



God Has a Story, Too

Reflections on Suffering & Evil

Why Suffering & Evil?

Holy Scripture confronts us with two realities: the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God and suffering and evil. Perhaps the most perplexing difficulty Christians face is embracing both of these. This is not just an intellectual puzzle to be solved. These two realities are existentially taxing. All we have to do is live long enough to learn that the question “Why?” is much more than a thought experiment. We can be as orthodox as the apostle Paul, yet so lack the apostle’s spiritual maturity that when crisis hits, our most fundamental beliefs are called into question. The purpose of this series, therefore, is to help us think biblically, thoughtfully, and fairly about suffering and evil in light of our faith. More importantly, it is to strengthen our confidence in God’s love and goodness so that outrage and resentment toward evil and suffering is disarmed by our trust and hope in God.

Schedule/Topics

Jan 14 – Defining the problem, framing a solution

Feb 4 – Suffering & evil in light of the cross

Jan 21 – Suffering & evil from a non-Christian perspective

Feb 11 – Suffering & evil as a mirror

Jan 28 – Suffering & evil from a Christian perspective

Feb 18 – Suffering & evil does *not* get the final word

Defining the Problem of Suffering & Evil

Since suffering is caused by evil, what then causes evil? Not all evil is created equally.

- **Moral evil:** arises from personal moral agents either by what humans do or fail to do. (Note: Augustine argued that **moral evil is a privation**; an absence of something that ought to be present in its subject. Evil has no existence on its own but, like rust, requires a host for it to manifest. Human freewill that is misused is a likely candidate for the host of moral evil.)
- **Natural evil:** arises from non-personal, natural agency (famine, fire, earthquakes, hurricanes, et al.).
- **Gratuitous evil:** may contain moral or natural causes but seemingly has no purpose, goal, or aim.

Rather than the problem of evil, there are really two problems of evil to consider.

1. The **religious problem** — in the wake of a particular instance of suffering and evil our relationship with God is somehow disrupted or called into question. The religious problem reasons:
 - a) Suffering and evil are real, not apparent.
 - b) An all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God exists.
 - c) In light of my experience of evil, beliefs a) and b) are difficult to reconcile.
 - d) Therefore, either a) or b) must be significantly modified to maintain both.
2. The **intellectual problem** — the quantity and intensity of many evil acts taken together make it less likely that either evil and suffering are real or that an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God exists. The intellectual problem reasons:
 - a) Suffering and evil are real, not apparent.
 - b) An all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving may or may not God exist.
 - c) If light of my knowledge of evil, beliefs a) and b) are impossible to reconcile.
 - d) Therefore, either a) or b) must be abandoned.

It’s important we distinguish between objections to belief in God and honest questions about how God operates. We must identify which problem is in focus. Attempts at addressing the religious problem with an intellectual solution is rarely effective, and vice versa. Still, it’s possible the two problems are conflated, namely, **the religious problem may give rise to an intellectual problem**. Therefore, addressing the one may open the door to addressing the other.

It’s conceivable that both problems include some tacit assumptions, for example:

- The world would be morally different given the existence of God.
- God does not have morally sufficient reasons for permitting suffering and evil.



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Framing a Solution: Two Considerations

1. Consider **God's sovereignty**. Is there really such a thing as gratuitous evil given the meticulous sovereignty of God (cf., 1 Sam 23:7-13; Matt 11:20-24; Lk 12:6-7; Jn 9:3)? What is meant by God's "meticulous sovereignty?"

God ordains every means toward his certain ends. He is the chief architect and ruler over the nations (Job 12:23; Ezra 1:1; 6:22; Ps. 22:28; 33:14-15; Pr. 16:9; 21:1; Dan. 4:34-35; Acts 17:26). Even in the midst of evil, God masterfully and skillfully redirects sinful human choices toward his ultimate goals, whether for blessing, discipline, or judgment (Gen. 37:28; 45:5; 50:20; 2 Kgs. 19:25; Is. 10:5, 12; 13:17; Jer. 25:9, 12; Ez. 14:9; Hab. 1:5-12; Rom. 8:28-29). As the sovereign, all-knowing Architect of the universe, he has an overall "blueprint," known only to him, in which he has already engineered every effect from every cause and every consequence from every condition. In his perfect wisdom and almighty power, God's resolve is to bring about the precise purpose which he intends for his creation. Ultimately, everything that comes to pass is what he has purposed, and everything he has purposed comes to pass (Is. 14:26-27; Eph. 1:11).

Given a strong view of God's meticulous sovereignty, then **all** suffering and evil occurs within the parameters of God's knowledge, care, and control. But, this view does not entail God is the direct cause of suffering and evil. "The exercise of absolute sovereignty does not exclude the relative operation of secondary causes; on the contrary, it includes it." (Henri Blocher).

2. What about **mystery**? Can it help us move toward a better understanding of the problem of suffering and evil? Or, is playing the "mystery card" just an intellectual cop-out?
 - With regards to natural evil, it is not unreasonable to propose that God's intervention of natural disasters may create some greater evil. The natural order is a system and to suspend or alter one natural law in order to prevent harm may result in far worse implications. Thus, certain goods may emerge from the suffering caused by an earthquake to justify God's nonintervention.
 - The fact that Christians do not know why God permits suffering and evil is hardly reason to abandon belief in God's existence or his goodness. There are many other reasons to believe God exists without knowing all the details of how he operates or why he allows certain things. God's goodness does not stand or fall on a story yet to be written.
 - To be sure, the reality of suffering and evil may be reason to question God's goodness and power, but no one is in a position to provide final answers or draw definitive conclusions. Put differently, are we humans *really* able to claim God does not have morally sufficient reasons for allowing suffering and evil, whether moral, natural, or (seemingly) gratuitous? Therefore, given our limited view, it is prudent to remain cautiously agnostic as to God's operations and acknowledge some mystery (Deut 29:29).

Weekly Meditation:

On the one hand Jesus instructs us to pray that God would "deliver us from evil" (Matt 6:13), whereas Job bows in reverence over God permitting suffering and evil (read carefully Job 42:1-6). Can these two be reconciled?

*Some information here can be referenced in other sources by Clay Jones, Craig Blomberg, Eleonore Stump, N. T. Wright, Doug Moo, John Feinberg, D. A. Carson, John Wenham, Paul Helm, Doug Geivett, A. E. Wilder-Smith, Alvin Plantinga, Paul Moser, Henri Blocher, C. Stephen Evans, Oscar Cullman, Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall, Douglas Groothuis.