



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

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

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.



God Has a Story, Too

Reflections on Suffering & Evil

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.



God Has a Story, Too

Reflections on Suffering & Evil

Schedule/Topics

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

Feb 4 – Evil & suffering in light of the cross
Feb 11 – Evil & suffering as a mirror
Feb 18 – Evil & suffering does not get the final word

Atheism — No Rationale for Outrage against Evil

1. If there is no God, there is no objective moral standard against which to measure good.
2. If there is no objective moral standard against which to measure good, then no act or event is objectively evil or morally wrong.
3. If no act or event is objectively evil or morally wrong, then evil and morality are subjectively grounded in some arbitrary standard or human convention.
4. If evil and morality are subjectively grounded in some arbitrary standard or human convention, then there is no rationale for moral outrage at any act or event that seems inherently wrong.
5. If there is no rationale for moral outrage at any act or event that seems inherently wrong, then our moral intuitions are mistaken or misguided.
6. If our moral intuitions are mistaken or misguided, then ideas of evil and morality are reduced to preference.
7. If ideas of evil are reduced to preference, then the actions of Mother Teresa and Adolf Hitler were morally no different in kind and are morally equivalent to drinking diet Coke instead of sweet tea.

Deism — No Comfort or Hope in the face of Evil

1. If God is not all-good or all-loving, he would be unable to sympathize with us during suffering and evil.
2. If God is not all-powerful, he could not stop evil or sustain us in suffering, though he may really want to.
3. If God is not all-knowing, then suffering and evil would catch him by surprise. An ignorant God may emotionally react against suffering and evil, but he cannot plan for it.
4. If God is not all-wise, then he would not be able to achieve the best ends from our suffering and evil.
5. Therefore, a god who is emotionally distant, impotent, ignorant, or perplexed offers no comfort to sustain us and no hope to inspire us against suffering and evil.

Pantheism — No Meaning in Evil

The line between good and evil is illusion. Since there is no distinction between them, they have no meaning.

1. God is not personal or transcendent. Instead, God is part of the universe rather than above it and, therefore, cannot come from beyond to help us.
2. Buddhism: Suffering is not caused by evil but arises from human desire. Our problem is desire.
3. Hinduism: Suffering emerges not from evil but from the negative effects of past lives (karma).
4. The key to release from suffering is to detach from this life and embrace the oneness of all things.
5. What is perceived as evil is really a limitation that requires human effort to overcome. The goal is to rise above the illusion of evil and cycle up the chain through reincarnation as we increasingly recognize our oneness with all things.

Dualism — No Victory over Evil

1. Good and evil are two distinct principles and eternally exist with equal power. God and Satan are not real but are personifications of good and evil.
2. If good and evil are equal but opposing forces, then neither gets the upper hand and the odds are even that either wins the day.
3. Taoism: Suffering is the product of ignorance in failing to acknowledge the interdependence of all dualities (female [yin]/male [yang], light/dark, truth/error, love/hate, etc.). Labeling something good is the same as labeling its opposite evil and vice versa. The one cannot exist without the other. Embracing rather than resisting the interdependence of all dualities promotes harmonious living.
4. Thus, there is no victory to be had.



God Has a Story, Too

Reflections on Suffering & Evil

Can a case be made for God's existence from suffering and evil?

1. Suffering and evil are real and are a departure from the way the world ought to be.
2. If suffering and evil are a departure from the way the world ought to be, then there is a way the world ought to be.
3. If there is a way the world ought to be, then there is a master plan or moral design for the way the world ought to be.
4. If there is a master plan or moral design for the way the world ought to be, then there is a Master Planner or Moral Designer for the world.
5. This Master Planner or Moral Designer we call "God."

When we ponder the love of God in the cross of Christ, the problem of evil becomes *our* problem of evil. The question we must face is not how God can justify himself in permitting suffering and evil, but how we can justify ourselves before him!

Weekly Meditation:

"However else we may try to explain the difficulties which are all around us, we are not allowed to invoke God's incompetence.

Furthermore, even if God could be absolved of the responsibility for inactivity by his impotence, he could not be absolved of the responsibility for having allowed the situation to arise, for when he created the world he must have known the potentialities that he was creating. Or, if he did not know what he was doing, we must add ignorance and folly to his impotence and inactivity."

— John Wenham, *The Goodness of God*

*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, Henri Blocher, C. Stephen Evans, Oscar Cullman, Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall.



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

What Scripture affirms

1. Evil is evil. From Gen 3 to Rev 20, the Bible is clear about the reality and nature of evil. The lines are not blurred (Is 5:20).
2. God is good and so is his creation.
3. God is sovereign and everything, including suffering and evil, is used to achieve his good ends.
4. Suffering from evil is part of the Christian life (Philip 1:29-30; 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pt 4:1).
5. Suffering and evil are temporary and come with an expiration date (Rev 21-22).

The NT puts far more weight on helping Christians respond appropriately to suffering and evil than in answering the “Why?” question.

Three Kinds of suffering all subject to

Suffering related to the Fall (cf., Rom 8:19-22)

- No one is promised exemption from terminal illnesses, natural disasters, or birth defects (cf., Jn 9:1). Jesus implores us to recognize that moral and natural evil, in part, should drive all to repentance (see Lk 13:4-5).
- Spiritual warfare is the natural outcome of living in a universe governed by God but compromised by the evil one (Matt 6:13; Eph 6:10-20; 1 Pt 5:8-9).

Suffering related to personal sin

- Some suffering is related to personal sin (Jn. 5:1-14; 1 Cor 11:27-32; possibly James 5:13-16).
- AIDS contracted because of sexual promiscuity, cancer from smoking, liver disease from alcohol abuse.

Suffering related to the purposes of God

- All suffering ultimately brings God glory (Jn 9:3; Jn 11:4;). How?
 - ✓ God’s power to withstand temptation is displayed when we suffer (1 Cor 10:13, 2 Cor 12:9).
 - ✓ God’s justice is meted out on the wicked (Pr 16:4; Rom 9:22-23).
- God permits suffering so we can empathize with those who are undergoing similar affliction (2 Cor 1:3-7).
- The glory that God will reveal in us far outweighs any trouble we encounter in our pilgrimage here (2 Cor 4:17; Rom 8:18; Rev 21:4).
- Suffering for our faith exposes God’s patience in bringing others into his kingdom (2 Pt 3:8-10).

The Christian response to suffering

God brings difficulties into our lives for a purpose (Rom 5:2-4; Jm. 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:5-7), which is achieved by our mature response. Consider James 1:2-4.

- “Joy” for James is a quiet, inner conviction and bold confidence that God is good and in control. This is not to say believers do not experience doubt, sadness, or other emotions when faced with trials (Note: James does not say “only joy” but “all joy” meaning sincere and genuine joy).
- In writing “trials of various kinds” James casts his net widely to include a variety of trials and sufferings.
- The trials are not meant to show the authenticity of faith, but to purify it by strengthening (Jm. 1:3). Muscles become stronger when repeatedly faced with resistance. Likewise, building strength through trials is the goal of trials.
- The goal is not perfection but maturity in character and Christian virtue.
- If indeed God uses all kinds of trials to deepen our maturity toward Christlikeness, then facing every trial with joy is perfectly reasonable.



God Has a Story, Too

Reflections on Suffering & Evil

Suffering & Evil: A double-edged sword?

- Though evil does repel some, it could also draw others toward God. C. S. Lewis writes:

“No doubt Pain as God’s megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.

Now God, who has made us, knows what we are and that our happiness lies in Him. Yet we will not seek it in Him as long as He leaves us any other resort where it can even plausibly be looked for. While what we call ‘our own life’ remains agreeable we will not surrender it to Him. What then can God do in our interests but make our own life less agreeable to us, and take away the plausible sources of false happiness?”

— *The Problem of Pain*, pp. 95-96

- It was Friedrich Nietzsche who coined the phrase “What doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger” but that didn’t turn out to be true for him because Nietzsche went insane. Before his death, Nietzsche “collapsed into insanity” and “during the course of ... eleven years he slowly but inexorably declined” until in “his final years he was plainly aware of nothing” (*The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*). Suffering is a benefit to those who belong to Christ—it does make us stronger—but it is only misery to those who persist in rejecting him. As 2 Corinthians 7:10 puts it: “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.” (Clay Jones)
- Imagine, after cataloging his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 4, 2 Corinthians 6 and 2 Corinthians 11, the Apostle Paul saying “I couldn’t make sense of it all so I gave up!” Instead, he sees God’s point and purpose in his suffering, embracing his weakness so he might find the strength of Christ. (Don Carson)
- Therefore, every pain, every instance of suffering in this life is a redemptive moment and is not meaningless or purposeless. Suffering is God’s chosen means of instilling hope and bringing about the optimal state of all things (see Rom 5:3-5; Heb 12:1-3). (N. T. Wright)

“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” — Rom 8:31-39

*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, Henri Blocher, C. Stephen Evans, Oscar Cullman, Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall.



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

The Bible Project Video — Sacrifice & Atonement (see <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/sacrifice-atonement/>)

Suffering and the Cross

What can we say about the sufferings of Christ? Although Christ's suffering was qualitatively different from ours, it runs parallel to our suffering in that:

- Christ experienced alienation from God (expressed in his cry of dereliction, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" See Mk 15:34). So too with Adam and Eve and with us (Gen 3:23-24; Eph 2:13).
- The significance of Christ's sufferings is the wisdom of God on display to the entire world. (1 Cor 1:18; Philip 1:13). Our sufferings bear the same gospel witness to everyone (Philip 2:17-18).
- Jesus "learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8), not as the result of his own failings, but the failings of others who were hell-bent against God's will. He knows the costly price of listening to and living for God. So too must we be heaven-bent on pursuing what God is doing through our suffering, no matter the costs (1 Pt 1:7). After all, "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12; also 1 Pt 2:21).
- Since Jesus was fully human, he suffered like us and shares in all our human weaknesses. He was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Is 53:3; see also Heb 4:15-16; 5:7-9; Mk 14:33-36). Therefore, Jesus was no super-human simply because he is God-Incarnate. So, let's not entertain any notion that it was easier for him or that he really can't understand what we're going through.
- Three times Jesus pleaded with God to "take this cup" from him (Mk 14:33-42) and yet this request was answered in the negative! No matter how much passion, submission, and devotion surrounds our prayers, it simply may not be in our best interests to receive what we ask. Clearly it was not in anyone's best interests for God to grant Jesus's request and remove the cup! Jesus **does** feel the depth of our despair whenever the world around us is flying upside down and "all hell is breaking lose." Our sufferings are likened unto his.
- Christ did not suffer solely as a victim nor was his suffering entirely passive. He voluntarily and actively embraced it because he knew there was purpose (Jn 10:17-18). When we embrace our suffering, then God's purposes are not held hostage by our despair or outrage. What more could God do to redeem our suffering than what he has already done in Christ?
- The Lion of Judah is also the Lamb that was slain (Rev 5:5-6). Christ's resurrection and exaltation are direct results of his suffering. The road to glory is traveled on the rails of suffering (see esp. Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 1:5; Philip 3:10; Col 1:24; 2 Tim 2:3). So too with us. *God has a story, too!*



God Has a Story, Too

Reflections on Suffering & Evil

Living the Cruciform Life

Although the devil is defeated by the cross and resurrection, he has not yet conceded defeat. To be sure the devil has been overthrown, but he has not been eliminated. The battle continues to rage (Eph 6:11-13 ;1 Pt 5:8-9) and believers are called by Jesus to engage in battle by living a cruciform life (Lk 9:23; Gal 2:20; 1 Jn 3:16).

- In a world compromised by sin at every turn, perfect love necessarily will be a suffering love; a love governed by and finding its culmination in the cross of Christ (Rom 5:8). Living the cruciform life involves all the pains and perils of a suffering love.
- Some suffering is God's loving discipline to shape us (Ps 23:4; Heb 12:7-11). The parent who scolds their child in a crowd of children expresses their devotion and commitment to the child's growth and maturity. Hardships likewise may be God's means of marking you as children and molding you into Christlikeness (Rom 5:3-4; 8:18; Jm 1:2-4; 1 Pt 4:12-13). If the means of discipline seem too harsh or too cruel, then maybe we have not sufficiently understood or embraced God's glorious ends.
- The cruciform life extends forgiveness to others and receives it from others (Eph 4:32). Forgiveness turns hell on its head and frees us to love and be loved. Offering forgiveness to an offender overcomes evil by empowering the offended with the requisite freedom necessary to love the offender. Love, therefore, has the final word, not the offense.
- Forgiveness is not only a healing power but the reigning power over evil. Whenever we offer forgiveness, not only is the grip of resentment loosened, but the master of evil is disarmed. The powers of hell were overthrown at the cross and our entire debt to sin was paid (Col 2:13-15). The extension of forgiveness reenacts this victory.
- The cross of Christ is God's triumph predicted (Gen 3:15; Matt 16:21-23) and our victory secured (Heb 2:14)!
- The cross of Christ is the culmination of an obedient life lived (Rom 5:19; Philip 2:8). Christ's moral victory over evil was procured by his refusal to disobey God, hate his enemies, or use his power wrongly.

In short, Christ took our place, bore our sin, became our curse, endured our penalty, and died our death. Therefore, God is not an unwilling judge who has to be persuaded by Jesus to love and to forgive, because it was God himself who demonstrated his love by providing the atoning sacrifice for all our sin. "It is finished!"

It was God himself who conquered evil by the cross of Christ and changed forever the trajectory of all human suffering. He has paid our debt in full without remainder! "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (1 Cor 15:57).

*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, John Stott, Gordon Fee, Doug Geivett, A. E. Wilder-Smith, Bruce Demarest, Alvin Plantinga, Henri Blocher, C. Stephen Evans, Oscar Cullman, Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall.



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.



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

Audio Recording: "God Has a Story, Too" by Dr. Gay Hubbard (you can listen on my website at <https://goo.gl/BfDzRL>)

Rehearsing the Story

Week 1 we stated that the purpose of this class is to strengthen our confidence in God's love and goodness so that outrage and resentment toward suffering and evil are disarmed by our trust and hope in God. Observing distinctions between natural evil and moral evil, the religious problem versus the intellectual problem, we attempted framing a solution through the lens of God's meticulous sovereignty and mystery. **Week 2** outlined 4 non-Christian views of suffering and evil, and we offered an argument for God's existence from suffering and evil. **Week 3** emphasized that God uses suffering and evil in the lives of believers as redemptive instruments to shape and mold us into the image of the suffering and glorified Christ. **Week 4** turned our focus on the cross. We proposed that when the light of the cross shines on suffering and evil, then meaning and significance begin to emerge. It is from the Lamb who was slain that the Lion of Judah appears to illuminate our path and inspire our journey through pain and affliction. We risked a thought experiment in **Week 5**, using mirror as metaphor to enlarge our vision of God's care. Though our moral and cognitive limitations are reflected by the mirror of pain and suffering, affliction also serves to sharpen our moral intuition and promote a longing for shalom and rest. This final week offers hope as we embrace one simple yet profound truth, namely, that our story is part of a much larger and richer storyline to redeem everything in creation. Even though we cannot be certain *how* God uses suffering and evil, we can be sure *that* he does so, because God has a story, too!

Revisiting the Meticulous Providence of God

Not only does God permit and redirect evil toward his purposes, he also restrains it. Consider just a snapshot of God's careful and wise control:

- ✓ Abimelek was kept from having relations with Sarah, because God promised to fulfill his redemptive plan via Abraham's offspring (Gen 20:1-7).
- ✓ Haman's wicked plan to destroy the Jewish population was overruled by God's providential orchestration to promote Esther in the Persian empire (Esther 4:14; 9:1-4), thus preserving a people from whom the Messiah would come.
- ✓ God confines the evil of Nineveh by providing Jonah as a prophet to preach a message of repentance (Jonah 1:2; 3:10), although a few generations later God destroys the Assyrian capital for her recalcitrant idolatries (Nahum; see also Is 10).
- ✓ Even inexplicable disaster and seemingly gratuitous evil are not lost on God's story, but serve a purpose in the overall blueprint (Gen 37:28; 45:5; 50:20; 2 Kgs 19:25; Is 14:26-27; Jer 25:9, 12; Ez 14:9; Lk 13:1-5; Eph 1:11).

The Legitimacy of our Hope

Our present identity and our future reality is fundamentally tied to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Because Christ is raised, we can be certain that...

1. The world is not a closed system of impersonal cause and effect principles, routine physical laws of nature, or random social interaction among morally compromised humans. Instead, the world is an open system where miracles of God are not only possible but actual in history!
2. God's power to transform history's greatest injustice (the crucifixion of Christ) into the greatest glory of the entire universe has been definitively demonstrated.



God Has a Story, Too

Reflections on Suffering & Evil

Listen to me! The greatest display of God's power was not in the past at creation nor is it in the present sustaining of the universe. God's power was comprehensively and supernaturally displayed at the cross of Jesus when he overcame the final enemy known as death. In profound irony, it is by Christ's death that he conquered death. Once and for all, Christ atoned for our sins and opened wide the doorway to forgiveness and reconciliation with God. It is the cross of Christ that turns hell on its head and defies all suffering and evil! But, God's story does not end there.

Jesus's resurrection and exaltation are heaven's triumphant declaration that all suffering and evil, all pain and affliction have an expiration date! The resurrection of Christ shows not only God's ability to reconstitute your material body thus demonstrating his power over your **mortal** life (Rom 8:11), but also shows God's power to completely refashion the immaterial order of the universe, thus demonstrating his power over your **moral** life as well. This is so important for us to realize that Paul asserts "death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin...But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor 15:54-56).

And so, God makes his appeal to us ...

"Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits at God's right hand in the place of honor and power. Let heaven fill your thoughts. Do not think only about things down here on earth. For you died when Christ died, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your real life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory" (Col 3:1-4, NLT).

The same power that raised Christ from the dead is present in you right here, right now to live the life God has called you to live and to walk every day with a spring in your step and a hope in your heart (cf., Eph 1:19-20)! Suffering and evil, therefore, do **not** and **cannot** get the final word; Christ does! Our story has forever been re-scripted and we can confidently and loudly proclaim **God has a story, too!**

*I'm indebted to and have referenced many others who have written so well on the problem of evil and suffering. Some of those include, Clay Jones, Craig Blomberg, Eleonore Stump, N. T. Wright, Doug Moo, John Feinberg, D. A. Carson, John Wenham, J. P. Moreland, William Lane Craig, Paul Helm, Doug Geivett, Paul Moser, A. E. Wilder-Smith, Alvin Plantinga, Henri Blocher, C. Stephen Evans, Oscar Cullman, Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall, and Douglas Groothuis.