

Billy Graham on Evil, Suffering, Death

The technological revolutions of today stagger our imaginations. We try to peer into the future, and if we could actually see what the world will be like 10 or 20 years from now, I'm sure that we would be overwhelmed.

This is not the first time, however, that the human race has undergone a technological revolution.

Three thousand years ago when a young man by the name of David became king of Israel, Israel was divided and backward, and was oppressed by its neighbors. Israel was little more than a cluster of primitive tribes living in tents, and people were barely scratching a living from the land.

But 40 years later when King David died, all that had changed. In only one generation Israel had become one of the strongest, most prosperous nations in the Near East. In fact, in those few decades, Israel experienced one of the greatest periods of social and economic progress in its history.

What happened? Certainly David was a man with exceptional leadership ability, and he had the favor of God.

But there was another reason: King David introduced into Israel a new technology.

About two centuries earlier the Hittites had discovered the secret of smelting and processing iron. Slowly the skill spread, but for many decades Israel's enemies deliberately kept the knowledge away from Israel. "We find ourselves in the paralyzing grip of self-destructive habits that we can't break. ... Even the most sophisticated among us seems powerless to break the cycle."

But David changed all that, and he introduced the Iron Age to Israel. Now, instead of using crude tools made of sticks and stones, Israel had plows, sickles, hoes, axes and other implements made of iron. And in the course of that one generation, Israel was completely changed.

The introduction of iron, in some ways, had an impact on David's day much as the microchip is having today.

King David reflected on what was happening. David not only was a great ruler, he also was a great poet and a philosopher and a musician.

A technological revolution had changed the lives of his people. But as David looked at life, he realized that there were several problems that technology had not solved.

In the Psalms, David speaks to a number of these problems. And these problems are still with us, for they are moral and spiritual problems, and only moral and spiritual answers can solve those problems.

I want to address three of these problems.

Human Evil

The first problem that King David knew he could not solve is the problem of human evil. Something is wrong. We can't get along with other people, even in our own families. We find ourselves in the paralyzing grip of self-destructive habits that we can't break. Racism, injustice and violence sweep our world, bringing a tragic harvest of heartache and death. Even the most sophisticated among us seems powerless to break the cycle.

The Bible says that the problem is within us—within our hearts and our souls (see Jer. 17:9). We are separated from God, and we need to have our souls restored—something that only God can do.

Jesus said, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matt 15:19, NIV).

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell was not a religious man, but on one point he agreed with Jesus when he said, "It is in our hearts that the evil lies, and it is from our hearts that it must be plucked out."

Albert Einstein once pessimistically declared, "It is easier to denature plutonium than to denature the evil spirit of man."

Many people have puzzled over this. People take beneficial technological advances and twist them into something corrupting. Brilliant people devise computer viruses that bring down entire information systems. But the problem is not the technology; the problem is the person using the technology.

King David himself knew the depths of evil in his own soul. He couldn't free himself from personal sins, which included adultery and murder (see 2 Sam. 11:27). Yet King David, seeking God's forgiveness, said, "You restore my soul" (cf. Ps. 23:3).

The Bible teaches that we do not simply have bodies and minds, we also have souls. Our souls are that part of us that yearns for meaning in life and that seeks something beyond this life. Our souls are that part of us that yearns for God. Even people who have no religious beliefs wonder at times if there is something more.

Thomas Edison said, "When you see everything that happens in the world of science and in the working of the universe, you cannot deny that there is a 'Captain on the bridge.'"

Human Suffering

The second problem that King David realized he could not solve

is the problem of human suffering. The Bible says, "Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7).

Yes, to be sure, science has done much to push back certain types of human suffering, but think of the suffering that we still face in the world today: Inner-city children trapped in cycles of despair. Children of divorce described increasingly by researchers as carrying deep and lasting wounds. Orphans and desperate children, around the world, torn apart by war.

And among those of us who are the most protected against poverty and violence, families self-destruct, friends betray us, psychological pressures bear down on us.

Why do we suffer? That is an age-old question that none of us can fully answer.

King David too suffered heartbreak. His own deceit caused the death of his infant son. His children were involved with rape, revenge and murder. His son Absalom led a revolt against him.

Yet David, again and again, in the most agonizing circumstances, could turn to God and say, "The Lord is my shepherd" (Ps. 23:1).

Death

The third problem that King David knew he could not solve is the problem of death (see Ps. 55:4-5). Some people find it difficult even to comprehend death, and most people live as if they were never going to die. But death is inevitable.

The writer of Ecclesiastes declared, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2).

Several years ago a university student asked me what was the greatest surprise of my life, and I replied, "Its brevity."

This, then, is humanity's threefold dilemma: evil, suffering and death. Technology cannot solve these problems. They

ultimately are spiritual problems, and they demand spiritual solutions.

And today in our world we need a moral dimension more than ever. Without it, the 21st century could become the bloodiest century in the history of the human race. It could be the last century. But it does not need to be this way.

Wernher von Braun said, "It has frequently been stated that scientific enlightenment and religious belief are incompatible. [But] technology and ethics are sisters."

Blaise Pascal has been called one of the architects of modern civilization. He was a brilliant scientist at the frontiers of mathematics, even when he was a teenager. He is viewed by many as the founder of the probability theory and as the creator of the first digital calculator.

Pascal explored in depth our dilemmas of human evil, human suffering and death. People can achieve extraordinary heights in science, the arts and human enterprise. Yet people also are full of anger, hypocrisy and self-hatred. Pascal saw this as a remarkable mixture of genius and self-delusion.

On November 23, 1654, Pascal had a profound religious experience. He wrote these words: "May I never be separated from Him. ... Total and sweet renunciation. Total submission to Jesus Christ. Eternally in joy."(13)

Pascal came to believe that only the love and the grace of God could bring us back into harmony with God. Pascal experienced it in a way that went beyond scientific observation and reason. It was he who wrote the words that are now well-known: "The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing."

For Pascal, scientific knowledge paled beside knowledge of God. When Pascal died at age 39, he was ready to face God.

King David lived to be 70 years old; yet he too had to face

death: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps. 23:4). This was David's answer to the three dilemmas of human evil, human suffering and death.

It can be your answer as well as you seek the living God and allow Him to fill your life and give you hope for the future.

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