The Theodicy of John Wesley

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From time immemorial to the present theologians have debated the question of theodicy, by which is meant the justification of divine providence, the reconciliation of the existence of evil with the goodness and sovereignty of God. It is not surprising then to find that John Wesley attempts a solution to this problem in his sermon entitled "God's Love to Fallen Man," using as his text Romans 5:15: "Not as the offence, so also is the free gift."

Near the beginning of the sermon Wesley declares that it is exceedingly strange that hardly anything had been written on the subject. This is a bit surprising from a man so well read as the founder of Methodism. The question was raised in Job, it was debated by Plato and the Stoics, by Plotinus, Augustine, Giordano Bruno and Jakob Boehme, all of whom lived before Wesley's day. The matter was raised by Kant and Hegel, who were more or less contemporary with him. Could it be to one of these Wesley refers when he writes in the sermon "that plausible account of the origin of evil, published to the world some years ago, and supposed to be unanswerable: that, 'it naturally results from the nature of matter, which God was not able to alter'? It is very kind of this sweet-tongued orator to make an excuse for God! But there is really no occasion for it: God hath answered for himself."

Wesley follows by stating that man abused his liberty, produced evil; brought pain into the world. This God permitted in order to bring forth a fuller manifestation of his wisdom, justice and mercy, to bestow an infinitely greater happiness than could have been obtained unless Adam had fallen. But let us permit Wesley to develop his own argument.

He opens by saying there has been more happiness and holiness in the world than there could have been had not Adam sinned, for, then, Christ would not have died, thus, not showing his amazing love to mankind, as an Advocate with the Father. There could have been no justification by faith and no re-
demption in the blood of Christ; he could not have been made God to us. Further, there would have been no room for love; we could not have known the power of the resurrection, nor the love of the Holy Spirit. The tragic error of our first parents opened the way for God's Son to die for us, and without this we would have lost the motive of brotherly love.

The entrance of evil into the world became the cause of suffering, yet, what are called "afflictions" in the language of men are, in the thought of God, blessings. If there had been no suffering then one of the most excellent parts of our religion would have been missing. It bequeaths the noblest of all Christian graces, love enduring all things, the ground of resignation to God. The sight worthy of God is to see a man struggling with adversity, and superior to it. By affliction our faith is tried, made acceptable to God.

By the coming of evil we cultivate the quieter virtues: patience, meekness, gentleness, longsuffering; otherwise, there would have been no returning good for evil. Adam's fall gave all posterity the opportunity of exercising the passive virtues and doing good in numberless instances, for, the more good we do the happier we will be.

If Adam had not fallen, then each individual would have been personally responsible for his wrongdoing to God; but by the death of Christ, to break the power of evil, every man now rests on the covenant of grace. By the Fall, God was compelled to send his Son into the world, otherwise we could not have known Christ in the flesh. By the birth, life and death of our Lord we have come to know the "unsearchable riches of Christ." Mercy now rejoices over judgment.

Having canvassed the earthly virtues that Wesley considers to have come through evil, he now proceeds to delineate the eternal values so derived. The most holy are those who have most successfully opposed sin, thus, they will shine brightest in heaven. Evil brought a train of woe which God's children have helped to combat by their good works, the reward for which they will receive in heaven. Wickedness entails suffering, but those who suffer with Christ shall also reign with him.

To sum up, and in conclusion, Wesley preaches that God permitted Adam's transgression in order that he might more fully manifest his wisdom, justice and mercy. By mankind conquering wickedness through the merits of Christ's death, the race has found a source of greater holiness and happiness than it could otherwise have known. While the ways of God may be unsearchable to us we can discern the general scheme
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of the divine plan running through all eternity.

It seems surprising that Wesley, so well versed in Scripture, did not see his argument answered from the Book. It is only necessary to refer to two texts: Romans 9:14, "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid." Galatians 2:17b, "Is Christ therefore the minister of sin? God forbid." Other verses could be cited.

But let Dr. Daniel Curry in an editorial in The Methodist Review, November, 1888, answer the founder of Methodism. John Wesley theodicy is a theological heresy, an unconscious variation from the truth. The doctrine of sin as taught in Sermon LXIV is obnoxious in its accumulated assumptions, a perversion of the Scriptures adduced to support it, and if adopted as explanatory of the world's irregularities must logically legitimate man's disaster and render atonement unnecessary and void, or a makeshift for mischief which might have been prevented. To declare the "unspeakable advantage" of the Fall, to speculate on the innumerable benefits of natural and moral evil; to condemn our repining of Adam's transgression as the source of earth's woes; and to insist that man should glorify God because He instituted sin as the instrument of suffering, and by suffering of final elevation, is a doctrine to be rejected.... If evil is constitutionally or instrumentally good, or it can be established that a sinful world is provisionally happier, it might be well to introduce the disciplinary regime of sin among the angels, for they are imperfect and distant from the perfections of God. A whiff of polluted atmosphere might sweep over the hills of immortality to good effect upon those who inhabit the heights.... Sin is the essentia opposition to God, He hates it, we hate it, and any defense of it savors of the pit whence it came.

Professor M. W. Terry, former professor of Christian Doctrine in Garrett Biblical Institute, commenting on the theodicy of Job, states that the book leaves the problem unsolved. In fact, it may not be successfully thought out by man. Many writers could be quoted as to the difficulty of finding a solution for evil. I like a line from Bernard Bosanquet, the English philosopher, in which he states, "This world is a place of soul making." W. N. Clarke in his Outline of Christian
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Doctrine observes, "This world is only a cradle of souls, the earliest school of an endless life." What we do not know here and now may be revealed to us in the hereafter when God makes all things plain.