

The Problem of Suffering and Evil (Part 2)

Last week we embarked on a journey exploring this crucial question in Christian Apologetics; if God is omnibenevolent (all loving), omniscient (all knowing), omnipotent (all powerful) why is there evil and suffering in the world? We highlighted that many have turned from the faith because of unanswered questions in this area. We examined the tension between the good world God created and the cursed world we live in and the new world we anticipate. I find it interesting that many people expect us to be in a perfect world right now despite the consistent rebellion against God and His ways. *Romans 1:18 "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness."* We need to explore what this wrath looks like. We explored the concept of theodicies and I promised to explore this in more depth. I highlighted how Jesus identifies with our pain and suffering, and we examined how early apostles responded to trials and tribulations. We also looked at the limits of evil and the role of prayer as Jesus instructed. Our key verse for this subject remains *John 16:33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

We don't have all the answers. *Is 55:8-9 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.* Today, we will continue with our investigation starting with a deeper exploration of various philosophical positions with regards to evil.

Don't switch off when we have intellectual discussions in church. Let's love God with all our minds. As mentioned last week in the video recording, Amélie Rorty and others comprehensively articulate how evil and its relationship to the world has been understood in the West in a number of ways, including the following:

1. **Theodicy and coherentism:** Evil can be understood as part of or in relationship to God's larger plans for the cosmos. Coherentism in the context of evil and suffering is a position that seeks to understand the existence of evil within a coherent system of beliefs, rather than through direct evidence or linear explanations. Beliefs about evil and suffering must cohere with other beliefs in a person's worldview. The coherence of the belief system as a whole is what gives justification to individual beliefs about suffering and evil. I would like to add to this by highlighting various types of theodicies:

Theodicy is an attempt to justify the goodness and omnipotence of God in the face of the existence of evil and suffering in the world.

Augustinian Theodicy: Evil is a privation of good (i.e., a lack of good) and not a substance in itself. It entered the world through the misuse of free will by angels and humans. For Augustine, evil was not a physical thing so God could not have created it, rather it's a privation. It's the going wrong of something good. Natural evil came through the loss of order in nature. He also emphasized that God is also a just God.

Irenaean Theodicy: (2nd Century theologian). He believed that man was first created in the image of God but later will be in the likeness of God. The emphasis here is potential. Evil and suffering are necessary for spiritual growth and development. They provide opportunities for humans to develop virtues like courage and compassion. From here we get the Soul-Making Theodicy: The soul-making theodicy posits that suffering and evil are necessary for personal and spiritual

development. Popularized by the ideas of John Hick. It argues that challenges and suffering help develop virtues like courage, patience, and empathy. First order goods result directly from an action whilst second order goods are moral goods that result from our response to evil.

Process Theodicy: (Alfred Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne) God is not omnipotent in the traditional sense and cannot unilaterally prevent evil. Instead, God works within the processes of the universe to bring about good. Influenced by process philosophy (Hegel etc). This view suggests that God is part of the universal process of creation and affected by it.

Disavowal of Theodicy: This is the argument against theodicies. The argument is that most theodicies assume that whatever evil there is, exists for the sake of some greater good. They say that, if that is so, then it appears humans have no duty to prevent it, for in preventing evil they would also prevent the greater good for which the evil is required. Those against theodicies suggest that we are saying any action can be rationalized, for if one succeeds in performing an evil act, then God has permitted it, and so it must be for the greater good.

2. **The Neo-platonic:** Evil as the privation or negation of the good or being, so that evil is only evil set against the greater good.
3. **Manichaeism & Dualism:** Good and evil are equal conflicting powers expressing their opposition in human history. Dualism posits the existence of two fundamental principles, often seen as good and evil, in conflict. Examples include Zoroastrianism and some interpretations of Gnosticism. Suggests that suffering results from the ongoing struggle between these two forces.
4. **Pious Rationalism:** Human reason cannot understand evil, but reason must postulate a God to explain human morality.
5. **Pious Fidesm:** Human reason cannot understand evil, so a leap of faith is required to trust in God. **This is a form of Sceptical Theism:** Sceptical Theism holds that human beings are limited in their understanding and cannot grasp the reasons why an omnipotent and benevolent God might allow evil and suffering. Emphasizes the epistemic gap between human knowledge and divine reasons. Suggests that the presence of evil does not provide sufficient grounds to doubt God's existence.
6. **Pessimism:** Evil is real, but the world does not make sense, nor can it be understood.
7. **Non-existent:** Evil does not actually exist; rather, human beings project their own subjective disapproval onto events and actions. We know that the Christian Scientist cult sees evil as illusory. They see evil as illusions so they've been criticized for denying the reality of injury, death, and crimes on victims. It also creates a new problem, why God would create illusions of crime etc
8. **Logical Problem of Evil:** The logical problem of evil argues that the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God is logically incompatible with the existence of evil. It attempts to show a logical impossibility of the coexistence of God and evil. Attributed to philosophers like J.L. Mackie Australian philosopher from 20th Century, known for defending atheism). Suggests that the coexistence of God and evil is logically contradictory. He argues that all theodicies limit the power of God. This is well aligned with Atheism. In the context of suffering and evil, atheism often argues that the existence of extensive and unjustified suffering is evidence against the existence of God. Maintains that a world with so much suffering is more consistent with a godless universe. Can lead to moral frameworks that emphasize human responsibility for alleviating suffering.
9. **Evidential Problem of Evil:** The evidential problem of evil argues that while the existence of evil does not logically contradict the existence of God, the amount and kinds of evil provide strong

evidence against the likelihood of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God. Presented by philosophers like William Rowe. He speaks of the intensity of human and animal suffering stating that he can understand some degree of human suffering for growth and development but the suffering of animals seems pointless. If God is omniscient, He would see these things in advance and prevent them. Gregory S. Paul makes a similar argument with regards to the millions of innocent babies who die prematurely.

10. Free Will Defence: This defence argues that evil and suffering are the result of human free will, and that free will is necessary for genuine moral actions. Associated with Alvin Plantinga. **He argues that a world with free will and some evil is better than a world with no free will and no evil.** Norman Geisler, the Christian Apologist says, "Sure God could destroy all the evil of the world but in destroying it He would destroy good. Because one of the good things God made was freedom."

11. Pantheism: Pantheism posits that God and the universe are identical, and suffering and evil are aspects of the divine. Views suffering as a necessary part of the cosmic order. Encourages acceptance and understanding of suffering as part of the divine reality.

The one thing most people agree with is that there is too much evil and suffering in the world. Suffering is a universal phenomenon. We all suffer, the difference is the intensity and regularity of it.

Is God evil?

Some people hold this philosophical position. That's how they try to resolve what they see in the world. For some people they have resolved that God must be evil. They believe that God is not good. This is known as the Evil God Challenge. **Dystheism is the belief that God is not wholly good whilst Maltheism is the belief in an evil god.** Peter Forrest highlighted the problem of positing any character to God. He suggests that we rather hypothesize others, for example the God who loves drama or a God who creates in jest or even a God who loves creating regardless of the joy or suffering of the creatures.

According to the Bible, God cannot be the author of evil.

James 1:13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.

1 John 1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

1 Cor 14:33 For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord's people.

Lam 3:31-33 For no one is cast off by the Lord forever.³² Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.³³ For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.

God can't be evil. How can evil produce good things? There is kindness and selfless love in the world. If we were created in the image of God, it must come from Him.

Perhaps there is another explanation to the evil we see

2 Corinthians 4:4: "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

John 10:10 "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

What is Evil?

Is it enough for us to say that evil is the privation or absence of good? Is evil a thing or is it what someone does? The National Institute of Medicine says pain is essential for survival, "without pain the world would be an impossibly dangerous place." Marcus Singer says a usable definition of evil must be based on knowledge that "if something is really evil it can't be necessary and if it is really necessary it can't be evil." John Kemp said that evil cannot be correctly understood on a simple hedonistic scale on which pleasure appears as a plus and pain as a minus. Calder stated that evil must involve the attempt or desire to inflict significant harm on the victim without moral justification. John Kekes writes that an action is evil if it causes grievous harm to innocent victims and is deliberate, malevolently motivated and morally unjustifiable.

The Bible describes evil as anything that violates God's moral standards and anyone who chooses anything contrary to God's perfection chooses evil.

Not all suffering is due to evil or one's sin.

Luke 13:1-4 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? 3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. 4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?"

This causes us to see that the problem of evil is more complex than we sometimes make it. It raises the question of the **Personal Argument, which is Why me and Why Now?** Jesus is reinforcing the fact that the whole world is under God's wrath, and we all need to step into His grace and be covered by the blood of Jesus. We must not be quick to assume we are better than others who lose spiritual battles. Natural disasters are sometimes God's megaphone teaching us about the uncertainty of life

Accurate diagnosis results in accurate strategies and solutions, therefore it behoves us to study the various sources of suffering and evil.

Sources of Suffering and Evil

1. Satan is a major source of suffering and evil

John 8:44 "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

1 Peter 5:8 "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."

Revelation 12:9 "And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him."

Luke 22:31-32 (ESV) "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."

To sift is to test severely like wheat is sifted to separate it from chaff.

2. Individual suffering can be because of one's own sin

Proverbs 8:36: *"But those who fail to find me harm themselves; all who hate me love death."*

Proverbs 15:32: *"Those who disregard discipline despise themselves, but the one who heeds correction gains understanding."*

Isaiah 3:9 (NIV): *"The look on their faces testifies against them; they parade their sin like Sodom; they do not hide it. Woe to them! They have brought disaster upon themselves."*

2 Peter 2:12-15 (NIV): *"But these people blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like unreasoning animals, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like animals they too will perish. They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done. Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are blots and blemishes, revelling in their pleasures while they feast with you. With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood! They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Bezer, who loved the wages of wickedness."*

The context here is false teachers who secretly introduce heresies.

3. Some suffering is caused by other people's actions

1 Chronicles 21:14-17:14 "So the LORD sent a plague on Israel, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell dead.15 And God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem. But as the angel was doing so, the LORD saw it and relented concerning the disaster and said to the angel who was destroying the people, 'Enough! Withdraw your hand.' The angel of the LORD was then standing at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.16 David looked up and saw the angel of the LORD standing between heaven and earth, with a drawn sword in his hand extended over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell facedown.17 David said to God, 'Was it not I who ordered the fighting men to be counted? I, the shepherd, have sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? LORD my God, let your hand fall on me and my family, but do not let this plague remain on your people.'"

Jonah 1:12:12 "'Pick me up and throw me into the sea,' he replied, 'and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.'"

Some of the suffering we experience is by association. **The Bible says a lot about forbidden alliances. Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. It becomes a snare.**

4. Some suffering is caused by demons

Luke 13:10-13 "On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, 'Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.' Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God."

5. Some suffering is the result of God using evil entities or nations as instruments of His judgement

1 Sam 16:14-16 "Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. Saul's attendants said to him, 'See, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord command his servants here to search for someone who can play the lyre. He will play when the evil spirit from God comes on you, and you will feel better.'"

This can be seen as the divine passive

2 Kings 17:5-7 "The king of Assyria invaded the entire land, marched against Samaria and laid siege to it for three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, in Gozan on the Habor River and in the towns of the Medes. All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshiped other gods."

Isaiah 10:5-6 "Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath! I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me, to seize loot and snatch plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets."

Jeremiah 25:8-9 "Therefore the Lord Almighty says this: 'Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon,' declares the Lord, 'and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin.'"

Habakkuk 1:5-6 "Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own."

Ezekiel 21:31 "I will pour out my wrath on you and breathe out my fiery anger against you; I will deliver you into the hands of brutal men, men skilled in destruction."

Amos 6:14 "For the Lord God Almighty declares, 'I will stir up a nation against you, Israel, that will oppress you all the way from Lebo Hamath to the valley of the Arabah.'"

6. Some suffering is for growth of character

Isaiah 48:10 "See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction."

Hebrews 5:8 "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered."

Philippians 3:10 "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."

7. Some suffering is an act of judgement or punishment for evil

In 2 Kings 5:20-27 we see how Gehazi, Elisha's servant was struck with leprosy as a result of his deceit. Gehazi, secretly follows Naaman after Elisha refused gifts for healing him. Gehazi lies to Naaman, claiming that Elisha had a change of heart and needed gifts for two young prophets. Gehazi then hides the items at home, but Elisha confronts him. In Acts 5 we have the New Testament example of Ananias and Sapphira.

Acts 5:1-6 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. 3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God." 5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. 6 Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

Acts 12:19-21 On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. 22 They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." 23 Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

We don't have the Biblical narrative explaining why certain things are happening today but the reasons have not changed. There are some cases where indeed pride and self-aggrandizement comes before a fall.

8. Some suffering is because of God desiring to display His works in us

John 9:3 "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."

Was this man allowed to spend His childhood blind just so that God could be glorified in His healing later on? **Could it be that perhaps what you are going through is a story for His glory?**

9. Some suffering is the result of persecution and martyrdom

The 20th Century had more Christian martyrs than the previous 19 Centuries combined.

Rev 6:10-11 They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" 11 Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

1 Thess 3:2-3 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them.

1 Pet 4:19 So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

Make sure that when you suffer it is for the right reasons. It must be according to God's will and not because of your own foolishness.

10. Some natural disasters are because of sin

Revelation 16:8-9 "The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was allowed to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him."

Amos 4:6-9 "'I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me,' declares the Lord. 'I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up. People staggered from town to town for water but did not get enough to drink, yet you have not returned to me,' declares the Lord. 'Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, destroying them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to me,' declares the Lord."

God lists several natural disasters—drought, famine, blight, and locusts—as consequences of Israel's unfaithfulness and sin.

Genesis 19:24-25 "Then the Lord rained down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the Lord out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land."

May God reveal to us the source of the suffering or evil we experience so that we may overcome. We live in a world where there is suffering and evil, but we can stand on this promise and co-labour with Christ as we enforce His Kingdom of peace and righteousness onto the Earth.

Romans 16:20 "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you."

Reflection Questions

1. How does the concept of theodicy help us reconcile the existence of a benevolent God with the presence of evil in the world?
2. In what ways can the Augustinian Theodicy and Irenaean Theodicy offer comfort or challenge to those suffering?

3. How does the Process Theodicy view of God's power differ from traditional views, and what implications does this have for understanding suffering?
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Free Will Defence in explaining the existence of evil?
5. How might the argument against theodicies (disavowal of theodicy) impact one's faith or understanding of God?
6. In what ways can recognizing suffering as a tool for spiritual growth (Soul-Making Theodicy) change our perspective on personal hardships?
7. How do the ideas of Dystheism and Maltheism challenge traditional Christian views of God?
8. How does the logical problem of evil differ from the evidential problem of evil, and which do you find more compelling?
9. What role do you believe Satan plays in the presence of evil and suffering in the world, according to biblical texts?
10. How can understanding different sources of suffering (e.g., personal sin, other people's actions, demonic influence) help in responding to and alleviating suffering?

Assignments

1. **Essay Assignment:** Write a 2000-word essay exploring the different philosophical theodicies presented (Augustinian, Irenaean, Process Theodicy, Free Will Defence). Evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in addressing the problem of evil and suffering.
2. **Research Project:** Conduct a research project on the historical and contemporary responses to natural disasters within a Christian framework. Include how these events have been interpreted as acts of God or consequences of sin, and analyze the theological implications.
3. **Group Presentation:** In groups, create a presentation that explains the logical and evidential problems of evil. Include real-life examples and biblical references to support your points. Each group member should present one aspect of the problem and its implications for Christian faith.