

Why So Much Evil and Suffering?

April 25, 2021

Series: *If You Could Ask God One Question*

We surveyed over 800 people about the questions they'd most like to ask God. In this series, we're unpacking the three top-ranked questions from our survey.

Today, we come to the number one question people had for God: "Why is there so much evil and suffering in the world?" Have you ever wrestled with this question?

The late British Bible scholar John Stott says that, "The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has... in every generation."

Indeed, three centuries before Jesus was even born, the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus laid out the problem as follows. Either God *wants* to abolish evil and suffering in this world, but *can't*—in which case he'd be impotent—well-meaning, but lacking the power to get the job done. Or, he *can* abolish evil and suffering, but *doesn't want to*—in which case he'd be wicked—a moral monster. But if God is both *able* and *willing* to abolish evil and suffering, then how do we account for all the evil and suffering in the world? If God exists, and is indeed all-loving, all-good, and all-powerful, why so much evil and suffering?

Now, it would be all too easy, and certainly a whole lot more comfortable, to keep this discussion on a strictly intellectual, abstract level. But if the Christian response to the question of evil and suffering is to have integrity, our search for answers needs to remain closely connected with the painful events of real-world evil and suffering. And we don't have to look far to find examples of that these days.

From systemic injustices, racially motivated violence, and mass shootings to volcanic eruptions causing an epic humanitarian crisis in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, our world has known no shortage of evil and suffering in 2020 and 2021, not to mention the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has left over 3,000,000 dead worldwide, and counting.

Reflections like these, uncomfortable though they are, begin to take us out of the realm of mere philosophical abstraction, and into the realm of our hearts, where we cry out, "Why, God?"

But we need to bring things even closer to home. I encourage you to take your own personal experience of pain and loss and make it a peg on which you hang the things we talk about today. It will make this message all the more real—and all the more hopeful, I'm praying. Because it's only when we get to the personal level, to the level of the *heart*, that

God can truly give us the comfort and hope we need to carry on, and from there, to make us agents of his life, light and healing in this troubled world.

With that in mind, I'd like to share **three powerful biblical themes** that can give us perspective as we wrestle with the question of evil and suffering. These themes provide a framework that helps us begin to get at a subject that is vast, complex and sensitive. We begin with the biblical theme of:

1. Creation and fall.

In Genesis chapters 1 and 2 we find humankind placed into a world without death, without suffering. When God completed his work of creation, we read that:

Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good! ¹

Genesis describes how there was complete harmony between God and people, between people and people, and between people and the planet. It was paradise.

So evil, suffering, and death were *not* part of God's original design. Could this be why, for example, that even when someone dies a peaceful death at the ripe old age of 90, there is a sense of "wrongness" about it that's hard to deny? Sure, sometimes well-meaning folks try to comfort those who are grieving by saying that death is a perfectly natural part of life. And yet somehow, we know better. Our deepest instincts tell us that we were not meant for mortality, and for all the fear, pain and loss that go along with it. In the words of poet Dylan Thomas, our deepest instincts tell us, "Do not go gentle into that good night... Rage, rage, against the dying of the light."

But if evil and suffering were *not* part of God's original design for this world, it begs the question— how did we get to where we are today? In response, Genesis chapter 3 points to the fall of humankind. The origin of this world's darkness, according to the Bible, lies in the fact that we turned to our own way instead of God's, and as a result, our relationships fell apart— with God, with each other, and with the planet.

Everything went awry— including our hearts, minds, emotions, and bodies; our work; and nature itself, which now heaves with things like earthquakes, droughts, hurricanes, tsunamis and destructive volcanoes.

¹ Genesis 1:31 (NLT)

To be sure, the good pattern of life God created on earth wasn't totally eradicated in the fall. Those who insist that evil and suffering disprove God's existence are left to wrestle with the question of why there continues to be so much *good* in the world—so much beauty, bounty, wonder, and love.

If creation explains that suffering was not part of God's original design for the world, and the fall explains why evil and suffering now exist, we need to ask why God created a world where such a fall could happen. Here, we must reflect on how God created human beings. In Genesis 1:27, we read:

So God created human beings in his own image.
In the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.²

In creating human beings in his own image, God gave us the capacity to *love*—to love God and others. The Bible says that God *is* love.³ Since God wanted to create beings capable of love, he had to create beings with *free will*. Why? Because love must be freely chosen. For real love to be possible, the rejection of love must also be possible.

Therefore, in creating free-will beings for the sake of love, God took the risk of making a world that contained the *potential* of evil—and the suffering that comes with it. Created free-will beings—both human and angelic— are the ones who *actualized* that potential for evil.

What do I mean by angelic beings? Well, the biblical account of the fall very prominently features a villain, doesn't it? The serpent who tempts the man and woman to reject God is the embodiment of Satan—who we also know from other biblical passages as Lucifer—the chief of the *fallen angels*, who rebelled against God before the creation of the world.

The Bible clearly and unapologetically states that our fallen world is influenced by evil spiritual beings— the devil and his demonic minions. These unseen forces of darkness are fiercely opposed to God and God's agenda for the world. So *spiritual warfare*, as Christians call it, is one of the reasons for evil and suffering in this world. As the Bible says in Ephesians 6:

² Genesis 1:27 (NLT)

³ 1 John 4:8

For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.⁴

Those who follow Jesus needn't fear the spiritual forces of evil, because God has triumphed over them by the cross of Jesus Christ, and in Christ, God gives us authority over the enemy. But until Jesus comes again and puts a final end to the devil and his fallen angels, these enemies continue to wage guerilla warfare against God's purposes for the world. Much of the evil and suffering in the world can be attributed, either directly or indirectly, to their malevolent influence.

Allow me to note at this point that the Bible rejects the notion of karma—that individuals only ever suffer because they've done something to deserve it. That's what Job's friends thought. They kept trying to tell Job that his own tremendous suffering must be the consequence of his own sins—that he must have had it coming to him. One friend told Job:

“Stop and think! Do the innocent die? When have the upright been destroyed?”⁵

God expressed anger with Job's friends for giving such simplistic counsel to a suffering man. The reasons for suffering are astonishingly complex, which makes speculation about why suffering happens to any person or group a very foolish thing to do.

Your suffering may well be the result of your own choices. But not always. Sometimes it's the result of the choices others have made. It may be the result of spiritual warfare. It may have to do with where in the world you happen to live, or the broken systems of the society you happen to a part of, or the family you were born into. Sometimes it's the result of the sheer randomness of life in this topsy-turvy, fallen planet. Or, it could be any combination of these things.

Some Christians believe that God wills everything that ever happens—including all the bad things. They say that somehow every event is part of God's blueprint, part of his so-called “perfect plan.” Not true! Understand that *not* everything that happens in this world is God's will. Jesus went to the extreme of dying a godforsaken death on a cross precisely because this world was *not* in accordance with God's will. Jesus teaches us to pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” precisely because God's will is often *not* done on earth.⁶

⁴ Ephesians 6:12 (NLT)

⁵ Job 4:7 (NLT)

⁶ See Matthew 6:10b

Why is that? It's because in creating free-will beings, God has made a world where it's possible for his will to be thwarted for a time.

So why didn't God just create beings *without* free will, without the capacity to choose for or against God, for or against love? Such a world would have been a place without the possibility of evil and suffering, but it also would have been a dull, lifeless place without love, which is the highest possible good, and what makes life worth living. "If I have not love, I am nothing," writes the Apostle Paul.⁷ **God thought love was worth the risk.**

Christian philosopher Peter Kreeft offers this challenge:

Pretend you're God and try to create a better world in your imagination. Try to create utopia. But you have to think through the consequences of everything you try to improve. Every time you use force to prevent evil, you must remove all freedom and reduce all people to puppets, which means they would then lack the possibility to freely choose love.

You'll find it's not so easy to create a world where the ultimate good is possible apart from risk. When Job challenged God about why he permitted suffering, God challenged him back with these words:

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much."⁸

God is love, and to create a world where the highest good could be realized, God had to create a world vulnerable to evil and suffering. In the process, God would willingly make *himself* vulnerable to the ultimate evil and suffering in order to rescue us, as we'll talk about later. As C.S. Lewis wrote, "To love at all is to be vulnerable."

If the biblical theme of creation and fall provides us with a lens as to how evil and suffering have come into the world, a second biblical theme offers us tremendous hope when it comes to the future of suffering. That theme is:

2. The ultimate renewal of the world.

The Apostle Paul was no stranger to suffering. He had experienced beatings. Imprisonments. Shipwrecks. People out to kill him. And yet, Paul could write:

⁷ See 1 Corinthians 13:2

⁸ Job 38:4

For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.⁹

This is remarkable. By fixing the eyes of his heart on the glorious, eternal future God has in store for his people, Paul found a hope that kept him going in spite of it all, and a joy that no suffering could steal away.

He even goes as far as to say that our troubles in this life help *produce* the glory we will know in the next life. How so? It all has to do with the nature of our future hope in Christ. What is the nature of our hope as Christians? Is it just going to heaven when we die? Is that it?

Well, in 1 Corinthians 15 (and elsewhere), Paul teaches extensively on the resurrection of the body. Jesus came in a physical body, and his physical body was raised from the dead, imperishable—we just celebrated that at Easter. One day, Jesus will also redeem and resurrect our own physical bodies, and renew the world—the whole of material creation.

In Revelation 21 we read of our eternal future in a renewed material creation called the new heavens and the new earth, where evil will be eradicated once and for all, and we will dwell in God's presence forever, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain.¹⁰ Why is this so significant?

Maybe you're familiar with Edgar Allen Poe's haunting poem *The Raven*. In the poem, this sinister bird keeps repeating the word, "nevermore." It's a poem about how our losses are irreversible. Poe is suggesting that once you lose your youth, your looks, your health, your career, your loved ones—that's it—you can never get them back. *Nevermore*.

But here is where the biblical theme of the ultimate renewal of the world comes in, and bodily resurrection along with it. As Pastor Tim Keller explains, if our hope is just for a disembodied existence in heaven when we die, then we'll have *consolation* for all the things we've lost but we can still never get those things back—and we've lost so much—our bodies, our friends, our family, our dreams; the books and poems we wanted to write but never will, the music we wanted to compose but couldn't.

But, if the new heavens and new earth is our hope, as the Bible teaches, then we won't just have *consolation* for what we've lost, but a *restoration* of *this* world and *the life we always*

⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 (NLT)

¹⁰ See Revelation 21:1-5.

wanted in it—a glorious, perfect, embodied and unimaginably rich life in a renewed material creation. This changes everything with regard to suffering. This spells the end of death's seeming irreversibility. It is the end of *nevermore*.

This brings us to the third biblical theme:

3. Jesus and the wounds of God.

This is the very heart of things. God's final answer to the question of evil and suffering is not an explanation; it's not an argument; it's not a proposition— it's a *person*.

The wondrous mystery of the Christian gospel is that in Jesus, the sovereign God himself has come into this world as a human being. The Creator of all things became as one created, and experienced this world's darkness firsthand, as one of us. He did so to rescue us by bearing in his own body the full extent of suffering, death, and the curse not for his sins, but for ours. For yours. For mine.

In Jesus, God has taken the sin and suffering of the whole world upon himself so that someday he can return and put an end to all evil and suffering once and for all, without having to put an end to you and me. God's own suffering in Jesus, then, becomes the very heart of the Christian story. In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah foretold the coming of a Suffering Servant:

He was despised and rejected—
a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.
We turned our backs on him and looked the other way.
He was despised, and we did not care.
Yet it was our weaknesses he carried;
it was our sorrows that weighed him down...
But he was pierced for our rebellion,
crushed for our sins.
He was beaten so we could be whole.
He was whipped so we could be healed.
All of us, like sheep, have strayed away.
We have left God's paths to follow our own.
Yet the LORD laid on him
the sins of us all. ¹¹

¹¹ Isaiah 53:3-6 (NLT)

The New Testament goes on to reveal that this Suffering Servant was Jesus Christ, God come in the flesh. Colossians says:

For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. ¹²

The book of Hebrews tells us that:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears... ¹³

As a human being, he knew firsthand rejection, betrayal, poverty, disappointment, grief, abuse, torture, and death itself. Therefore, Hebrews also says that:

This High Priest of ours understands our weakness, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. ¹⁴

In Jesus, we see that God—who is ultimate strength—is in fact so strong that he is willing to become weak for our sake. God's greatest glory is his willingness to lay aside all his glory out of love for you and me.

No other religion even conceives of such a thing. A Christian leader named John Dickson tells of how he once spoke on the theme of the wounds of God at a university campus in Sydney, Australia. There was a time for questions after the talk, and a Muslim man stood up to explain, in a very logical and civil manner, "how preposterous was the claim that the Creator of the universe should be subjected to the forces of his own creation—that he would have to eat, sleep, and go to the toilet, let alone die on a cross." As this Muslim man's words hung in the silent lecture hall, Dickson offered no counter argument. He simply thanked the man for making the uniqueness of the Christian claim so clear, and said, "What the Muslim denounces as blasphemy, the Christian holds as precious."

"I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross," writes John Stott. "In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?" Stott goes on to say, "I have entered many Buddhist temples... and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that

¹² Colossians 2:9 (NLT)

¹³ Hebrews 5:7 (NIV)

¹⁴ Hebrews 4:15 (NLT)

lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through the hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. *That is the God for me... in a world such as ours.*"

Of all the world religions, only the Christian faith teaches that when we turned from God, God did not abandon us, but came to earth in Jesus Christ and himself became subject to suffering and death. While there are no easy answers for why God allows suffering, at least we know what the reason for this world's suffering is *not*. It cannot be that God doesn't love us. He understands, he's been there himself, he's with us even now, and he assures us that he has a plan to eventually wipe away every tear.

I'd like to close this message by speaking to three groups of people. First, I'd like to speak to people who do not yet identify as Christians—those who have not yet become followers of Jesus.

One day Jesus will return to earth and put an end to evil and suffering, once and for all. There will be a time of reckoning—a time of final judgment, says the Bible. Which is good and important, because it means that all injustices will be fully and finally addressed, and true justice will reign. But the Bible tells us the main reason God does not step in an end all evil and suffering right now is that:

... he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.¹⁵

My friend, God is patiently waiting for you to repent. Repent means to turn to God. To benefit from all God has done for you in Jesus, and to be spared being on the wrong side of God's final judgment, you need to make a choice for Jesus. God will not force you. He will woo you with his sacrificial love in Jesus, as I hope he is doing this morning. But the choice is yours. Free will, remember?

Have you ever acknowledged that you're a sinner in need of the Saviour? Have you ever clearly and specifically embraced Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour and Lord? I'd like to give you the chance to do so this morning. You've heard about Jesus today. He is knocking at the door of your heart right now, saying, "It's time; now's your chance. You need me. Would you let me into your life? Would you let me carry your sins and your sufferings for you?" If that's you, then I invite you to click the response button in the chat area that says, "I'm committing my life to Jesus."

¹⁵ 2 Peter 3:9 (NLT)

If you do make a first-time commitment of your life to Jesus today, I encourage you to also connect with someone in our online prayer room. Just click the prayer button, and you'll be connected with someone who will talk and pray with you confidentially in a private online room. They will point you to some helpful [resources and opportunities](#) that will get you off to a good start in your new relationship with Jesus, and we're also making those resources and opportunities available to you via the link you see in the chat.

The second group of people I'd like to speak to as I close this message is anyone who is suffering. Maybe you're already a follower of Jesus, or maybe you're not. I want to encourage you to know that whatever the cause of your suffering, God is with you, he understands, he cares and invites you to bring your pain to him in prayer. Feel free to request prayer in the chat, and someone will be happy to listen and pray for your need today.

The third group I'd like to speak to is those of you that God is calling to become the answer to someone else's prayer today. How is God calling you to be Jesus' hands and feet to alleviate suffering today? Who is God calling you reach out to in a practical way today? Who will you bring a meal to? Who will you lift a prayer for? How will you become an answer to someone else's prayer today?

Today, we've seen **three powerful biblical themes** that can give us perspective as we wrestle with the question of evil and suffering: Creation and fall; the ultimate renewal of the world; and Jesus and the wounds of God. Lord, as we treasure all this up in our hearts, may we experience your presence even now, and may we worship you...

Benediction

In his kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation. All power to him forever! Amen.

- 1 Peter 5:10-11 (NLT)

Now don't go away, because Bethany has a special story to share with us!