

# REDEEMER

R E P O R T

MARCH 2001

## THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

BY TIM KELLER

**I**n our continuing discussion of how to deal with objections (or “defeaters”) to the Christian faith, this month I want to deal with what is probably the strongest and certainly the most often voiced objection to the Christian faith. It is the “Problem of Evil,” and it goes like this: “Why would a good God allow all this evil and suffering?” If we are going to help anyone with this problem (or if we are going to get help for our own hearts), it is important immediately to distinguish between the ‘personal’ problem of evil and the ‘theoretical’ problem of evil.

**1) Personal.** The Bible is filled with the cries of people—including

the Biblical authors (!)—who are deeply perplexed and baffled by the magnitude and the unjust distribution of instances of evil and suffering. When you taste of this bitter cup, it creates a personal problem with God. This problem is not necessarily directed at belief in whether there is a God or not. It may or may not tempt you to doubt God’s existence, but you will at least be tempted to mistrust, resent, or even hate God.

**2) Theoretical.** On the other hand, many thinkers have said that evil and suffering also pose a powerful argument against belief in the very existence of the all-powerful-but-good God of traditional faith. This is called the ‘a-

theological argument from evil.’ (An “atheological argument” is an argument proving that God can not or probably does not exist.)

It is important for us to distinguish between the two types of “problem with evil” for these reasons: First, we should never treat a personal problem theoretically. It is cruel to argue theoretically with a person who is in the grip of suffering herself, even if she states the problem theoretically (as an emotional defense mechanism, perhaps). Using the right arguments you might win the debate, (or at least reduce the other party to silence), but we want to connect

*(continued on page 2)*

## REDEEMER’S URBAN CHURCH PLANTING CENTER

BY LYNDA CHIN

**H**ave you been hearing all the talk about church planting and Redeemer’s Urban Church Planting Center and wondering what’s actually happening? Where are the new churches being started? In what language groups? Will one be near me? Well, here’s your chance to find out.

For one week at the end of March, the Redeemer Urban Church Planting Center will host a series of presentations given by several of the church planters. At this week-long “conference” of church planters, you will have a chance to meet some of the pastors who are connected to the church-planting center, hear about their

work and be better able to pray for these churches. You will also have the opportunity to learn more about why Redeemer has chosen to emphasize church planting. Everyone is welcome to attend, and we especially encourage home fellowship groups to attend together as both a social and an enrichment event. The schedule of events is on page 3.

The problem will be deciding which one to attend, because they will all be great. Wilson Cheng

from Covenant of Grace in Queens will give communion at the CPR service at All Angels. Or you can meet Stephen Ro from Living Faith Community Church in Queens who will present in Astoria. If you’re interested in a Brazilian church plant, come see Renato Bernardes from Comunidade Crista Presbiteriana in Newark. For those of you who know Jim Om (who used to be a

*(continued on page 3)*

### INSIDE:

- HIGH SCHOOL RETREATS
- OPEN FORUM MARCH 11
- PREMARITAL SEMINARS
- DIACONATE THANK YOU

*MORE...*



(continued from page 1)

# THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

to hearts, not win arguments.

Second, we should also remember that the theoretical 'defense' (theodicy) of God in an unjust world hasn't failed just because it doesn't make you feel better. In other words, the practical and the theoretical problem of evil usually come together in our lives. We experience injustice or suffering and thus we pick up the theoretical objection-to-God-from-evil and say, "Sounds right to me!" When this happens, the doubter will frame his objection in a theoretical way, and he may get an excellent answer that really puts the theoretical question to rest, but because of internal hurt, he won't concede it. But just because an argument doesn't make you feel good doesn't mean it is invalid.

In short, the two problems have to be recognized as distinct, but worked on together. An answer to one is not necessarily an answer to the other. There are resources in the Christian faith that address both problems, and in general I have found that you need to work a bit on both. It's like walking; you need to step with one foot, then another. There are exceptions, of course. If a person has had a very comfortable life (so far), and if his or her objection-to-God-from-evil is almost completely theoretical, it may be possible to lay it to rest with a purely theoretical treatment. Likewise, a person who is deep in suffering often can be helped spiritually without any "arguments" at all—just through your being their faithful, non-preachy, sensitive, sympathetic friend. But most people need some of both.

## **The Theoretical Problem**

The classic objection goes like

this: "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent, not omnipotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent, and not good. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (David Hume, *Dialogues on Natural Religion*) But this objection to the existence of God hinges on a falla-

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cious premise. It assumes that a good God would not allow evil to continue. After all, why should he? We certainly can't think of any reason for allowing evil to continue one miserable second longer than it already has.

But the reasoning underneath that indignation goes like this:

1. I cannot think of any justifiable reason why God would allow suffering and evil to continue.

2. Therefore, God cannot have such a reason.

This, of course, does not follow! If you object to the very existence of God because of suffering and evil, you are assuming that God cannot have a good reason for allowing suffering and evil. But why should there be no reason just because we can't think of one? Is it reasonable to assume that God is great enough to be able to stop evil, but not great enough to have a reason for allowing evil that you can't discern? You can't have it both ways.

Not only does the argument against God from evil not succeed, but it actually has a "boomerang effect." If there is a God, then evil creates a very grave personal problem. Why is God doing this? Doesn't he understand? But if there is no God, then you don't really even have a good basis for being outraged at the existence of suffering. After all, nature is "red in tooth and claw." Death and destruction are perfectly natural. How can you consider nature to be abnormal when the strong eat the weak and all manner of oppression is built right into our genetic structure? You can only object to injustice if you already believe in some kind of "supernatural" moral standard (some standard that comes from outside of nature and which judges some types of "natural" behavior as wrong or bad). And where does such a supernatural standard come from, if there is no God?

## **The Practical Problem**

There is no cogent argument that evil and suffering is incompatible with the existence of a holy and all-powerful God. But this does not mean that evil cannot constitute a "non-argumentative defeater" for the reality of God. Horrifying evil is overwhelming. It is even worse when horrific evil happens to relatively good people while relatively bad people have really comfortable lives.

All of the arguments listed above are only cold comfort to a hurting heart. They must be made, but they usually only clear the ground for what I believe is the real answer of Christianity to the problem of evil. Alvin Plantinga

*(continued on page 6)*

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## **REDEEMER REPORT**

Kathy Keller

Buddy Mungo

Dave Jacobs

The Redeemer Report is a publication of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church.  
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HUNTER COLLEGE AUDITORIUM  
EAST 69TH BETWEEN PARK AND LEXINGTON  
services at 10:30 • 6:00

CHURCH OF ST. PAUL AND ST. ANDREW  
86TH AND WEST END AVENUE  
services at 7:00

# SCHOOL OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Redeemer's School of Christian Community—Sunday classes for adults—is held after the morning service on the east side and before the west side service. Chris Gilbert's recently launched track for Fellowship Group leaders continues with the pilot of Part II of his three-part plan: *Spirituality for Guarding Christian Community*. It treats spiritual discipline as a response towards God not just for individual personal growth but as our responsibility for the safeguarding of our Christian Communities. (east side at 12:10 p.m.)

The Counseling Center is offering the first half of a new class — *Changing Hearts, Changing Lives*. Students will be exposed to a Christ-centered, biblical examination of personal growth and sanctification in the context of the situations and relationships of daily living. The curriculum offers a

gospel-centered alternative to our culture's behaviorist thinking. The class will equip people to deal biblically with the practical problems of daily life so that they can be

*Check out the Redeemer website (www.redeemer.com) under Learning Resources for the full listing of classes starting March 4.*

tools of change in their community. (east side at 12:10 p.m.)

*Introduction to Redeemer* will be held after the morning service and before the west side evening class. On the west side, the class will begin at 5:00 p.m. - so if you plan to attend, you will have to make a

point of getting to class an hour before the service!

If you've noticed fewer classes available during the last weeks of February, you're experiencing the new format of five-week cycles. Starting in January cycles begin on the first Sunday (except holidays) of every other month September, November, January, March and May. Cycles run for five weeks (vs. the 7-weeks of our previous schedule) with two-to-four weeks between cycles. Some of the classes being developed for launch in the fall will incorporate retreats for participants, which will be scheduled between cycles.

Check out the Redeemer website (www.redeemer.com) under Learning Resources for the full listing of classes starting March 4. Soon you will be able to find the class descriptions, teacher bios - everything you need to know - on our website, so keep checking.

(continued from page 1)

## CHURCH PLANTING CENTER

pastor at Redeemer), don't miss his presentation about the two New Jersey daughter churches. Finally, to end the week, Charlie Drew will speak about how Emmanuel Church, the Columbia U. church plant, is doing.

Come with your home fellowship group, a friend from Redeemer, or just show up to meet others who are interested in knowing more about Redeemer's vision for church planting in the area. It's the perfect opportunity to learn, to pray, and to ask questions.

## CHURCH PLANTER'S SCHEDULE

Monday, March 26 - Wilson Cheng from Covenant of Grace in Queens, will speak at the CPR service at All Angels (7:00 p.m.).

Wednesday, March 28 - Stephen Ro from Living Faith Community Church, Queens will speak in Astoria at 37-10 Skillman Avenue at 7:00 p.m.

Wednesday, March 28 - Renato Bernardes from Comunidade Crista Presbiteriana in Newark, NJ, will speak at the Redeemer office, 271 Madison Avenue, 15th floor, at 7:00 p.m.

Thursday - March 29 - Jim Om from Redeemer Presbyterian Mission of New Jersey will speak at the Norwegian Seaman's Church, 317 E. 52nd Street.

Friday - March 30 - Charlie Drew from Emmanuel Church - (Columbia U area) will speak at 54 W 39th Street, 3rd floor, at 7:00 p.m.

For more information about these events, brochures are available on the information tables at the various worship sites. Or you may email Carol@Redeemer.com with questions.

# SENIOR HIGH YOUTH RETREATS

BY SARA BARRINEAU  
JUNIOR, SCARSDALE HIGH SCHOOL

**R**edeemer's Senior High youth enjoyed a great weekend retreat at Lake Champion at Glen Spey, New York, this past January 26-28. Activities included games, massive snowball fight, songs, skits and messages from speaker Nathan Gunn.

"I think it was fun," said Preston Christensen, a member of Redeemer's C.L.A.Y. (Christ Loves All Youth.) "Nathan Gunn was a great speaker with an interesting life. It informed me more about the sins of the world and why we aren't supposed to judge others." Redeemer regulars brought many of their friends

*"It informed me more about the sins of the world and why we aren't supposed to judge others."*

who don't attend church to hear messages especially crafted for teens who wanted to know more about Jesus Christ.

C.L.A.Y. members and schoolmates who accompanied them on the trip would agree that the snowball fight was the most fun event of the weekend. Endless games of foosball, pool, and bas-

ketball kept us entertained when we weren't listening to Nathan Gunn. Another highlight of the trip was the high-intensity foosball competition that took place between our best female and male players.

The fun isn't over, either. Junior High school students will enjoy a similar weekend of fun during March 2-4, while the Senior High students will serve on the kitchen crew. Jobs included in those duties are serving the food, doing the dishes, and cooking. If you are interested in working with Redeemer's C.L.A.Y. ministry, please contact Mindi Cooke at (201) 792-6313.

## CHURCH FAMILY UPDATE

### *Membership Vows:*

Sue Jin Lee  
Bryan Jacob Smith  
Christy Brady Smith  
Elizabeth Hyen Lim Hwang  
Kathleen Riddle  
Anne Massey Brindley  
Megan Anne Henry  
Alice Sung-Lim Kim  
Grace J. Park Kim  
Kyongsoo Noh  
Jason David North  
Margaret Susan Scott  
Lauren Jee-Hyun Chung  
Sarah Marie Demas  
Eric Steven Walters

### *Infant Baptisms:*

Mininger, Piersol James, son of Andrew & Sara Mininger  
Moon, Stephen Jungsoo, son of John & Hee-Jung Moon  
Mui, Jonathan Jet, son of Gary & Grace Mui  
Whitford, Zoe Carew, daughter of Tom & Chris Whitford  
Ricci, Giovanna Quin, daughter of Joe & Connie Ricci  
Pyott-Sauriat, Hugo Greene, son of Philippe & Laura Sauriat  
Kurpiewski, Stephen Taegoon, son of Ken & Ji Soo Kurpiewski  
West, Madison Ann, daughter of Blair & Ann West

## A THANK YOU FROM THE DIACONATE

**W**e would like to extend our deepest thanks for the generosity of God's people towards our annual Mercy Fund Offering, which we received on December 10, 2000. These funds directly enable us to provide for the needs of those we care for in the congregation and community. We are 'filled with awe' (Acts 2:43-45) at how God provides and heals through His people. Please keep us and those we serve in your prayers, especially as we re-open officer nominations in May. As the church grows, our need for caregivers increases. We hope you will consider how you can be involved.

# REDEEMER MATERIALS AND COPYRIGHT ISSUES

A question has been arising with such frequency that we decided we should address it in the newsletter; that is, may materials produced for use at Redeemer be used by other churches and individuals? And if so, to what extent? Some churches have put materials produced at Redeemer on their websites or printed them for use by their own fellowship groups, with a credit line reading “Adapted from materials authored by Tim Keller.” Other churches find themselves in possession of fellowship group curriculum, courtesy of a brother or a friend who has used it in a Redeemer fellowship group, and thanks to the miracle of copier machines, now their entire church is using it.

None of this is appropriate, but the problem is mostly our fault. When Tim and others have authored handouts, curriculum or training materials for use at Redeemer, we didn’t look far enough ahead (or use our common sense) to realize that in the

age of websites and copying machines, those materials would soon “get out” of our control and into the larger world. Many of those materials, including the fellowship group material, are still in development and “not ready for prime time.” So while we fully expected to copyright the finished product when it was finally edited and published, we didn’t think to put “Copyright Tim Keller [or whomever], all rights reserved” on every piece of paper floating around Redeemer.

The result is that a good bit of that paper is now floating around in what has been described as a “black market” of Redeemer materials. And who can blame other churches? Certainly not us. When you find something useful for your people, you want to use it. It’s OUR fault for not making clear that copyright laws and courtesy to the author needed to be observed (i.e. asking permission before using something.)

So here it is, belatedly. Folks,

out there, somewhere, anywhere—please don’t use Redeemer materials without first calling, writing or e-mailing to get permission. You may discover that there have been five revisions since the copy which got into your hands was produced. And ESPECIALLY please do not adapt, alter, shorten or otherwise edit materials produced by Tim or others at Redeemer, even if they don’t have the author’s name or copyright information on them—that just proves that they were not meant to be used outside of Redeemer yet.

We are working very hard to get materials (in their final incarnation) up on our website under “Learning Resources.” And fellowship group curriculum is currently undergoing major editing and restructuring with the hope that it can be sent to a publisher before the end of the year. Meanwhile, just hang on, don’t break any laws, and please call first if you want to use something.

## PREMARITAL SEMINARS OFFERED

Two premarital seminars are being offered for engaged couples and couples who are just beginning to discuss marriage. The first will be on Saturday, April 7, followed by one on Saturday, June 9.

Both will run from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. at the church office, 271 Madison Ave., 15th floor, and cost \$35 per couple. To register, call the church receptionist at 808-4460 x110. The seminar is a prerequisite for having a Redeemer pastor officiate at your wedding.

## OPEN FORUM - MARCH 11

“New York, New York - it’s a helluva town....” Although some would argue it’s just hell. Either way, no one has a mild view of New York City. At our next Broadway Open Forum, March 11, at 6:00 PM at the Hunter College Auditorium, we will explore the spiritual benefits and dangers of the city. The program will begin with a concert of musical theater songs about New York — *Autumn in New York*, *42nd Street*, *Take the A Train*, *There’s a Boat Leaving Soon for New York* — featuring Tony award-winner Ben Harney and George Merritt of *Jekyll and Hyde*, with Teri Hansen, Kip Wilborn, Mindy Sax and others, accompanied by the Redeemer band. Following the concert, Tim Keller will give a lecture on the importance of cities. Following the lecture, there will be an opportunity for you to re-

spond at an open-mike question and answer session.

This event is being presented in conjunction with the annual IAM Conference, “Art as Prayer: Prayer as Art,” being held throughout New York from March 10-18. The Forum will feature images of the city designed by artists Mako Fujimura and Peter Corriston. For more information on the IAM Conference, visit their website at [www.IAMny.org](http://www.IAMny.org).

This Open Forum will be the eighteenth in a series of events that has attracted over 25,000 people to programs ranging in style from jazz and opera to rhythm and blues, classical and dance. Open Forums are excellent opportunities for you to introduce your friends to Redeemer. Come early, but don’t take the A train. If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere...you get the idea.

(continued from page 2)

## THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

writes:

“We don’t know why God permits evil; we do know, however, that he was prepared to accept suffering of which we can form no conception. The chief difference between Christianity and the other...religions lies just here. This doesn’t answer the question ‘why’ [exactly] does God permit evil? But it helps the Christian trust God as his loving father...His aims and goals may be beyond our ken, but he himself is prepared to share much greater suffering than we in the pursuit of those ends.” (Alvin Plantinga in *Philosophers Who Believe*, ed. K. Clark (Eerdmans, 1993)

“Confronted with a particularly loathsome example of evil, I may find myself to be angry or resentful: ‘Why should I or my family suffer...when I don’t have even a glimmer of an idea as to how my suffering contributes to some good?’ But when I think of the divine willingness to endure greater suffering on my behalf, I am comforted or, at any rate, quieted...Notice that the comfort involved here does not go by way of probabilistic reasoning. [Just as the ‘defeater’ does not come by reasoning.]...

And here is a respect in which Christian theism has a resource for dealing with evil that is not available to other forms of theism.” (Alvin Plantinga, in *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, 2000)

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why God permits evil;  
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to accept suffering...”*

The problem of evil and suffering is the strongest objection by far to the Christian faith. It is strong because it is an irreducible problem. It can never be removed by argument. It continues to weigh down Christians. However, it is no authentic reason to abandon the Christian faith, because evil and suffering creates a greater problem for all alternative views and positions.

Are you an atheist? Then you

have no rational basis to even be outraged at suffering and evil. Are you a believer in Eastern religions, or Islam, or some other faith? Then you have a god who does not suffer. If, as in the Eastern religions, god is impersonal, then your misery and outrage before suffering is illusory and unjustified. If you are the adherent of some other religion, you still have a god who has not suffered. Only the Christian faith shows us a God who takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he is willing to get involved with it himself.

And what confirmation do we have that God has some good reason for allowing suffering and evil to (temporarily) continue? The cross. He must hate evil, too, or he wouldn’t have done that. But he must have some good reason for letting history continue, too. Confidence in the character of God—his love, his justice, and his wisdom—becomes possible only when we see what he did in coming himself to die on the cross in order to halt the greatest evil and suffering of all—separation from him.