**A Very COVID Thanksgiving**

*(Scene opens at a dinner table where a family has assembled for Thanksgiving. GRANDMA EDITH\* and grandson STEVE\*\* are seated six feet apart from one another. There is an empty chair at the head of the table where a picture has been placed of GRANDMA EDITH’s late husband Patrick.)*

**GRANDMA EDITH:** Okay, everyone, let’s bow our heads and join together in the Lord’s prayer to give thanks for this wonderful meal!

**FAMILY:** Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen. *(STEVE abstains.)*

**GRANDMA EDITH:** Steve, I didn’t hear you say the prayer.

**STEVE:** Yeah, Grandma Edith, I’m just not really in the Thanksgiving spirit this year. *(Glances over at Grandpa Patrick’s picture.)*

**GRANDMA EDITH:** Oh, I see, but Grandpa Patrick would want you to be glad that we can celebrate together, and we have so much to be thankful for this year!

**STEVE:** Grandpa Patrick isn’t here.

**GRANDMA EDITH:** I know that, but he’s here with us in spirit.

**STEVE:** I’m glad you think that. I just have a hard time believing in a God who would take him away from us three weeks before Thanksgiving.

*(Family members gasp.)*

**GRANDMA EDITH:** Steve, I can’t believe you just said that! Didn’t your parents raise you to be a good Christian?

**STEVE:** They did, Grandma, and then I turned 18 and went to college. Now it’s my responsibility and my prerogative to decide what and who I believe in. You saw what happened to Grandpa.

**GRANDMA EDITH:** You better stop talking like that before you ruin Thanksgiving. I bet it’s that class that’s filling you with these crazy ideas.

**STEVE:** My class on the Problem of Evil?

**GRANDMA EDITH:** Yes, it’s exactly that… evil. I knew you should’ve taken that biblical studies class that I suggested.

**STEVE:** I did, Grandma. Last semester. And I thought my professor made some really great points. And then I took this class, and now I’m rethinking everything.

**GRANDMA EDITH:** Mm-hm, what points could your professor make that could possibly make you rethink your entire faith?

**STEVE:** It’s nothing *he* said in particular. It’s the readings we’ve done and the arguments I’ve been exposed to. There are terms for everything. What we’re dealing with right now―this entire pandemic―is a perfect example of the evidential problem of evil. Can you seriously look outside right now and think that God is at work? Three of your church friends have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and didn’t Mr. Blumenthal die last week? We are literally sitting at a dinner table six feet apart from one another staring at a picture of my dead grandfather. Over twelve million people have been diagnosed with the disease in the U.S. and over 250,000 have died.[[1]](#footnote-1) Just last week, I had to get tested because I had a cough and didn’t want to come home and kill you.

**GRANDMA EDITH:** Well this is all a part of God’s plan. He is an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God who always does the best for His children. There has to be a greater purpose that you just can’t understand. You have to have faith in His grand plan. Even though it is terrible that 250,000 people have died, the case fatality rate (number of confirmed COVID deaths divided by number of COVID cases) in the U.S. is only 2.1%.[[2]](#footnote-2) And as for Mr. Blumenthal, he was a terrible person and had it coming anyways.

**STEVE:** Well, Grandma, I’ll admit that Mr. Blumenthal was a little rough around the edges, but I don’t really think he had it coming, per se. Am I to believe in a God who smites others, regardless of how terrible you think they were? That’s a really bad defense for a supposedly omnibenevolent being.

**GRANDMA EDITH:** I know that wasn’t a very Christlike thing to say. Allow me to try and redeem myself. God never intends to hurt anyone on purpose. But it is impossible for Him to control everything we do and still allow us to have free will. And even though God has to allow the possibility of suffering in order to maintain our free will, good things can come out of evil events. Take COVID for example: Even though we have to wear masks and distance ourselves, we are more aware of personal hygiene and how easily germs can be spread. I know we haven’t kept the house this clean since 1986.

**STEVE:** I guess that’s true. It’s just such a complex evil that it’s hard for me to see the good things. Sure, I’ve really enjoyed spending time with you and Mom and Dad and Suzie, but my trip to Yellowstone was cancelled in May, Mom’s restaurant almost shut down this summer, Dad was laid off in June, and Suzie has to complete kindergarten online this fall and doesn’t even know basic math. Not to mention you haven’t left the house since Grandpa Patrick died. It’s all too much evidence to me that either God just is not good, or He does not exist.

**GRANDMA EDITH:** Now I could go on and come up with a good reason why these events happened, but I know that God exists, and since he exists, he would probably try and stop evils unless it prevented a greater good or allowed an even worse evil, which means that pointless evils do not exist! Also, God loves us and that’s why sometimes He lets us struggle, so that we can be the best versions of ourselves.

**STEVE:** No. I can’t accept that. Grandpa loved me. Your God does not. Grandpa taught me to hunt and to fish and to ride a horse. He made me milkshakes and brought me to the movies and always had a funny story to share with me. He made me laugh, and even better, he made you laugh, Grandma. That is love. Making us cry and grieve and fight on Thanksgiving is not love. Love is about happiness, not about pain or suffering. Your God is not all-good, nor is he all-loving. Grandpa was both.

**GRANDMA EDITH:** No, what you’re talking about is God’s kindness. You want everything to go perfectly right in your life, but that’s not what love is. God gives us the intolerable compliment. Love demands suffering, and He will allow us to suffer even if it means we are unhappy because He loves us and doesn’t want us to be morally horrific. We tend to want less love and more kindness, but that’s not what’s best for us.

**STEVE:** Well I don’t feel God’s love. I feel like God is absent. That’s what I’ve been feeling since Mom called me and told me that Grandpa died. If God’s love demands suffering, I don’t want it. I want to grieve and to feel comforted, not like I have a debt to pay to a God doing me a favor by loving me after taking my grandfather’s life. I don’t deserve this, and Grandpa most certainly did not deserve death. Grandma Edith, you are alone for the first time in 50 years. Are you not at least questioning your faith at night alone in bed?

**GRANDMA EDITH:** Of course sometimes I question my faith, but I know that one day we will all be united together.

**STEVE:** Are you seriously talking about Heaven now? No human being knows what happens once we die. For all we know, Grandpa could be gone forever.

**GRANDMA EDITH:** Steve, you’re talking like a faithless heathen.

**STEVE:** *(Laughs.)* I am not faithless, Grandma. And I’m not a heathen. I simply cannot reconcile the beliefs with which I grew up with the reality of the world in which we live. There is too much going on right now for me to find solace in the afterlife. Right now, here at this Thanksgiving dinner table, you are sitting alone. The only reminders we have of Grandpa are that picture and his tombstone. We couldn’t even have a funeral because of COVID. We drove our cars through the cemetery and laid flowers on his grave. I’m not dismissing your claims of faith; I just don’t know what I believe. But I do know that your intense belief in a good God is in direct contradiction with the life you are living right now. You may follow in the footsteps of Christ and hope your children and grandchildren do the same, but you cannot truly believe that God is looking out for you and Grandpa even now. I know I don’t.

**GRANDMA EDITH:** I believe that God is watching over us, yes, but you’re justified in your belief that He is not. We can never know what God’s plan is because we are incapable of understanding and seeing things at His level of understanding. We may not know where to look for or even recognize God’s reasoning if it were right in front of us because we are merely human. But God is God.

**STEVE:** Perhaps I do not understand God’s reasoning because God is deceiving me. Perhaps, even, He is deceiving you. Maybe there are no morally acceptable or justifiable explanations for pain and suffering and evil, yet we attribute to God some greater moral judgment that He does not truly deserve. Either that or our conceptions of goodness are entirely incompatible with His, and worshipping Him is pointless. One of the arguments that C. S. Lewis made in his book, *The Problem of Pain*, which I read in class, was that pain supposedly demonstrates our commitment to God.[[3]](#footnote-3) But for me, the pain of losing my grandfather has demonstrated nothing more than God’s lack of commitment to the well-being of our family. And yet, here you are, praising Him still. You are unequivocally committed to Him, but obviously not to your late husband. Why is that?

**GRANDMA EDITH:** C. S. Lewis also said that pain completely shatters our illusion of self-sufficiency. It makes us realize that sometimes we can’t handle things all on our own and that we need God. It ends up bringing us closer to Him, in fact, which is ultimately His wish for us. We should place God as our endpoint, not as a means to our end. And we also have to accept the fact that God shows us divine humility and acknowledges the fact that we only offer ourselves to Him when we’re at our worst.

**STEVE:** *(Tearfully)* I’m torn, Grandma. I feel like I have offered myself to God for 18 years, dutifully and submissively. But those were my best years. This year has been the absolute worst in my life, and I have never felt further from God. In the midst of this great suffering, in the midst of this godforsaken year, how am I to show Him love? What point is there for all of this pain and suffering and uncertainty? Please stop grouping us together and claiming that we are all suffering as members of this family. Please stop turning to collective suffering as a means of defending your faith. Your suffering is not my suffering. And while you may feel comfortable turning to God, I do not have enough experience to do so. I feel like my entire world has come crashing down, and here you are encouraging us to drink and be merry. How do you do it?

**GRANDMA EDITH:** Steve, I’m sorry that this year has been so rough on you. I didn’t realize how much Grandpa’s death has affected you. I understand that it’s difficult for you to turn to God when evil things are happening, but I tend to turn to God at times like these because I believe that He is using our pain so that we can make the intentions of our faith clear. Our faith can’t be taken seriously until there are real stakes at risk. He doesn’t test us to know the results; He tests us so that we can know the results ourselves. Maybe Grandpa’s death is just a means to really deep dive and clarify and strengthen our faith.

**STEVE:** I’ve never really thought of it that way. As much as I hate to think that Grandpa’s death is affecting me like that, I think perhaps you’re right. Maybe this is a test, but if it is, the results suck, and I’m failing. I will continue to struggle with my faith in God as this year comes to an end, but I see the beauty in your faith, and I see where you’re coming from. I think that all people deserve a safe harbor in the middle of a storm, and for you, that’s God. I don’t know for sure whether or not I believe He is all-good, but I do know that what you feel is real. And you exemplify Christlike behavior (except when you’re, you know, damning Mr. Blumenthal). What if I can find faith in Christ but not in God? Where do I go from there?

**GRANDMA EDITH:** I agree that it’s easier to believe in something or someone who you can relate to more. Christ walked this earth and lived a perfect life; God is abstract, which makes it difficult to accept Him as real. God sent Christ down as a means of giving humanity a role model for how we should all strive to live. As much as you want to give Jesus all the credit, though, you must acknowledge that He was made in the image of God. Seeing and knowing what Jesus did on this very earth may be the closest reflection of God's nature we’ll ever get.

**STEVE:** *(Breathes in deeply.)* Well, I certainly have a lot to ponder. I genuinely cannot imagine losing my husband of 50 years and remaining so calm and collected like you. You hold this intense faith, and it’s just something I do not possess. I hope to one day be as strong and brave as you are in the face of adversity and pain and suffering, but sometimes the external world is so full of sorrow and evil that I fail to believe in the goodness of God. I miss Grandpa, and I am heartbroken that he is not with us tonight, but I do feel his presence just the same. Maybe he is here in spirit after all. And maybe what’s missing in my life isn’t him. Maybe, just maybe, I’m missing faith in God.

**GRANDMA EDITH:** (*Laughing)* Well unlike you, honey, I go to church every Sunday! I also think that my faith is strong because it comes from decades of practice. I am glad that we can understand each other, and I would be honored to help you along your faith journey. I miss Grandpa too, but he loves us and so does God. It’s a blessing that we could all be here together today.

**STEVE:** Thank you, Grandma. *(Pauses.)* Are you going to church this Sunday? Maybe I could tag along.

**GRANDMA EDITH:** Oh Steve, don’t be silly, there’s a global pandemic. (*Winks.)* How about you lead us in prayer instead?

**STEVE:** Yeah. I think I’d like that. *(Smiles.)* Everyone, please bow your heads. Our Father…

*(Family recites the Lord’s prayer once again. This time, STEVE says “Amen.”)*

**SUZIE:** Let’s eat!!!

*(Family members laugh as GRANDMA EDITH begins passing around a big bowl of mashed potatoes. She smiles at STEVE, and he smiles back.)*

\*Character of GRANDMA EDITH was written by Kelly Jarratt.

\*\*Character of STEVE was written by Jacob Farmer.

1. "CDC COVID Data Tracker." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Nov. 2020, covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases\_casesper100klast7days. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ritchie, Hannah, et al. “Mortality Risk of COVID-19 - Statistics and Research.” *Our World in Data*, Global Change Data Lab, 22 Nov. 2020, ourworldindata.org/mortality-risk-covid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Blincoe, Adam. Honors 361: The Problem of Evil. 17 Sept. 2020, Longwood University, Farmville, Virginia. Class lecture. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)