

How Can I Believe in a Good God in a Suffering World?

Series: How Can I Believe?
Brad Bailey - May 13, 2018

1. The God who is known and testified to in the Scriptures stands uniquely on the _____ of our experience...
_____ that something is truly wrong.

2. God is never simply the _____ or _____ of evil; for “evil” is merely the negation of the “goodness” that was created.

3. Evil flows from the choice to declare _____ from God.

4. Suffering is not God’s ultimate will.

“... we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”- Romans 8:28

"You will have to suffer only for a little while: the God of all grace who called you to eternal glory in Christ will see that all is well again: he will confirm, strengthen and support you" - I Peter 5:10-11

5. The response of God, testified to in the Biblical Scriptures, is profoundly _____... for he _____ our suffering.

Luke 4:18-19

Hebrews 2:8-9 - *“God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. **BUT WE SEE JESUS**, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”*

6. As finite creatures, in this realm of time and space we never live in response to _____ knowledge...but rather in response to _____ knowledge... and that is what God has come to provide.
Job 37:23

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Intro

We are continuing in our series entitled: How Can I Believe? We are engaging the questions that can be a natural part of the process of faith. So in the recent past weeks we have engaged the questions of How can I believe in God?...the Bible.. historical Jesus... in any one truth... and today we are going to engage the question:

How Can I Believe in a Good God in a Suffering World?

or it might be said as...

How Can I Trust A God Who Allows Suffering?

On a philosophical level this is often referred to as **The Problem of Evil**. It might take the form of a question such as

“If God is all powerful; and God is all loving, then he would not allow evil and suffering to exist? So the evil and suffering we experience must mean that God is not all powerful...or not all loving...or doesn't exist.

More than merely a philosophical question, the problem of evil always involves a personal dimension as well.

We all know something of how this world seems to have something wrong... of the suffering so inherent to our human condition.

- A world in which **nice people** can feel **painfully lonely**.
- A world in which **marriages** can **become battlefields** and the **children** often **bear the scars**.
- A world of **crippling conditions**...physically, mentally, emotionally...**with us or around us**.
- A world in which **diseases** such as cancer **take too many we love too soon**.
- A world in which **parents die** and our **pasts feel lost; children die** and **futures feel lost**.

And of course even the **suffering of those far away** doesn't completely escape us!

- The hungry children in drought stricken countries we pray for...yet so many still die.
- The oppressed and persecuted...still beaten.

The question we consider is **a question for all who have wept and wondered**.

Is it a little odd to engage such a question on **Mother's Day**?

I suppose. But... **I don't know any role, which must by it's very nature, faces the suffering of this world more than that of a mother**.

On one level...we acknowledge that **mother's themselves are willing to suffer** for the sake of their children... deprivation of sleep... space... of any time for their own needs.

But on another level... it is the **heart of a mother** who may **feel most deeply** the suffering of those they brought into this world.

No doubt there are **some mothers who may not have seemed to care...or even been capable** of caring as they should. But **one can sense** the **tension with nature...**for there is a bond that naturally is given to protection... and feels the suffering of their child as if it were their own... **perhaps more than their own.**

To every mother who wonder... to every person who wonders. You are in good company.

The **best of the prophets** raised this very issue, with different slants.

Habakkuk asked, "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?" (Hab. 1:3).

David cried out, "How long will the enemy mock you?" (Ps. 74:10).

And then there is Job... an entire Book in the Scriptures that follows the life of one who suffers and the issues it raises. And one of the elements that is captured in that story...is how his friends come...with good intentions...but with answers that prove simplistic.

Reminds us how easy it is to offer simple answers that only add new types of burden to those suffering.

It is not for us to "solve" the problem of evil... but to consider it in the light God offers.
How much light? Enough to live by.

I've noted throughout this series...that **in regard to the transcendent question at hand...** it is helpful to understand that **we are by nature finite ... limited...**and our **belief is always a matter of trusting what we don't understand by what we do understand.**

It is helpful to understand that it is a **question that everyone faces.**

Most people think the problem of evil and human suffering is a problem for those whose view of the world is understood in light of God's Word; without realizing that **everyone hold's a view of the world and each world view must evaluated in the light of reason.**

The questioner must realize that the mere question itself raises issues and one must consider among alternatives. We each have to consider what makes the most sense of our experience. And this is why the very nature of feeling that there is something wrong...fundamentally wrong... leads many to the reality of God. Because if we believe there is something fundamentally wrong... it can only be based in something fundamentally right. To declare that there is nothing but a material world with no real meaning...just by natural selection... removes the claim that there is any fundamental right or wrong.

So the first point that may be helpful to note is that...

1. The God who is known and testified to in the Scriptures stands uniquely on the side of our experience... validating that something is truly wrong.

The problem of evil and suffering...is real!

This may seem obvious enough...but this is where **the God who is known and testified to in the Scriptures stands uniquely on the side of our experience.**

There are two other major worldviews that stand in contrast.

Eastern worldview... involves two concepts;

- Suffering (evil) is the result of desire, attachment to the material world which is an illusion. Suffering is the result of the desires that arise from being a separate 'self.' Through enlightenment and the pursuit of detachment we awaken from the illusion...and from all desire which is the source of all suffering. This idea may be helpful to some...but it has proven difficult to reconcile with how real human suffering is.
- There is karmic justice. We are reincarnated according to our past behavior until we reach complete detachment...and enlightenment. Whatever one experiences is the result of a perfect impersonal system of justice. This too may seem to be a helpful idea...but it is difficult in satisfying the wrong that lies before us. If what we see around us is mere karmic justice... why have compassion?

The other more modern view is the...

Atheistic worldview - Life is governed by chance, not order. Therefore there is no right, no wrong, and no evil. There is really no transcendent objective basis for complaining...nor for causes or compassion. [1]

But as mentioned...

“Evil by nature finds it’s meaning only in relationship to some meaningful idea of good. Evil always noted in contrast to the good that should be.”

As another described so well... *“The only reason you recognize injustice at all, is that you have been made with an God-inherited need for justice, just like God has given all of us an inborn need for love and meaning. These are primarily God's questions inside of you. When you stop asking you stop being truly human.” - Derek Flood*

C.S. Lewis observed: *“..in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist--in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless -- I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality -- namely my idea of justice -- was full of sense. Consequently, atheism turns out to be too simple....If there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be without meaning.”*

In contrast to other worldviews which declare that the very cry for justice is misguided... the BIBLE AFFIRMS OUR CRY.

Psalm 22:1

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning”

The Scriptures capture how God respects such a cry. We find that Job got mad at God and meets with favor, for deep in his soul he is pursuing God. His quarrel with God is a lover’s quarrel. His apparent hate and rejection are born out of desire for affirmation and reconciliation. (cf. Jeremiah 15:18)

The central arena in the book of Job is not the courtroom.... but the heart, and in the end those who cry out find themselves closest to God. (Job, Psalmist David, Christ.)

If we believe that suffering and injustice are real... and the Biblical worldview uniquely affirms this, we **then want to understand:**

Where did evil come from? and What is God’s response? What’s He doing about it?

2. God is never simply the creator or controller of evil... for “evil” is merely the negation of the “goodness” that was created.

At first thought, it may seem like basic logic that if we assume God as the creator of all, He must have created evil, and be responsible for it... but ...

God created everything, but evil is not a “thing.”

- We may think of a sword or a gun as evil, but they aren’t.
- Where is the evil? Evil is in the human will, the choice to harm, the intent.
- Even physical evil is not a thing. A paralyzed limb is evil but it’s not a thing like another limb; blindness is not a thing, but the negation of the good thing God created.
- Evil is merely the negation of good; it does not have actual existence it’s merely the “non” of something else.

Note: There is suffering that is the result of what is sometimes referred to as “natural evil” in contrast to moral evil. ‘Natural evil’ refers to acts of nature and raises a different type of question. The issue here is not one of trying to understand Hitler... but hurricanes. The issue becomes one of plausibility beyond our ability to conceive, i.e. Could God have created a natural realm that was free of natural laws that come into conflict and create pain? Could God miraculously hold back more of the consequences of nature without them ceasing to be an order at all?

The issue and questions that arise from ‘natural evil’ call forth a different sense.

- I recognize that the evil that offends most deeply is moral evil... the suffering that involves intent. (Starvation in Africa is generally harder to accept than that of an earthquake in part because we sense the human potential to alleviate it.)

- Suffering from natural laws or natural disasters raises it's own questions. But the Scripture's seem to suggest that when we chose to give ourselves to life apart from God, that the whole world was subjected to it's effect. This leads to the next point...

3. Evil flows from the choice to declare freedom from God.

- Part of the "good" of God's initial creation was freedom...free will...freedom inherent to establishing relationships of love. The Bible describes the beauty of such freedom as well as the consequences...
- Even the devil is revealed to be an angel who freely turned from God.
- In leading humankind away from God...**the whole earth was subjected to a fallen state.**

If we ask,

Why didn't God create a world without sin and suffering? He did.

Why didn't God create a world **with the possibility of never sinning and suffering? He did.**

Why did he give us freedom? That is a good question...but it may be helpful to understand...

"God did not give us freedom like one gives a dog to a child...rather as one gives three sides to a triangle. It's an essential quality of who we are. It may help us to acknowledge that we are presuming God should have created a world without freedom or consequences... without the very nature of choice and love... a world without true life as we know it.... a world we cannot even conceive."

In facing the condition of human suffering we are facing the condition of our freedom...and the problem is no longer this "thing" out there, but this "nature" here.

The London Times asked a number of writers for essays on the topic **"What's Wrong With the World? G.K. Chesterton's reply was the shortest and truest in history.**

Dear Sirs,

I am.

Sincerely, G.K. Chesterton

- In our suffering we may be tempted to simplify the problem as all "out there"...some sort of thing that God should get rid of so that we can be free of evil.
- In our private dreams and moments of passion, have we not all found thoughts of harm upon another...found coveting and greed...found sexual passions that betray our moral sense?
- What we really want is NOT justice for it would begin with us. Often our cry for justice is really a desire to bring justice to all the profuse evil right up to the front door of our souls.

4. Suffering is not God's ultimate will.

- God is sovereign over evil...not of evil.
- Sovereignty over something is not the same as being the source of something

"Suffering reflects we're part of the planet, not part of a plan."

Romans 8:28

"... we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

The "all things" which God can work for good does not mean that they are in themselves good.

"You will have to suffer only for a little while: the God of all grace who called you to eternal glory in Christ will see that all is well again: he will confirm, strengthen and support you" - I Peter 5:10-11

God's sovereignty over evil never claims the current condition of human kind or this planet to be his will. Rather he proves sovereign over the great dilemma.

So what has God done in response?

5. The response of God, testified to in the Biblical Scriptures, is profoundly personal... for he enters our suffering.

Suffering is **profoundly personal**. Whatever physical dimension is at hand, the deepest pain lies in the soul's doubt.

Am I hopeless, lost, abandoned? To this cry, God entered the world. In Christ God has come to enter our suffering and to take it upon himself. Christ declared at the very start of his public ministry...

Luke 4:18-19

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed.... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Upon raising to life the only son of a poor widow, Luke says of the people, "They were all filled with awe and praised God...they said. "God has come to help his people." (Luke 7:16) They recognized **what every soul longs to know and God longs to communicate.**

In Christ, God enters the human condition and is with us.

While all religions commonly ask humanity to rise above their pain, only in Christ we discover God descending to our pain.

The writer of Hebrews...states the significance of Christ to a suffering world. Begins quoting a Psalm describing God's intents for our human positions.

Hebrews 2:8-9

"God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. BUT WE SEE JESUS, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." -

How can I trust God in the midst of suffering when I can't expect to share the fullness of His perspective? Because I share the fullness of his presence. He's come in person.

In Christ I discover that it is God who suffers with us...for us.

And God's suffering is not merely passive ...but purposeful and powerful; for he comes to pay off our personal debt. On the cross he paid the price of our sin and shame.

Many think that God should look at the world and his heart should break. It has!

Many think that God should look at the world and somehow, bear the load. He did!

They tell the story about a great Russian tribal leader in the early days who had two laws.

The first was that all the tribe were to **love their parents** and the second was they were **not to steal**. This man's leadership and these laws made his tribe the greatest in all of Russia. Now one day they discovered that someone was stealing. This angered the leader greatly and he brought all the people together. He said, "Let the thief come forward and receive 10 lashes for his crime." No one came and he upped the ante to 20 lashes. Then 30, then 40 lashes. He stopped there for he knew that it would take a strong man to survive 40 lashes with the whip. The crowd dispersed and the leader sent his men to find the thief. Within a week they brought the thief to him and the leader gasped, for the thief was his own mother. The guards were waging among themselves as to what this great and wise leader would do. Would he keep his word, obey his second law and whip his mother? Or would he obey the first law, love his mother and let her go free, thus disgracing himself and the laws he sought to enforce: If the crime went unpunished surely everyone would steal. The leader gathered the tribe together. They brought his mother forward and bared her frail back. "Ah, ha," thought the people, "He's going to whip her." **Then, just before the whip master brought the whip to bear, the leader strode over to his mother, tearing his shirt off as he went and draped himself over her frail body, taking the 40 lashes himself.** That's exactly what Jesus did for us. Jesus took our punishment on the cross. We should have rightly died for our sins, but Jesus took our place.

And so it was, that when the cross, the ultimate power of curse and judgment was lifted up, it wasn't us hanging on it, it was God.

And it's important that we don't separate the suffering of Christ as God the Son from that of God's nature in its fullness.

- "Jesus answered anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." - John 14:9
- "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" Hebrews 1:3 (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4, Col. 1:15).

The **sin and suffering of humanity has always meant suffering for God.** [4]

"The cross is not merely a New Testament reality. Sin has been the crucifixion of God from its inception."

The bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament is the suffering love of God. [3]

This is what God brings to bear into the suffering we face. And as a final point...we come back to this truth....

6. As finite creatures, in this realm of time and space we never live in response to comprehensive knowledge...but rather in response to sufficient knowledge... and that is what God has come to provide.

Job would come to the conclusion...

Job 37:23 -

*“The Almighty is **beyond our reach** and exalted in power; in his justice and great righteousness, he does not oppress.”*

And so we look at what is clearest to us.

Philip Yancey describes how Jesus in flesh clarifies the distortions and questions about God:

“I must admit that Jesus has revised in flesh many of my harsh and unpalatable notions about God. Why am I a Christian? I sometimes ask myself, and to be perfectly honest the reasons reduce to two: (1) the lack of good alternatives, and (2) Jesus. Brilliant, untamed, tender, creative, slippery, irreducible, paradoxically humble--Jesus stands up to scrutiny. He is who I want my God to be. If I use a magnifying glass to examine a fine painting, the object in the center of the glass stays crisp and clear, while around the edges the view grows increasingly distorted. For me, Jesus has become the focal point. When I speculate about such imponderables as the problem of pain or providence versus free will, everything becomes fuzzy. But if I look at Jesus himself, at how he treated actual people in pain, at his calls to free and diligent action, clarity is restored.” [5]

When you wonder or you weep... look at Jesus.

When you wonder where God is... look at Jesus suffering on the cross.

When any mother wonders...how can I bring a life into this existence and face it's suffering... know that God chooses to do the same...and is with you.

Resources:

There are many good responses to the nature of evil and suffering...particularly by Tim Keller, Ravi Zacharias, and Peter Kreeft.

A good video online is: Why Does God Allow Pain and Suffering? At

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjcpW_kPYq0

A good online sources that I felt gave especially thoughtful understanding of the Biblical truth

The Book of Job: A Series about Faith and Suffering - <http://www.thelakesanglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Job-why-does-God-allow-suffering1.pdf>

Notes:

1. Regarding that acknowledging evil means acknowledging some absolute good, some other quotes:

As Theodore P. Rebard, Ph.D. ('The Problem of Evil Revisited') notes:

Goodness and intelligibility are the frame - the contrast and context which make evil stand out and be noticed. (Peter Kreeft, *Love is Stronger than Death*, pp. 26-26, 45-46.)

By way of metaphor, C. S. Lewis notes that "the Englishness of English is audible only to those who know some other language as well." (*Miracles*, cited in Kreeft, *Love Is Stronger Than Death*, p. 46)

Josef Pieper says this: "The incomprehensibility of evil in the world becomes fully apparent only against the background of the indestructible happiness of God." - (Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, (Pantheon Books, 1958), p. 31)

Thomas Merton put it this way:

In the name of whom or what do you ask me to behave? Why should I go to the inconvenience of denying myself the satisfactions I desire in the name of some standard that exists only in your imagination? Why should I worship the fictions that you have imposed on me in the name of nothing? [Quoted in Phillip Yancy, "The Other Great Commission," *Christianity Today*, October 7, 1]

Also...Insights From The Nature Of Moral Judgment (From *Evil as Evidence for God* by Greg Koukl)

Four Observations about Morality

1. Moral judgments are not physical.
2. Moral rules are a kind of communication. They are propositions: intelligent statements of meaning conveyed from one mind to another.
3. They have a force we can actually feel prior to any behavior.
4. They create an ethical pain, making us aware that we have done something wrong and are deserving of punishment.

Three options regarding the source of moral judgment:

1. Morality is simply an illusion.
2. Moral rules exist, but are mere accidents, the product of chance.
3. Moral rules are the product of intelligence. Which option makes most sense given our four observations about morality?

2. C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1960, paperback), p. 45.]

3. We may often appreciate such Divine suffering because it may strike us as inconsistent with other attributes we know to be true of God...such as being omnipotent...immutable.

God's sacrificial suffering reflects the ultimate power, for He chooses to suffer, and reveals the unfailing power of His redemptive purposes.

GOD IS NO LESS POWERFUL... FOR HE CHOOSES TO SUFFER...

God is not a victim of circumstances. His sacrifice and suffering only reveal the strength of His love. When we declare God as "OUR ROCK"...let us understand...strength of his longsuffering love.

In Christ, God has destroyed the ultimate power of evil and suffering.

"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death...that is, the devil...and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." Hebrew 2:14-15

4. Regarding the whole of God suffering, we also note that at the very beginning, following our fall from freedom, Genesis 6 says,... "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become...and his heart was filled with pain." Genesis 6:5-6 (cf. Hosea 11:1-3, 2 Peter 3:9.)

5. Philip Yancey, "The Jesus I Never Knew"

Regarding our limited understanding, consider:

Proverbs 3:5-6 - "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."

Isaiah 55:8-11 - "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. [9] "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. [10] As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, [11] so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Corrie Ten Boom – Life as tapestry

The rendition of this poem is uniquely Corrie's: My life is but a weaving, between my God and me I do not choose the colors, He worketh steadily. Oftimes he weaveth sorrow, and I in foolish pride, Forget He sees the upper, and I the underside. Not till the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly. Will God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why, The dark threads are as needful in the skillful Weaver's hand, As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned.

- Carole C. Carlson, *Corrie Ten Boom: Her Life, Her Faith*. (Jove Books, The Berkeley Publishing Group, New York, 1984), page 175