



God Has a Story, Too

Reflections on Suffering & Evil

Schedule/Topics

Jan 14 – Defining the problem, framing a solution
Jan 21 – Suffering & evil from a non-Christian perspective
Jan 28 – Suffering & evil from a Christian perspective

Feb 4 – Suffering & evil in light of the cross
Feb 11 – Suffering & evil as a mirror*
Feb 18 – Suffering & evil does *not* get the final word

Introducing Mirror as Metaphor

Wholly objective, entirely impartial, and casting no judgment, a mirror captures everything in its purview. Nothing is exempt. When the mirror reflects suffering and evil, some catch a glance and quickly turn away. Clamoring “It’s all good!”, they go about their lives in a kind of euphoric denial. Others gaze intently into calamity and, gripped by its horror, join the ranks of countless other sufferers whose misery robs them of any joy. Whether dismissing tragedy altogether or being defeated by pain and affliction, we rarely see all that the mirror shows.

In fact, the mirror serves a dual purpose. It shows us not only suffering and evil, but also the absence of a corresponding good. Sometimes — most times in fact — we miss this. A viewer who scoffs at the Mona Lisa as a load of rubbish does not tell us much about the painting; he does tell us a great deal about himself. Similarly, the mirror contains not only what is in its reflection, but also portrays something about ourselves. It reflects our moral intuition.

Where does this faculty of moral intuition come from and what is its source? It cannot be sense perception, for we do not need to see the torture of children to know it is wrong. Neither is moral intuition found in reason alone, since reason takes for granted the existence of our moral categories. Good and evil are not simply conclusions of an argument from reason, but givens of our humanity. Society at large may help us shape and fine-tune our moral categories, but society does not give them to us. The most we could say is that societies have differences, but not that those differences are good or bad, kind or cruel.

The Mirror and God’s Image within

If the mirror of evil serves to reflect a faculty whereby we discern evil as evil, could it be that this same faculty also discerns the good? Could this faculty be the *imago Dei*, the image of God within?

A sustained “reflection” into the mirror enlarges our vision and expands our view to realize that:

1. All humans retain some remnant of God’s image, but sin has caused that image to be inverted and distorted.
 - ✓ Wise stewardship over creation turns into foolish idolatry of the creation (Ex 32; Rom 1). By ousting God and injecting self at the center, suffering and evil become our problems and so we are their only solution.
 - ✓ Our drive to construct an autonomous self in an ethos that worships the privatized, customized, individualized self is a reflection of that idolatry. In striving to “be ourselves” we find that our lives are lived inside an echo chamber where the only voice is ours and our sense of communal identity is snuffed out. We’ve forgotten that it is the imaging relationship rather than the image itself that is the primary vantage point for our identity. Suffering and evil then serve only to turn up the volume on the already deafening silence of our loneliness.
2. For Christ-followers, suffering and evil, ironically, animate the *imago Dei* within.
 - ✓ Bearing both the image of Adam and the image of Christ, a persistent existential dissonance constantly pulls us in two opposing directions when looking for relief from suffering and evil (Rom 7:14-25).
 - ✓ Rather than our moral intuition being blunted by suffering and evil, it is sharpened by them.
 - ✓ Risking being spiritually shipwrecked by trials, we find that meaning and purpose can emerge from them (Rom 8:18-23; 33-36). Just as the reflection captures our angst, it is our angst that expresses our longing for peace and repose, a sense of well-being or shalom.
 - ✓ Because God has in fact “foreknew, predestined, called, justified” and “glorified” our lives with him (Rom 8:29), despair from tragedy may be our temporary lot, but will never outflank or overwhelm our eternal destiny and confident hope in “the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39).



God Has a Story, Too

Reflections on Suffering & Evil

3. The mirror puts evil in its place, showing it to be dependent on the good (rather than vice versa). Suffering and sorrow are made small next to the goodness and kindness of God (Rom 8:18).
4. The mirror actually performs double duty.
 - ✓ On the one hand, it causes us to cry out with Habakkuk "How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?" (Hab 1:2-3).
 - ✓ On the other hand, the mirror enables us to pronounce with that same prophet, "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights" (Hab 3:17-19).
 - ✓ With Job the mirror insists we stand in protest, tear our robes, and shave our heads in the wake of tragedy.
 - ✓ Yet from that same stance believers echo Job's sure confidence, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:20-21).

Some Remediation on Mystery

- Though the ways of God may be *inscrutable*, they are *not* gratuitous (Rom 11:33-36).
- Our cognitive and moral equipment is damaged by sin. Is it any surprise, therefore, that mystery is what remains? At present "we know in part" (1 Cor 13:9). Even Jesus himself cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46).
- The thundering questions God levels against Job show the limitations of our knowledge (Job 38-42).

Not only are God's ways intellectually complex, they are morally profound. Quite simply we are not equipped with the necessary tools to grasp all that God is doing through hardship and affliction. And, it is *because* we're not prepared for the implications of suffering and evil that God covers them in a shroud of mystery. Mystery, therefore, is God's gift to us. It is set alongside the tools of faith and trust, which are also God's gifts!

Is it reasonable to expect that more knowledge or explanation will abate or even soften the blow from our psychological pain issuing from suffering and evil? The fact is, we have intellectual and moral limitations. It is wholly unlikely, therefore, that more information will be a silver bullet or panacea. Knowing this, we must respect what others might be going through (Pr 14:10) and not try to be the strength that only faith provides or the comfort that only God gives. Our abilities to help others or even ourselves is imperfect and incomplete.

What seems impossible and senseless to us makes perfect sense in the plan and purposes of God. Therefore, a fuller explanation of God's purposes may be withheld from us until such time that we are able to receive it (compare Mk 8:31-33; Lk 9:44-45 with Acts 2:23 or Gen 22 with Rom 4).

The Christian answer to the mystery of suffering and evil is not more knowledge, but the very presence of Christ as Immanuel, God with us (Mt 1:23). There's a sense in which we've no right to claim "surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life" until we have first embraced our "walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Only then will we know "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20).

As we look into the mirror of evil and lean in on mystery, we find a larger vision of it all. We acknowledge the *de facto*, yet we set our eyes on the *de jure*. We experience the real, but our hearts remain fixed on the ideal. In gaining heaven's perspective, we make sense of our earthly journey. We embrace all that the mirror reflects and find that the glory and goodness of God outshines it all and is the one image that remains forever.

Soli Deo gloria!

*I'm especially indebted to Eleonore Stump, Paul Moser, F. F. Bruce, John Feinberg, and Gay Hubbard for their insights.