

Elephants in the Room: The Evil Elephant
Various Scriptures (Mostly Genesis)
Small Group Discussion Guide

Warm-up question:

- How would you define “evil”? How is it different than just “sin?”

1. This past Sunday, Steve Tomlinson divided the problem of evil into two major categories: the intellectual (objective) problem of evil and the emotional (subjective) one. First, he states that “The intellectual problem of evil concerns how to give a rational explanation of the coexistence of God and evil.”
 - a. Have you ever struggled with the coexistence of God and evil? Explain. (Not looking for the “right” answer here, but what you genuinely experience).
 - b. What was one reason that Steve gave (or one reason you could think of) for how God could have “a morally sufficient reason for permitting evil”?
 - c. Does the reason or reasons described above help you understand what Steve calls “the extent and depth of evil in the world”? Expand.
2. Let’s see what the Bible says about the problem of evil. If you open your Bibles to page one we begin in chapter one with God declaring (starting at verse 4) seven times that his creation was good.
 - a. If God’s creation was originally good, where did evil come from?
 - b. Did God create evil?
 - c. What does “The Fall,” in Genesis 3, say about the origin of evil on earth?
 - d. What is the relationship between human free will and evil and the greatest good?
3. **TAKE TURNS READING the passage below (Gen 18:20-25).**

The passage takes place in Genesis 18 starting at verse 20 when God tells Abraham, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous." Abraham puts two and two together that he knows that God has the intention of completely destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham stands there dumbfounded for a while and then he asks the question that is burning inside him. He asks, "***Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?*** 24 What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing — to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! ***Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?***"

Over the next set of verses, Abraham keeps changing the number until he says to God, "What if there are only 10 righteous people?" to which God keeps agreeing and even goes below that number and expresses a willingness to save the city for the sake of a few people.

- a. From Abraham’s interaction with God in this passage, what do you learn about God?
- b. What do you learn about the ability of humans to interact with and influence God?
- c. How do you react to this passage emotionally? How does it make you feel – about God, about yourself, about the problem of evil?

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Note: If your small group is struggling to understand the Christian's answer to the intellectual problem of evil, read Steve's summary statement below:

We have argued that God allowed the possibility of evil so that the greatest good might come about, and we have seen that the God of the Bible claims to be good, and that the problem of evil actually suggests the existence of God, because it points to a reality of a universal idea of "goodness."

4. Second, the emotional problem of evil concerns how to resolve people's dislike for a God who would permit suffering. This is more personal when you struggle with blaming God when a personal tragedy hits you or someone close to you.
 - a. Do you now or have you ever struggled with your faith and feelings toward God when a personal tragedy or evil has struck you? Explain.
 - b. Is there anything that has been a comfort to you during this time? How can we support you as a small group?

5. The Bible addresses the emotional problem of evil with the story of Joseph. It begins in Genesis 37 where we see him sold as a slave by his brothers, we then see him thrown in jail because of being falsely accused and then he is forgotten by those he helps - such is his life for over a decade.

Did Joseph know the reasoning of God all through this trial? No he did not, but at the end of Genesis comes the verse (Gen. 50:19-20), "But Joseph said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.'"

- a. What answers does this passage give for the problem of evil? Are they helpful to you?
 - b. Joseph has been called a prototype or foreshadowing of Christ: someone whose suffering in the end helped a great many people. Pastor Steve said, "God the Father also knows what it is to lose a loved one in an unjust attack." Does this fact bring you any comfort, or help you to view God or the Problem of Evil in a different light?
 - c. Finally, if the resurrection is true, then to quote Samwise Gamgee in The Lord of the Rings, "Everything sad is going TO COME UNTRUE." (See Revelation 21:1-5). What is your reaction to the resurrection ushering us into heaven and wiping away all tears? How does this affect our view of the Problem of Evil?
6. PRAYER: Among our prayers for each other, let's be sensitive to pray for anyone who is currently struggling with their feelings or faith due to a personal tragedy or evil.