

Suffering – How can a Good, Powerful God allow Suffering?

(Suitable for use within a group over approximately one hour, or for an individual's personal Bible reading)

Pages 1-7: Understanding the Evidence and Strategy for Answering

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PAGES 1-7: UNDERSTANDING THE EVIDENCE AND STRATEGY FOR ANSWERING

1. IDENTIFY AND CLARIFY THE ORIGINS OF THE QUESTION

- a. Existential (Heart)
 - Personal experiences of suffering – mother died of cancer, brother in a car crash, etc.
- b. Presuppositions (Worldview, Plausibility Structures)
 - God does not exist.
 - God exists but is powerless to stop it.
 - God exists but is warped to allow evil to continue (he is not all-good).
- c. Evidence (Mind)
 - There is suffering at all levels (human, animals, world).
 - Where did evil come from? – i.e., an explanation of evil.
 - The logical 'problem of evil'.

2. EMPATHISE WITH THE QUESTIONER, THE QUESTION, THE OBJECTION

- a. Find common ground and empathise with their question – “I too wish that ...!”
- b. Show the Bible also contains their question (as it often does)!
- c. Remind them the Bible also ‘feels’ what they feel – see Job, Habakkuk, Psalms, Saints in Revelation, Jesus Himself.¹
- d. Note: When being questioned by persons who are asking as someone currently affected by personal suffering, you cannot treat it primarily as a theoretical problem. We are always to listen and to respond with empathy and pastoral care. It’s not a good idea to try to comfort them by attempting to give them a reason for it. The appropriate response is to “mourn with those who mourn” (Rom 12:15).²

3. DISMANTLE THEIR PRESUPPOSITIONS

- a. Show that it works against their position as well – i.e., their question is a 2-edged sword.
- b. Show that their position is as much a faith-based position as yours (Tim Keller).
- c. Show that their position is largely a product of their culture (Western) (Tim Keller).

¹ See for example: Judges 6:13; Job 23:2-9; Psalm 73:2-14; Ecclesiastes 7:15; Jeremiah 12:1-4; Habakkuk 1:2-4

² Timothy Keller, *The Reason For God. Conversations on Faith and Life. Discussion Guide* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2010) 54-55

Presupposition 1: “God does not exist – that’s why there is so much suffering and evil”

Response 1

*But then we have no right to call things as evil, wrong, not right, or suffering.
Because all such suffering, evil and violence would be ‘natural’.*

If we want to call something “unfair”, “wrong”, etc. then we are looking for someone who transcends nature – to whom we are making this appeal of ‘unfair’, and ‘wrong’ to.

In a playground, children have to run to a teacher.
In a family, children have to run to a parent.
In a society, we have to run to a judge.
In nations, we have to run to a United Nations.
But to whom do we ultimately run to say “this is unfair”?

“People, we believe, ought not to suffer, ought not be excluded, ought not to die of hunger or oppression. But the evolutionary mechanism of natural selection depends on death, destruction and violence of the stronger against the weak – *these things are all perfectly natural*. On what basis then, does the atheist judge the natural world to be horribly wrong, unfair and unjust? The non-believer in God doesn’t have a good basis for being outraged at injustice, which was the reason for objecting to God in the first place.”³

If there is no God, where do we get the standard of goodness by which we judge evil as evil? The reality is that it is impossible to distinguish evil from good unless one has an infinite reference point that is absolute good. This can only be God. If God does not exist, then there are no moral absolutes by which one has the right to judge something (or someone) as being evil. Seen in this light, the reality of evil actually *requires* the existence of God... In the end, evil and suffering provides a better argument for God’s existence than one against it.⁴

You can’t have it both ways...

- To claim there is evil and suffering and that this is wrong/unjust;
- And to say there is no God (to whom we can make this appeal or who sets the standard of goodness).

Presupposition 2: “There is a God – but he isn’t loving or powerful”.

Response

Deep, deep down in our hearts we want this to be true (this is a faith based position).

Tim Keller: “Many assume that if there were good reasons for the existence of evil and suffering, they would be accessible to our minds... Why couldn’t it be possible that, from God’s vantage point, there are good reasons for all the suffering?”

“If you have a God great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn’t stopped evil and suffering in

³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason For God. Belief in an age of scepticism* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2009) 26

⁴ Keller, *Reason For God*, 26; Peter J. Kreeft, ‘Objection #1: Since Evil And Suffering Exist, A Loving God Cannot’, in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith. A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Questions to Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2000) 46-47; Ronald Rhodes, ‘Though Questions About Evil’, in Ravi Zacharias and Norman Geisler (eds.), *Who Made God? And Answers to Over 100 Other Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2003) 35

the world, then you have (at the same moment) a God great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know."⁵

And God does have a reason for suffering...a reason so good that He too came into our world of suffering ... - to suffer for us and to die for us, so to one day end all evil and suffering.

4. DISCUSS THE EVIDENCE

Aim: To answer evidential objections; to present evidence.

Logical or Philosophical Evidence

1. God is good
2. God is powerful
3. There is evil and suffering

All 3 premises cannot logically co-exist (we can only have 2 out of 3), but there is no contradiction if we add:

4. God has a good reason (note at present secular philosophers hold to Premise 4).

We humans wonder why God allows us to go through certain painful circumstances. But just because we find it difficult to imagine what reasons God could have does not mean that no such reason exists.⁶

What might this reason be?

The Bible provides explanation here.

1. Human free will

Some people wonder why God couldn't have created humans in such a way that we would never sin, thus avoiding evil altogether. But such a scenario would mean that we were not truly human but robots. We would not have the capacity to make choices and to freely love. God apparently thought it worth the risk of creating us as we are. A free choice, however, leaves the possibility of a wrong choice.⁷

2. More harm than good if He removes evil

If God were to stamp out evil today, he would do a complete job. We want him to stop war but stay remote from us. If God were to remove evil from the universe, his action would be complete and would have to include our personal impurities, our lack of love and our failure to do good. Suppose God were to decree that tonight all evil would be removed from the universe – who of us would still be here after midnight?⁸

3. He is patient

Jeremiah reminds us, "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail" (Lam 3:33). *Justice delayed is not necessarily justice denied*. There will come a day when God will settle accounts and people will be held responsible for the evil they have perpetrated and the suffering they have caused. Criticising God for not doing it right now is like reading half a novel and criticising the author for not resolving the plot. The Bible says one reason he is delaying is because some people are still following the clues and have yet to find him. He is actually delaying the consummation of history out of his great love for them (2 Pet 3:9).⁹

4. He brings good out of suffering

⁵ Keller, *Reason For God*, 24-25

⁶ Rhodes, 'Though Questions About Evil', 45

⁷ Paul Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1988) 132; Rhodes, 'Though Questions About Evil', 36

⁸ Little, *Know Why You Believe*, 132-133

⁹ Kreeft, 'Objection #1', 58; Little, *Know Why You Believe*, 132, 137

An example from the Bible is Joseph in Genesis (Gen 50:20). What kind of leader would Paul have been if he had not been humbled after his exalted revelations of God (2 Cor 12)? Also, Paul certainly didn't like being imprisoned but God had a providential purpose - wrote four epistles while in prison. The ultimate example is the cross of Jesus (Mark 10:45; Isa 53:5).

Sometimes the 'good' that God brings out of our suffering involves a positive change in our character (1 Pet 1:6-7) or draws us closer to him.

Many people have to admit that most of what they really needed for success in life came to them through their most difficult and painful experiences. If finite humans can discover some good purpose for evil, then surely an infinitely wise God has a good purpose for all suffering.¹⁰

But ultimately, we do not know the reason for suffering in each and every circumstance. And so this becomes an ...

Existential Problem

"Why?", "How long?" Questions which the Bible also has! Even Jesus on the cross cries out "Why?"

Thus the question is "can I trust this God even if I see evil and suffering?" And it is this existential question that the Bible addresses.

5. LEAD TO THE GOSPEL AND BIBLICAL EXPLANATION

1. The risky gift of free will (origin of evil)

The original creation was "very good" (Gen 1:31). There was no sin, no evil, and no death. Yet today the world is permeated with sin, evil, pain and death. What brought these things about? The Bible indicates that the turn downward came the moment the first human beings *used their God-given free will to choose to disobey God* (Gen 3). Evil is inherent in the risky gift of free will. God could have made us machines but to do so would have robbed us of our *precious freedom of choice*, and we would have ceased to be human. We would not have the capacity to freely love either. Love cannot be programmed, it must be freely expressed. God wanted Adam and all humanity to *show love by freely choosing obedience*. This is why he gave us a free will. He will not do anything to coerce their decision.¹¹

We may conclude that God's plan had the potential for evil when he bestowed on humans the freedom of choice, but the actual origin of evil came as a result of a man who directed his will away from God and toward his own selfish desires. Whereas God created the *fact of freedom*, humans perform the *acts of freedom*. *God made evil possible; creatures make it actual*. Ever since Adam and Eve made evil actual on that first occasion in the Garden of Eden, a sin nature has been introduced to every man and woman (Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:22), and it is out of the sin nature that we today continue to use our free will to make evil actual (Mark 7:20-23). Even natural evil (earthquakes, tornados, floods etc) is rooted in our wrong use of free choice. We must not forget that we are living in a fallen world, and because of this, we are subject to disasters in the world of nature that would have not occurred had man not rebelled against God in the beginning (Rom 8:20-22).¹²

2. What God has done about evil – he suffered for us to ultimately judge it, remove it and restore its effects

God has done the most dramatic, costly and effective thing possible by giving himself through the person of his

¹⁰ Rhodes, 'Though Questions About Evil', 46-47; Keller, *Reason For God*, 24

¹¹ Rhodes, 'Though Questions About Evil', 36; Norman L. Geisler, Ronald M. Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask. A Handbook on Christian Evidences* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2008) 73; Little, *Know Why You Believe*, 139

¹² Rhodes, 'Though Questions About Evil', 36-37; Geisler/Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask*, 63

Son Jesus to die for evil human beings. God's answer to the problem of suffering is that he came right down into it. Many Christians try to get God off the hook for suffering; God put himself on the hook, so to speak – on the cross. Jesus bore, as a substitute in our place, the endless exclusion from God that the human race has merited (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Bible says that Jesus came on a rescue mission for creation. He had to pay for our sins so that some day he can end evil and suffering without ending us. As mentioned earlier human beings made evil actual through their free will. God would be perfectly justified in doing nothing about our own fault. But the fact that he went beyond justice and quite incredibly took all the suffering upon himself shows that he loves us. It can't be that he is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery so seriously that he was willing to take it on himself (John 3:16).¹³

It is possible for people to escape God's inevitable judgment on sin and evil. It is also possible to have its power broken by entering into a personal relationship with Jesus. The ultimate answer to the problem of evil, at the personal level, is found in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.¹⁴

3. God suffers with us

There may be no greater inner agony than the loss of a relationship we desperately want. If your spouse says he/she never wants to see you again or one of your parents does it to you when you are still a child. We cannot fathom, however, what it would be like to lose not just spousal love or parental love that has lasted several years, but the infinite love of the Father that Jesus had from all eternity. Jesus' sufferings would have been eternally unbearable. Christianity alone among the world religions claims that God became uniquely and fully human in Jesus Christ and therefore knows firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, bereavement, torture and imprisonment. On the cross he went beyond even the worst human suffering and experienced cosmic rejection and pain that exceeds ours infinitely as his knowledge and power exceeds ours. In his death, God suffers in love, identifying with the abandoned and godforsaken.¹⁵

God then is not a distant, aloof, impervious potentate, far removed from his people and their sufferings. He not only is aware of suffering – he feels it. No pain or suffering has ever come to us that has not first passed through the heart and hand of God. However greatly we may suffer, it is well to remember that God is the great sufferer. Comforting are the words of Isaiah the prophet, foretelling the agony of Christ: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (Isa 53:3). Another writer reminds us, "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Heb 2:18). And "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin" (Heb 4:15). So if we embrace the Christian teaching that Jesus is God and that he went to the cross, then we have deep consolation and strength to face the brutal realities of life on earth. God has not left us alone. He is there with us in our worst sufferings.¹⁶

4. God will end evil and suffering one day

We need more than knowing God is with us in our difficulties. We also need hope that our suffering will end one day. The Bible teaches not only the cross but also the fact of the resurrection. It teaches that the future is not an immaterial 'paradise' but a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21). This material world will be cleansed, renewed and perfected. The secular view of things, of course, sees no future restoration after death or history. And Eastern religions believe we lose our individuality and return to the great All-soul, so our material lives in this world are gone for ever. Embracing the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and cross brings profound consolation in the face of suffering. The doctrine of the resurrection can instil us with a powerful hope. It promises that we will get the life we most longed for, but it will be an infinitely more glorious world than if there had never been the need for bravery, endurance, sacrifice or salvation.¹⁷

One day in the future, Christ will return, strip away power from the wicked, and hold all men and women

¹³ Little, *Know Why You Believe*, 133; Keller, *Reason For God*, 29-30; Kreeft, 'Objection #1', 64

¹⁴ Little, *Know Why You Believe*, 133

¹⁵ Keller, *Reason For God*, 29-30

¹⁶ Little, *Know Why You Believe*, 138-139; Keller, *Reason For God*, 31

¹⁷ Keller, *Reason For God*, 31-33

accountable for the things they did during their time on earth (Matt 25:31-46; Rev 20:11-15). Justice will ultimately prevail. Those who enter eternity without having trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation will understand just how effectively God has dealt with the problem of evil.¹⁸

6. SOME SUMMARIZING THOUGHTS

We want to say all these things are true:

- There is evil and suffering
- Most of it is unfair
- If God is loving, he should remove our suffering
- If God is powerful, he should remove our suffering

Holding all these things together is what poses the problem for us.

This is something everyone and every major religion struggles with:

Buddhism	→ evil is an illusion
Islam	→ evil is real, but God is not loving
Hindu	→ you deserve your suffering
Secular	→ evil is a human construct

Only Christianity allows us to affirm all these as true:

- Evil is real
- Evil is unfair
- God is loving
- God is powerful

This is why there is a God to whom we can cry out, “Unfair!” “Why?”, and this is why every Bible writer and character at some stage cries out, “Why?”

But the Bible doesn’t fully give us the reason, and while giving some explanation the Bible primarily asks us to trust God – that He *does* have a reason and that one day He will put *an end* to all evil. The Bible admonishes Christians to evaluate present sufferings in the light of eternity (Rom 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17; Heb 12:2; 1 Pet 1:6-7).¹⁹

And we can be confident that this reason must be so good that he allowed his Son to also suffer and die for us.

¹⁸ Rhodes, ‘Though Questions About Evil’, 38

¹⁹ Rhodes, ‘Though Questions About Evil’, 46

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PAGE 8: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

IDENTIFY AND CLARIFY THE ORIGIN OF THE QUESTION

Case Scenario: Over the past month you have been one of a group of six students on a rural rotation. You have become friends with one of your classmates in particular, and from week two of the rotation you go running together to unwind at the end of each day. One night as you return to the house after your jog, your friend, knowing you are a 'church goer', asks out of the blue, "I don't know how you can believe in a God when there is so much suffering in the world."

1. Consider the possible origin(s) of this question from your classmate.
2. Are there any follow-up questions you would want to ask your friend to assist you in determining the origin of the question? (Completing a role play can be very helpful here).
3. In addition to an individual having a stimulus/motivation/origin for a question, a person will hold one or more presuppositions (i.e. truths that are subconsciously assumed) when they ask the question or hear your answer to their question. No person is a 'blank slate'. Consider these two ideas that could be presupposed as fact by your friend as he/she asks you their question, "I don't know how you can believe in a God when there is so much suffering in the world":
 - a. "God does not/cannot exist and that's why there is so much suffering and evil";
 - b. "There is a God, but he isn't loving or powerful".As a group develop a response to both of these presuppositions.

4. Having challenged the incorrect presuppositions held by your friend he/she now asks a further question. "Ok, so suffering may have a reason. But how does being religious help you deal with it? When you see it, and when it's inflicted on you?"
How will you answer your friend?
As part of your consideration, think about what each of the following worldviews purport regarding the reality and wrongness of suffering.
 - a. Buddhism
 - b. Secular Humanism
 - c. Islam
 - d. Judeo-Christian

To what degree does each of these worldviews indicate that suffering in this world is:

- a. Real;
 - b. Wrong;
 - c. Will be dealt with?
5. With the conversation now finished as you enter the house after your jog, you begin thinking about how you might build on this conversation and encourage your friend to think of the Truth of God – again and more fully.
As a group, consider how you could do this over the next:

- a. Month;
- b. Year.