

# How Can a Good God Allow Suffering?

## *The Reality of Evil and Suffering*



### General Observations<sup>1</sup>

- ❑ To “suffer” is to bear pain, distress, sorrow, damage or loss.
- ❑ Suffering exists. Worldviews that say suffering does not exist (that is, suffering is an illusion) go against human experience.
- ❑ In general, pain and suffering offer a message of warning that something is wrong.
- ❑ This “wrong” is generally the result of some kind of “evil” – either “moral evil” (action or inaction of moral agents) or “natural evil” (e.g., earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, disease, etc.).<sup>2</sup>
  - If we acknowledge the existence of evil, we imply the existence of good. If we acknowledge that suffering is bad, we imply that other conditions are good. Thus we acknowledge the existence of good and evil. Where does this distinction come from?

### Christian Perspective

- ❑ The reality of suffering and evil is consistent with the Christian worldview. If good and evil actually exist, an objective standard of good is needed, and that objective standard is a good God. Thus the existence of suffering and evil can be used to support the existence of God.
- ❑ The Christian view states that the causes of suffering are numerous and complex, but are generally traced to the conditions of the *fallen* world – a world out of harmony with God.<sup>3</sup>
- ❑ The major cause of suffering in this world is sin,<sup>4</sup> either directly or indirectly.<sup>5</sup>
  - How does pain and suffering affect us?



“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>6</sup>

### Non-Theistic Perspectives

- ❑ In general, theistic<sup>7</sup> views are similar with regard to the reality of suffering and evil, while non-theistic views tend to redefine, minimize or deny the reality of evil, or else eliminate any sound basis for distinguishing between good and evil.
- ❑ For example, consider the following quotation from atheist Richard Dawkins (next page):

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<sup>1</sup> Questions concerning evil and suffering are difficult for any worldview to answer. However, I believe the Christian answer provides the best explanation *and* solution. Herein is my humble attempt to provide a Christian answer.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, some natural disasters can be traced to irresponsible human activity.

<sup>3</sup> The world is “fallen” because of man’s rebellion against God (Genesis 3). As a result of “the Fall,” evil and suffering entered the world of human beings. The ultimate origin of evil (prior to the Fall) is largely unexplained. However, it is clear that God did not create evil (evil is not a substance), and He is not the direct cause of evil.

<sup>4</sup> “sin” may be defined as “any attitude or action that is opposed to the nature and will of God.” Suffering may result from our own sin, or the sin of others (including humanity in general). Jesus suffered though he committed no sin.

<sup>5</sup> It is obvious that human sin is the cause of much suffering in this world. Great suffering also results from “natural disasters,” which can sometimes be traced to irresponsible human activity. How does the present physical world (with its earthquakes and hurricanes) relate to the original (pre-fall) creation? This is disputed among theologians. In any case, sin has affected the “whole creation” which is under God’s judgment is (Romans 8:20-21).

<sup>6</sup> C. S. Lewis, 93. Pain is not necessarily a bad thing. In our physical bodies, pain is a beneficial warning signal. In a broader sense, trouble, pain and suffering offer “a *general* message of warning to all humanity that something is wrong with this planet, and that we need radical intervention” (Phillip Yancey, 84). Of course, not all respond positively to suffering. As D.A. Carson says, “Pain tends to make people better, or bitter” (Carson, 121).

<sup>7</sup> “theistic” refers to views that believe in a personal God as creator and ruler of the universe.

“In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason for it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no other good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.”<sup>8</sup>

- In response to this quotation, Ravi Zacharias asks, “Can you image telling a raped woman that the rapist merely danced to his DNA?”<sup>9</sup>

### **The “Problem” of Evil and Suffering**

- ❑ The “problem” of evil and suffering asks this question: “How can a good, all-powerful God allow evil and suffering? This “problem” might take two main forms – the intellectual problem and the experiential problem.
- ❑ The intellectual (or philosophical) problem demands a rational explanation in response to the question: How can a good, all-powerful God coexist with evil and suffering? (See page 5)
- ❑ The experiential (or emotional) problem demands a response to the sufferer’s questions, like: If there really is a good, all-powerful God, why is he letting me (or my loved one) suffer? Where is God? The sufferer wants relief more than answers.

### **What Does the Bible Say?**

#### **“I Can Relate!”**

- ❑ The Bible shows human experience. The writers of Scripture, and other people of faith, faced times of suffering and despair, and they questioned God.<sup>10</sup> For example, David wrote:

📖 “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts?  
And every day have sorrow in my heart?  
How long will my enemy triumph over me?”  
(*Psalm 13:1-2, NIV; also see Psalms 55, 73, 88, 102*)<sup>11</sup>

- ❑ The book of Job focuses on the problem of undeserved suffering. At one point, Job said:

📖 “I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer;  
I stand up, but you merely look at me.  
You turn on me ruthlessly;  
With the might of your hand you attack me.”  
(*Job 30:20-21, NIV*)

It’s important to note that God never answered Job’s questions of *why*, but that was okay. As John Blanchard writes, “One message that comes across very powerfully from Job’s experience is this: it is less important to know all the answers than to know and trust the one who does. Laying hold on this can be a liberating experience.” (Blanchard, 28)

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Dawkins, *Out of Eden* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 133.

<sup>9</sup> Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 114.

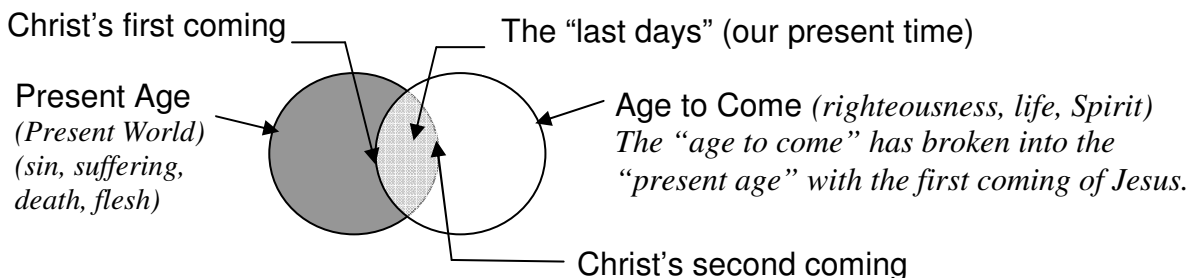
<sup>10</sup> Even Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46)

<sup>11</sup> Like many psalms that begin this way, Psalm 13 ends on a positive note: “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing of the LORD, for he has been good to me” (Psalm 13:5-6, NIV)

## The Big Picture of Evil & Suffering

- ❑ The all-good God created a “very good” world (*Genesis 1:31*). The first humans enjoyed moral innocence and harmony with God and his creation (*Genesis 2:8-25*).
- ❑ Moral evil was an intrusion into God’s good world, brought through the free agency of God’s creatures. Man’s sin against God resulted in a broken relationship with God, which resulted in a fallen world, infected with evil and suffering (*Genesis 3*).
- ❑ God initiated a plan to defeat evil and suffering, and promised a restored and harmonious created order (*Genesis 3:15; 12:1 ff.*).
- ❑ God was (and is) faithful to his promise, and even uses evil and suffering to accomplish his purposes (*e.g. Genesis 50:15-20, Acts 2:22-24*).
- ❑ God’s plan is fulfilled in Christ, who suffered and died for the sins of the world. Christ’s death and resurrection defeated evil and death (*Colossians 2:15, Hebrews 2:14-15*).
- ❑ Through faith in Christ, we receive the benefits of Christ’s victory over evil and death, but these benefits are not *fully* realized until the end of this age (*Acts 3:18-21, Romans 8:18-25*).
- ❑ The end of evil and suffering will be fully realized in the “new heaven and new earth” – God’s everlasting harmonious order in His glorious presence (*Revelation 21:3-4*).

*The Christian is a “new creation” but still lives in the “old world.”*



## The Suffering of Christ

- ❑ God purposed that Jesus Christ would suffer (*Acts 2:22-24*). Jesus said of himself, “*The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life*” (*Luke 9:22, NIV*).
- ❑ The suffering of Christ was in fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus said, “*Everything must be fulfilled that is written in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms ... This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day*” (*Luke 24:44-46; see Acts 26:22-23; Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; 16:9-11; Acts 2:24-36*).
- ❑ Christ had to suffer and die to provide redemption and salvation.



## The Suffering of Christ’s Followers

- ❑ Christians are not exempt from suffering in this world. In fact, many suffer *because* they are Christians. Jesus told his disciples, “*In this world you will have trouble*” (*John 16:33*). “*In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*” (*2 Tim 3:12*).
- ❑ Christians may suffer “*for [Christ]*” (*Philippians 1:29*); “*for what is right*” (*1 Peter 3:14*); for “*the kingdom of God*” (*2 Thessalonians 5:5*); and for the “*gospel*” (*2 Timothy 2:8-9*).
- ❑ Suffering “*with Christ*” is not something to shun. “*But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ*” (*1 Peter 4:12-19*). Paul wrote, “*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings*” (*Philippians 3:10, NIV*).
- ❑ Of course, Christians suffer for many of the same reasons that others in this world suffer.

## The End of Suffering

- ❑ Christians look forward to the future end of suffering, in the *new heaven and new earth*.  
“Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them ... He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:3-4, NIV).
- ❑ This blessed hope helps Christians endure their present sufferings. Paul wrote, “I consider that my present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18, NIV). He also wrote, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Corinthians 4:17, NIV).<sup>12</sup>

## Dealing with Suffering

- ❑ Suffering in this life is unavoidable.<sup>13</sup> The question is: How can we deal with it personally? Suffering provides opportunity. Opportunity for what?<sup>14</sup> The Bible says that God uses suffering for his good purposes.<sup>15</sup> How might our suffering result in something good?

## Suffering → Humility

- ❑ Suffering humbles us and reminds us of our dependence on God (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

## Suffering → Christian Character (Christ-likeness)

- ❑ God uses suffering to develop Christian character and spiritual maturity.
  - 📖 “And we rejoice<sup>16</sup> in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (Romans 5:2a-4, NIV)<sup>17</sup>
  - 📖 Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit<sup>18</sup> he prunes<sup>19</sup> so that it will be more fruitful.” (John 15:1-2, NIV)



<sup>12</sup> Paul’s “light and momentary troubles” included imprisonments, severe beatings, a stoning., exposure to death, shipwreck, various dangers, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, and anguish of heart (2 Corinthians 11:23-28; 2:4).

<sup>13</sup> Of course, much suffering can be avoided by godly and wise living. But suffering affects all people.

<sup>14</sup> Suffering reminds us of our mortality and need, and helps lay the foundation for a new way of thinking, living, and hoping. Suffering may help the non-Christian see his/her need for Christ.

<sup>15</sup> Some of God’s purposes can be found in the following passages: Hebrews 12:7-13; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7; 4:8-10; 1 Peter 1:6-7; 4:12-19; Acts 28:8-9; Philippians 3:10; Matthew 5:10-12. An article by J. Hampton Keathley, III is a concise and helpful summary (see [www.bible.org/page.asp?page\\_id=771](http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=771)).

<sup>16</sup> Paul says “rejoice” (5:3). Peter says “rejoice” (1 Peter 1:6). James says “consider it pure joy” (James 1:2). This does not necessarily mean rejoice *because* you suffer, but rejoice *in* your suffering and trials. Why? Because God uses suffering and trials to accomplish good. If we respond in the right way, we will be changed in a good way. What is the basis for this attitude? How can the Christian have this attitude? Because we have “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). We have a relationship with God, and because of that, we can rejoice in the certain hope of experiencing His full presence in the future. This changes our perspective on everything, including trouble, pain and suffering (Romans 8:18).

<sup>17</sup> The word translated “perseverance” (ὑπομονή) comes from the idea of “remaining under.” A person who successfully carries a heavy weight for a long time develops strength and endurance. Muscles need resistance to become stronger. The word translated “character” (δοκιμή) is related to the word for “test” or “prove to be genuine” (δοκιμάζω), so we can say perseverance brings about tested character or proven character. As we rely on God to help us endure suffering and develop character, it strengthens our trust in God for the future.

<sup>18</sup> “Fruit” is 1) the result of one’s labor, including evangelism (John 15:16); 2) the evidence of one’s true identity (Matthew 7:15-20) and/or 3) character (Galatians 5:22-23 – the “fruit of the Spirit”).

<sup>19</sup> God “prunes” (“trims clean”) the bad branches in our lives. These may be particular attitudes, perspectives, values, actions, etc. that need to be cleaned out, so we can become more fruitful. God “prunes” us in various ways. One way is through trouble and suffering. This “pruning” may be painful at the time, but later on “it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11).

## **Suffering → Preparation for Helping Others**

- ❑ Our suffering helps develop our capacity and sympathy in comforting others who are suffering, especially those who are suffering in a similar way (*2 Corinthians 1:3-5*).

## **Suffering → Christian Testimony**

- ❑ Christians who handle suffering with peace, joy, and stability are a testimony to the power and life of Christ (*2 Timothy 2:8-10; 1 Peter 3:13-17; 2 Corinthians 4:7-12*).

## **Reflection/Application**

- Are you presently experiencing difficulties, trouble, pain or suffering? If you aren't now, you certainly will in the future. How will you handle it? *What* are you trusting in? Where will you find help? The Bible says, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble" (*Psalms 46:1*). Have you entered into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ?
- As a Christian, how are you enduring the troubles in your life? Remember, God uses trouble and suffering to mold us into the image of His Son. We may not desire suffering, but we *should* desire Christ-likeness. When it seems too difficult to endure, share your troubles with a trusted Christian, and ask God for strength.
  - Don't dwell on the "why?"<sup>20</sup> Instead ask, "How can God work through this?"
  - Reflect on passages like Romans 8:18-39 and 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, which teach us to focus *not* on our troubles, but on God and his good purposes and promises.
- As a Christian in this present world, seek to be "salt and light" in order to help restrain the spread of evil and suffering (*Matthew 5:13-16*).

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## **The Intellectual Problem: Philosophy**

- ❑ The intellectual (or philosophical) problem of evil and suffering might take two forms – the logical problem and the probabilistic (or evidential) problem.

### **The Logical Problem**

- ❑ The logical argument claims that the coexistence of God and evil is logically incompatible. Thus God's existence is logically impossible. One way to state the problem is as follows:
  1. God is all-powerful;
  2. God is all-good;
  3. There is suffering and evil in the world;
  4. If God were all-powerful and all-good, he would not allow suffering and evil.
  5. Therefore an all-powerful and all-good God cannot exist.

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<sup>20</sup> It is okay to ask "why?" but we should not dwell on it. Sometimes the "why?" cannot be known. Consider Job.

- ❑ What is the Christian response to this argument? The first three statements are true.<sup>21</sup> The fourth statement is false, which means the concluding statement does not follow. So while some say the first three statements are logically incompatible, the Christian philosopher disagrees.
- ❑ In response to the logical argument, many theologians and Christian philosophers use the “free will defense,” as developed by philosopher Alvin Plantinga. The free will defense is based on the idea that human beings were created with a “free will,” and “*real freedom*” *necessarily* means there is a possibility of moral evil. As Plantinga says, “To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, he [God] must create creatures capable of moral evil.”<sup>22</sup> God could have created a world of “robots” programmed to do his will, but he chose to create humans with “free will” (which Plantinga says is more valuable than creating a world of humans without “free will”). Furthermore, though God is all-powerful, he cannot create a world in which free humans cannot use their freedom to commit evil, or they are no longer free.<sup>23</sup> Plantinga and other philosophers agree that God has *morally sufficient* reasons to permit evil and suffering.
- ❑ Other responses to the logical problem could be presented, but suffice it to say that philosophers have adequately shown that the existence of evil is not necessarily logically incompatible with the Christian view of God. Philosopher William Rowe, a self-professed atheist, agreed: “Some philosophers have contended that the existence of evil is *logically inconsistent* with the existence of the theistic God. No one, I think, has succeeded in establishing such an extravagant claim.”<sup>24</sup>

### The Evidential Problem

- ❑ The probabilistic (or evidential) argument claims that, based on the evidence, especially the evidence of “gratuitous” evil (that is, evil without any possible good reason), God’s existence is improbable.<sup>25</sup>
- ❑ Philosophers J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig offer the following response.<sup>26</sup>
  1. Relative to the full scope of evidence, God’s existence is probable.<sup>27</sup>
  2. We are not in a good position to access with confidence the probability that God has no morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evils that occur. We are finite, cognitively limited creatures attempting to understand the operations of an infinite God.
  3. Christian theism entails doctrines that increase the probability of the coexistence of God and evil.
    - The chief purpose of life is not happiness, but the knowledge of God.
    - Mankind is in a state of rebellion against God and his purposes.
    - God’s purpose is not restricted to this life but spills over into eternal life.
    - The knowledge of God is an incommensurable (impossible to measure) good.

So, how can a good God allow evil and suffering? Kenneth Richard Samples presents three broad points that come to bear on this difficult question (Samples, 249-251).

1. God has a morally adequate, but not yet fully revealed, reason for allowing evil and suffering. “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (*Genesis 18:25*)
2. God’s sovereignty and glory will be displayed by his ultimate prevailing over evil.
3. God allows evil and suffering because of the greater good that results from it (*Acts 2:22-23*).

<sup>21</sup> Though we might ask, how does a finite human being really understand what “all-good” means?

<sup>22</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 30.

<sup>23</sup> Plantinga’s free will defense is not without its weaknesses, but many agree that it accomplishes its objective, which is to show that evil is not necessarily logically inconsistent with the Christian view of God. For those whose theologies reject libertarian free will, there are also arguments from a compatibilist perspective, e.g., John S. Feinberg, *Why I Am a Christian*, ed. Norman L. Geisler & Paul K. Hoffman, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> William L. Rowe, “IX. The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (October 1979), 335.

<sup>25</sup> The skeptic’s logic is this: 1) If God exists, gratuitous evil does not exist; 2) Gratuitous evil exists; 3) Therefore, God does not exist. A theist might respond: 1) If God exists, gratuitous evil does not exist; 2) God exists (based on other evidence); 3) Therefore, gratuitous evil does not exist.

<sup>26</sup> Moreland & Craig (542-547)

<sup>27</sup> For example, Kreeft and Tacelli list twenty arguments for the existence of God. Peter Kreeft & Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994).