

Where is God in tough times?

1.0. Introduction: three assumptions of an answer to the question

(1) The answer the question calls for is the answer properly given by Christian witness and theology.

(2) By "God," therefore, is to be understood the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and so the One implied by "the greatest and first commandment," which reads, according to the formulation of Jesus' teaching in Mt 22:37 f., "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." God is to be understood, in other words, as *the all-worshipful One*, the one reality worthy of unreserved trust and unqualified loyalty, and hence *the all-surpassing, unsurpassable reality*, "than which—in Anselm's words—none greater can be conceived."

(3) And by "tough times" is to be understood times that, for anyone trying to lead a human life, and for causes either more generally natural or more specifically historical, happen to be bad rather than good, unfortunate rather than fortunate, and therefore troubling or demanding, hard or difficult to live through.

2. An answer

2.1. *God is where God is in all times, tough or not tough—doing what God unfailingly does in every time.*

2.2. God unfailingly does mainly two things: (1) God makes whatever comes to be really possible, in fact as well as in principle; and (2) God makes whatever comes to be really real and also abidingly significant. In doing (1), God may be said to create and emancipate, or providentially order, all things; and in doing (2), God may be said to redeem and consummate all things. Because, in both cases, God's doing extends to *all* things, God is rightly said to be, in the one case, *the* Creator, and, in the other case, *the* Consummator—all other things being, in their myriad different ways, also creators and consummators, although always of only *some* things, never of all.

2.3. But if God in tough times is where God is in all times, doing what God alone unfailingly does in every time, two implications follow necessarily.

2.3.1. There is no more reason, logically, to ask where God is in tough times than in any other times, there being no logical connection whatever between the times of our lives, tough or otherwise, and the whereabouts of God. This is true, at any rate, if God is to be understood as we assumed at the outset, i.e., as *the all-worshipful One* of "the greatest and first commandment," and thus as *the unsurpassable One*, "than which none greater can be conceived." To worship is to trust and to be loyal—ideally, to trust unreservedly and to be loyal unqualifiedly. But worship is authorized only if the object of worship, of trust and loyalty, is worshipful—ideally, *all-worshipful*. And this the object of worship can be only if it is unsurpassable: absolutely unsurpassable, or unsurpassable by itself as well as all others, in all the respects in which anything can be so; and relatively unsurpassable, or unsurpassable by all others although not by itself, in all other respects. Although for any believer in God conceived as all-worshipful and therefore unsurpassable in these senses, good times are rightly accepted as tokens of God's reality and favor, they are in no way evidence of God's existence and activity and may not be logically taken to "prove" it. By the same token, bad times, or tough times, are in no way evidence of God's nonexistence or inactivity and "disprove" absolutely nothing that Christian witness and theology have any stake in affirming. The so-called problem of evil, understood as being in any way a disproof of God as Christian faith understands God, is, in point of fact, a pseudo-problem. It arises from a conception of God's "omnipotence" that is self-contradictory and therefore a pseudo-conception only, altogether apart from the fact, or the extent, of evil in the world. Anyhow, the only God about whose whereabouts the reality of evil could logically raise even the least problem, is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, not the God of "the greatest and first commandment," but an idol, a fetish, a non-God.

2.3.2. Our possibility as human beings before God is exactly the same in tough times as in any other times. Because God remains present and active in every time, we have the same possibility in tough times as in any other times of what I speak of, following Paul, as obedient faith, which is to say, entrusting ourselves unreservedly to God's pure, unbounded love and then living in unqualified loyalty to the cause of God's love, loving God with the whole of our being by loving all whom God always already loves, to whom God is always already loyal—by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

3.0. Conclusion: I submit that the most appropriate prayer for the present tough times, as for any other times, is the so-called serenity prayer commonly attributed to the great American theologian of the last century, Reinhold Niebuhr:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Amen.

I add only that, if faith is what I have interpreted as "obedient faith," it is, in its essence, submission to God. But if Niebuhr is right in assuming that there are "things that should be changed" as well as "things that cannot be changed," then, clearly, to obey, and thus to submit, cannot be singular, but has to be dual. To act courageously and loyally to change the things that should be changed is no less to obey, and so to submit, than to act serenely and trustingly to accept the things that cannot.

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