

The Problem of Suffering and Evil

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."

Throughout the scriptures there seems to be two prevailing ideas around evil and suffering; the first is that they will both remain in the world until Jesus returns and establishes a new heaven and new earth and second, He has overcome them already. The fact that Jesus states that He has overcome the world, implies that we too have overcome the world. The complexity comes when we have to explore what He means by "the world" and what He means by "overcome". Nevertheless, in this statement there is still the sound of victory and dominion over certain things, despite the inevitability of "trouble". That is also something for us to unpack, what is "trouble"? There are two major types of evil and suffering in this world; natural and human. The natural kind is associated with earthquakes and other natural disasters. The human kind of evil is to do with armed robberies, wars, abuse and the list is endless. It is important to note that one could argue that some natural disasters are caused by human behaviour.

I am still the father in my household even if my children decide to do their own thing. Controlling your kids doesn't make you more of a father. When we make bad decisions we tend to look back and desire God's control. We wish God had forced us to do the right thing. I see it with my kids saying they wish certain sport had been forced at junior school so that they had participated and become good in that discipline. A gentleman said he wished that his father had forced him to do a different career. **Remember that if we didn't have a will, we would not be in the image of God who has a will. We would be like robots.** So, God has made this interesting world where the outcome is a mixture of the effect of His will on the earth and man's will. He has allowed that tension to exist. That's why Jesus says we must pray for His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. If everything that happens is God's will why does Jesus ask us to pray that His will is done. **Key questions people ask today, "If God is Good, why does He allow evil and suffering in the world? If God is all powerful, why does He not stop it?"** People seem to use the lack of clear answers to these questions as a reason for rejecting God and the Christian faith. It is important that apologists articulate a coherent Biblical theology with regards to this topic. A key word in this theme is **theodicy. Theodicy is an argument that seeks to vindicate God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence despite the evil and suffering in the world.** Over the next few weeks, when I explain what every believer should know about evil and suffering, I will be using expository apologetics in a series of theodicies.

Jesus identifies with our suffering

Hebrews 4:15 "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin."

He is a true high priest. Jesus was marginalised from birth because of where He came from. He was despised for being a Nazarene. If you are facing Xenophobia, He can identify with you. From birth, there was no room in the inn. He lost his earthly father when he was reasonably young. They must have had a close relationship for Joseph to have mentored him in carpentry.

Isaiah 53:3-5 He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. 4

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 53:7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

Isaiah 53:10-11 Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.11 After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

Jesus, despite going through troubles, still instructs His disciples to pray, “Deliver us from evil”, meaning prayer has an effect on the degree of suffering and evil. The evil within and the evil without.

May God reveal to you the why behind your troubles. He did so to Paul with regards to the thorn in his side.

Anticipating the New Heaven and New Earth

God created the world and said it was good. After the fall of man, things changed. Evil entered and God seemed to allow it to continue. The result of this is felt in the earth today.

Romans 5:12 (NIV): "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—"

Romans 8:20-22: 20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

Job 19:25-27 "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!"

On a few occasions God seemed to do a second take on what He had made. We see this in Noah's flood. What would have happened if He hadn't started over? We also see something similar when God was angry with the children of Israel and opted to make a people out of Moses. Would the world have ended up a better place if He had gone that route?

Exodus 32:9-10 (NIV) 9 "I have seen these people," the Lord said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people.10 Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."

Revelation 21:1-5 1 Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.4 '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." 5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

In the end God comes down and creates a new people who believe in Him and have His blood line. It seems to me, we are living between two worlds. **This is a tension for us who believe because we are a new creation but live in a world that is not yet new.** We live in this tension between a good world God had created and the fallen world we live in and the hope for a new world to come. With this in mind, let's remember Jesus' words, "I have overcome the world." When we see Jesus calming the storm is it not a picture of the authority that we can also walk in? I know of people who have prayed strong prayers to keep hurricanes at bay. Perhaps there is a dimension of the new heaven and new earth that we can walk in today. When Jesus said we will do greater works than these, was it limited to just healing the sick? I think not.

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Let's question the question. When Jesus was called good this was His response.

Mark 10:18 "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone.

I will say more about this later in the series. For now, just remember that there is a fine line. Who is evil and who is good? At what point does someone become bad? Where would you class Hitler vs Oscar Pistorius vs Jacob Zuma vs Puff Daddy vs Bill Clinton. The bible says, all have sinned and as a result the whole world is under God's wrath. Our cry is now Lord, in this life can we experience heaven on earth as you taught us to pray. It's already more than enough that we are saved and going to heaven. So be careful of sociological dualism; goodies vs baddies where the goodies tend to be the West and Israel and the baddies are always the Arabs. There are a lot of baddies in the West.

How did the early apostles respond to suffering and evil?

Suffering and evil are not new things. For now, before we go into the why of suffering, let's explore how we should respond to it. The important question to ask is, how did those who have gone before us respond to suffering and evil?

Rom 5:3-5 Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

James 1:2-4 "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

Rom 8:17-18 "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Phil 4:12-13 "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength."

The apostles seemed to understand its limits and temporary nature

2 Cor 4:8 "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed."

1 Pet 5:10 "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."

What is the extent of the power of evil?

In Christ we have victory over evil because He has overcome the world.

John 16:33 (NIV)"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."

Romans 12:21 (NIV)"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

1 Corinthians 15:57 (NIV)"But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

1 John 5:4 (NIV)"For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith."

It is important that as believers we see that just because evil and suffering are inevitable does not mean we must passively yield to them.

When we examine the scriptures, various narratives show us that although evil has real power (whether human or natural) it seems to have limits. It is not omnipotent. We see this with Paul in the storm.

Acts 27:13-26 (NIV): *When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete.14 Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island.15 The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along.16 As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure,17 so the men hoisted it aboard. Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Because they were afraid they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard.*

19 On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands.20 When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.21 After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss.22 But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed.23 Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me24 and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.'25 So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.26 Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island."

- We see that God gave them a way out but they did not listen. So there were consequences.
- God seems to have shown them mercy and as a result their lives were spared.
- Central to this narrative are the purposes of God, in this case, Paul having to appear before Caesar. Paul's presence on the ship appears to have preserved them.
- It is difficult to explain why the ship was caught in a storm but we know that in the midst of this God's glory was revealed.

The Peculiar Case of Job

Job 1:6-11 (NIV): *6 One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them. 7 The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it." 8 Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." 9 "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. 10 "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. 11 But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face."*

Job 2:6 (NIV): *"The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life.'"*

It appears as if some of the suffering we face in life is because God allows certain hedges to be removed that were there. Perhaps in some cases there is evil that comes upon us because there is no hedge in the first place. The fact that Satan recognises that a hedge was around Job implies that this hedge is not around everyone. Despite what Job went through there seemed to be limits; in this case his life could not be taken.

1 Corinthians 10:13 (NIV) *"No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."*

What are the different philosophical positions on evil and suffering?

Amélie Rorty notes, evil and its relationship to the world has been understood in the West in a number of ways, including the following:

- **Theodicy and coherentism:** Evil can be understood as part of or in relationship to God's larger plans for the cosmos.
- **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.
- **Manichaeanism:** Good and evil are equal conflicting powers expressing their opposition in human history.
- **Pious rationalism:** Human reason cannot understand evil, but reason must postulate a God to explain human morality.

- **Pious fideism:** Human reason cannot understand evil, so a leap of faith is required to trust in God.
- **Pessimism:** Evil is real, but the world does not make sense nor can it be understood.
- **Non-existent:** Evil does not actually exist; rather, human beings project their own subjective disapproval onto events and actions.

Next week I will be unpacking these views further and also looking at various sources of suffering and evil. The cause is not always the same. It is crucial for us to have answers for this in order to ensure that we are not shaken when the "evil" day comes.

Assignment Questions

1. Theodicy and Theological Coherence:

- o Explain the concept of theodicy and how it seeks to reconcile the existence of a good and omnipotent God with the presence of evil and suffering in the world. Include examples of how different philosophical positions approach this issue.

2. Scriptural Interpretation and Evil:

- o Analyze the scriptural passage John 16:33 within the context of Christian theology. Discuss what Jesus means by "the world" and "overcome" and how this relates to the presence of evil and suffering. Use additional biblical references to support your interpretation.

3. Human Responsibility and Divine Sovereignty:

- o Discuss the tension between human free will and divine sovereignty as presented in the text. How does this tension impact our understanding of the existence of evil and suffering? Provide examples from both scripture and contemporary issues.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you personally reconcile the presence of suffering and evil with the belief in an all-powerful, all-good God?
2. In what ways can prayer influence the degree of suffering and evil, according to the text and your own experience?
3. How does understanding Jesus' own experiences of suffering and marginalization affect your perspective on personal suffering?
4. What is the significance of the hope for a new heaven and a new earth in the context of current suffering and evil?
5. How does the biblical concept of "overcoming the world" influence your approach to challenges and hardships in life?

6. In what ways can the story of Job inform our understanding of the limits of evil and suffering?
7. How does the acknowledgment that evil has real power, yet is not omnipotent, shape your response to crises and disasters?
8. How do different philosophical positions on evil and suffering align with or challenge your personal beliefs?
9. Reflect on a time when you experienced suffering. How did your faith or philosophical outlook help you navigate that period?
10. What practical steps can believers take to respond to suffering and evil in their communities, based on the teachings in the text?