

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### Evil and its memories

Presented by Harry Goodhew

#### INTRODUCTION

There are sights and experiences that not even time will allow us to forget. Such was the experience of Elie Wiesel when as a boy entering the death camp at Auschwitz he witnessed the bodies of babies being thrown into a ditch of gigantic flames.

In 1960 he wrote: “Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night ... Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky”

“Never shall I forget” Perhaps because of the horror of such events one might, in the cause of justice shout, “let me never forget”

You may have personal memories that, while perhaps not as shocking and confronting as Wiesel’s, are nevertheless painful and distressing for you. Can the wrongs done to us, or done by us, whether great or small, ever be erased from our minds. Can we ever know a peace untroubled by our disturbing memories?

Let me say more about this in a moment.

#### SEGMENT 1

Wiesel was emphatic. “Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

“Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.”

Any view of life that fails to take seriously the fact of evil must, in the end, prove to be inadequate. Why? - Because evil is so obvious, so cruel and heartbreaking, so destructive, and so much a part of our human history whether international, national, or personal.

Furthermore, the issue is not just evil itself, it is also the memory of evil. Whether that evil is witnessed, or suffered it plants an indelible imprint in the brain which in unguarded moments returns to afflict and to depress.

With a view of the world that has no place for God, evil in the form of suffering and pain is still a reality, but it poses no problem as it does for those who hold, for other reasons, that life and the world are the creation of a good and caring God. If the world is a chance occurrence without meaning or purpose, if its life in every form is purely the outcome of chance and necessity then what befalls any of us may be painful but it

is easily explainable. And the solution for bad memories? Well, that might simply be the bottle, or drugs, or a determined pursuit of interests that dampen and deaden the pain. Some heroically and nobly devote themselves to the alleviation of suffering. Others pursue the perpetrators of evil in the name of justice. But all that must be, in the end, the temporary imposition of a sense of meaning on something which, by its very nature, can never have any real meaning.

However, for those who hold that a good and caring Creator brought into being and sustains all that exists, then evil, and the memories it leaves behind, are a problem. Further, suffering and memories like those carried by Elie Wiesel and by multiplied thousands like him, can never be bypassed or lightly dismissed.

But more in a moment

## SEGMENT 2

The Bible does not avoid the question of evil, or indeed the memory of evil. From its opening chapters that describe an initial environment of harmony and delight, its story is one that touches again and again on evil both suffered and inflicted. It describes evil perpetrated by individuals and by nations. It speaks of natural disasters and it knows of a world that can be contorted by earthquakes and ravaged by natural forces.

The Bible describes evil that is perpetrated by human beings upon one another and in contravention of the character of God. The horrors described by Wiesel fall into that category as do the purges of Russia, China, and Cambodia and the treatment of so many indigenous peoples in the advance of so called civilisation. It attributes the brokenness of our world to the failure of human beings to honour God and to do his will. Yet for all that, it does not tell us the ultimate origin of evil, only perhaps hinting that pride in a created being lay at its foundation.

Why God allowed this to take place we are not told. Why he has allowed us to pursue for so long the destructive path we have taken is not revealed to us. What is clearly revealed, and it is the great central theme of the Bible, is what God has done about evil and what he will do about evil and the memory of evil.

It is the Bible's central message that God has dealt with evil, all evil, in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We may not be able fully to comprehend it but his word is emphatic: in the death and resurrection of Jesus God defeated evil, overcome it, and in the events of those three momentous days brought about that new creation which will one day completely eliminate evil and its memory. How can that be? I'll be back after this music.

## SEGMENT 3

How can it be? Listen to a thoughtful Christian writer from a nation that has known evil and suffering and who has tasted it himself.

*Only non-remembering can end the lament over suffering which no thought can think away and no action undo.*

*Such redemptive forgetting is implied in a passage in Revelation about the new heaven and the new earth. "Mourning and crying and pain" will be no more not only because "death will be no more" but also because the first things have passed away" (21:4) - from experience as well as*

*from memory, as the text in Isaiah from which Revelation quoted explicitly states: "the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind (65:17; cf.43:18).*

*How can God forget the wrongdoing of human beings? Because at the centre of God's all-embracing memory there is a paradoxical monument to forgetting. It is the cross of Christ. God forgets humanity's sins in the same way that God forgives humanity's sins: by taking sins away from humanity and placing them upon God himself. How will human beings be able to forget the horrors of history? Because at the centre of the new world that will emerge after "the first heaven and the first earth have passed away" there will stand a throne, and on the throne there will sit the Lamb who has "taken away the sin of the world" and erased their memory.*

(Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, pages 135, 136, and 140)

Such is the Bible's treatment of evil, of suffering, and of its memories.

We look at the man hanging on the cross: perhaps just another victim of evil. It looks all so human. But as well as humanness divinity was present. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. That, the Bible says, is the way that God has dealt with evil and the problem it appears to create.

## **CONCLUSION**

The prospect of a world without evil is the wonderful outcome of God's victory over evil in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The coming of that Kingdom is the end to which those who believe the message of the Bible look with eager anticipation. It also provides the foundation for expending effort to ameliorate and defeat evil wherever that can be done now as we wait for that final day. It is a motivator in stimulating those who have confidence in God to pass on the knowledge of what God has done in Christ to others. No one is exempt from the impact of evil in this world and no one is excluded from embracing and benefiting from the action which God has taken to finally remove evil and its terrible legacies.

Good morning and God be with you.