will understand when they need it and so with you, so in your life, that's what the verse says, "us too".

You see every one of us in this room have a natural tendency to respond, "Me? No, no, wait a minute. I believe, I believe in God's love. He doesn't need to show me. I believe. I believe and I can see how He had to deal with those old recalcitrant Jews, I mean they wouldn't believe, they wouldn't believe, and so He had to allow Pharaoh to come right down there and oppress them so they had to be thrown out into the wilderness. Boy, I can see that and I believe your whole explanation of the problem of evil is beautiful. I believe it and no, no, I don't need that kind of experience, no, not me. No, God doesn't -- really, Lord, you don't need to prove it. You don't need to prove it to me. I'll just continue to pray 'deliver me from evil' and that's good, deliver me from evil. I don't want to touch evil. Don't let it touch me Lord because I believe you'd be right there if I needed you", and that's our attitude you know we think we believe it.

We think we believe it and yet what is the worst evil in the world? Is the worst evil pain? Is the

worst evil sickness? Is the worst evil poverty? Is the worst evil loneliness? Are those the evils that we really need to be delivered from?

Loved ones, there's an evil far worse than that and if you just look back to Exodus, I'd show you it and it's one we read, it's the verse we read last time, Exodus 16:1-3, and it's the start of that historical record, really.

Exodus 16:1-3, "They set out" - as the Israelites set out- "from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. And the whole congregation of the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness and said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the flesh pots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." That's sin, that's the worst evil: self-sufficiency. And I know you all say, "We're different", but loved ones, we're just the same as those old Israelites.

We'll settle even for a limited happiness or a limited security as long as it is under our control, that's it. We'd rather have the flesh pots and the slavery back in Egypt, we'd rather put up with those as long as they're under our control but we hate to be driven beyond our own resources and that's why we dislike evil so much when it touches our lives, that's why we hate it.

We hate to be driven out beyond our own resources. We are miserable, petty, small-minded little creatures that want to be our own God and we want to have our own little universe and we want to be able to control it and so what if it's not the wonderful, magnificent experience that our Creator planned for us, "Well, at least it's something that I can control. At least it means I don't have to depend on somebody else."

You know the reluctance that you felt when you first learned to float on water and you put yourself back, you remember, and you tried to lie back and boy, you didn't want to get your feet off the bottom, that's really typical of our whole lives. We don't like to be driven beyond ourselves.

We like to have things in our own control and do you see that's the heart of sin because God's whole plan was that we would never live this life on our own. We would never live it by our own resources, never live it by our own power. His plan was that we would be forced by the exigencies of this life to reach out beyond ourselves to Him and that's how He uses evil.

He didn't create evil but He allows it to touch our lives because it drives us beyond our own resources and beyond our own abilities and it drives us beyond our self-sufficiency. Really, we're all like the old man that was walking along the road with a great bundle of wood on his back and a passing farmer in a donkey-cart stopped and said, "Do you want a ride?", and the old man said, "Yeah, I'd be really grateful", and he got up onto the donkey-cart with the farmer.

After about a quarter of a mile, the farmer looked around and the old guy was sitting in the big bundle of wood, was sitting on his knees and he said, "Why don't you put that wood down on the back of the cart and relax and rest", and the old guy said to the farmer, "Oh no, you and your donkey have been so good giving me a ride but I wouldn't ask you both to carry my wood as well", and you know we know that this body here came from God, we know it and we know it's His spaceship we're riding on throughout the universe everyday, we know that.

We know it's His air, we know that without His Spirit the whole atom structure would blow apart, we know that and yet we still want to carry our own wood. We still want to persuade ourselves, "Yeah, well He may have given me that, that, that and that, but I can do this for myself", and really we all want to be a little bit of God in our own lives and we just hate it when we're driven beyond ourselves and so instead of taking of God's life and becoming a mass of gigantic princes and princesses that will bestride the world, we end up stunted little dwarfs who muddle our way through our own lives with our own very limited resources.

What we don't realize is that every time God allows evil to touch us, He is trying to blow us out of that, He is trying to make it as big as it is His plan for us. Loved ones, we were made to work in cooperative dependence on the life of God. You do not have all the resources you need, you do not have all the patience you need, you don't have all the love you need, you don't have all the kindness you need, you don't have all the gentleness you need and God knows that and He has it to give you and there are countless times when you come into situations where you find that you have to go beyond yourself and that's when He wants you to reach out and actually we all know this, we know this.

When is life most vital, you tell me? When is life most vital? When are you most alive? When are you most alive? When are all your powers most alive and alert? You know it, in the midst of danger, in the midst of impending disaster, when things seem beyond you there's some spirit that seems to come down, isn't there, and you seem to live more fully and wholly at that time than ever before.

I really think that's why there's a lot of silly talk about Vietnam and about war but I do believe that many men and women lived more fully and really when they were driven beyond themselves. Oh there's just one of the most pathetic letters you know, that I've ever read in the London Times. It appears in May 5 edition and the Menon Gate is in Belgium and in the first World War, if you remember, there were eight million of the best and the youngest men of all nations you know, that were just slaughtered.

It's incredible when you think of the limited weapons we had in that war, how many people were slaughtered, and so in Belgium, millions and millions were slaughtered and were put into graves but there were millions whose bodies were not found and the Belgians have put up a massive memorial to them and at a certain time in the dusk in the late evening, every day since the 1480 war ended, there is a bugler that comes out and plays "The Last Post" in memory of these men that died defending Belgium and the traffic stops and this man writes, "Yesterday I stood at the Menon Gate and listened with overwhelming emotion to the sounding of "The Last Post". As the haunting notes of the bugler's echoed off the walls of the thousands and thousands of British dead, I was overcome with a feeling of shame for the lazy, greedy, tax-fiddling, strike-ridden, bureaucratic, vandalized country we have created. Whatever the military folly of their sacrifice they made it, whilst at going down of the sun, I was remembering them, I was thankful they could not speak to me, for what could I have said of England?", and you think of our own country and you think of how we rise at a moment of danger and how we seem to stretch beyond ourselves when things are too big for us to handle ourselves and there seems something divine comes down to us in those moments.

I am not arguing for war but do you see that when you come into situations that are beyond you, those are the most precious moments of life and when you come up against that person who tries you beyond your own patience, that is the moment when you're beginning to lift into life, that is the moment when God expects you to look up and see His Son standing above the world with the world under His feet and with all the patience that you will need and He expects you to call upon Him for the

patience that you need at that moment and to act in the strength and the power of Jesus' own life.

When you're fired unfairly from your job and you find that you do not have the courage for the future and you do not have the ability to take this with peace of mind, that's the moment when God has allowed evil to touch you in order to drive you beyond your own resources, to look up to Jesus and say, "Lord, I don't know where the next penny is coming from but I know that you have promised that you will supply every need and so Lord, on the basis of that promise, I am going to act in peace, not on the basis of my own plans because I have none but on the basis of your promise."

It's the same loved ones, when somebody's greed and cruelty destroys your finances. It's the same. From a human point of view, all you can do is strike out against them or retaliate - but it is at that moment when God has allowed evil to touch you and to drive you beyond your own patience and your own kindness that He expects you to look up to Him and receive the only kindness and the only love that will do any redeeming work in the other person.

Loved ones, when people ignore you and walk over the top of you and despise you and are contemptuous of you and your own human humility is not strong enough to bear it, at that moment, God expects you to look up to His Son and to receive from Him the humility that will enable you to accept that and that's the beautiful plan that God has for evil in our lives, not His original plan at all but do you see how beautifully He works it in?

How do you make a weight lifter? Oh well, put him on the Daytona Beach, day after day after day and give him gallons of Coca Cola and ice cream and chocolate, no, no. That'll destroy him. The only way to make a weight lifter is to make him lift weights, that's the only way. He has to lift weights each day, lifting something a little beyond what he is able to lift the day before and that's how he grows strong as a weight lifter. The only way for you to receive the life of God is to come into situations where you cannot do without it, and that's exactly what Jesus does.

He allows you to come into trial after trial that is just a little beyond you but there is no trial come upon you beyond what you're able to bear. Loved ones, I think you have to look at that because some of you are going through it now and I think you need to look at the verse. It's First Corinthians 10:13.

First Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you", and the Greek word is translated 'temptation' or 'trial' you see. So, "No temptation [or trial] has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful and He will not let you be tempted [or tried] beyond your strength but with the temptation, [with the trial] will also provide the way of escape", He'll provide His own strength that you may be able to endure it, and that's why the children of God counted it as pure joy when they enter into various trials because they know that every time evil touches them, it is a sign that more of God's life is on its way to them and that's it.

So every time something happens that you didn't expect, every time inconvenience comes, every time somebody does something that hurts you or impairs the happiness of your life, see, "Ah Lord, you're sending me a messenger to tell me that you're going to give me some new life in a moment", that's it, but don't respond to it as if the Lord doesn't know about this and this is something that has happened to me that ought not to happen and all I can do is grit my teeth and resent it, no.

It's something that God has worked into His plan and it's something that signals to you that He has some more of His life to give you that you've not had in the past. So loved ones, would you begin

that way? Would you begin doing that this week? Don't go out with all kinds of wonderful dreams, begin to do that this week, okay?

First time you get a flat on the car, all right, the first time the boss treats you unjustly, the first time that loved one at home once more shows you how limited your life is going to be as long as you are tied to them, the first time it happens, look up to Jesus and say, "Lord, I do not have the grace and the strength to face this. Lord, I call upon You now, give it to me, will You", and He will, He will, He'll be faithful. Let us pray.

Father, I thank You that You have promised us all that grace that we need in time of trial and we would all thank You Father that evil is not some wildcat planet that You cannot use. However produced it is by the free rebellious will of someone else, yet You are able to use it in order to bring us beyond ourselves, to drive us beyond our own petty little resources and drive us into Your arms. So Lord, thank You.

Thank you that we have the choice with every inconvenience and every piece of evil that touches us of either resenting it and allowing it to spoil our day and our weeks and our lives or of welcoming it with pure joy, knowing that you do not give us a weight to bear unless you're going to give us the strength to bear it. Thank you, Lord.

Thank you that in this way, we grow bigger than we are and we will become the kind of princes and princesses that You designed us to be, who live off the royal life of the king. Thank you, Lord. Thank you. The grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and throughout this weekend, throughout every trial, until we see Jesus face to face. Amen.