



Lesson 5 – The Problem of Evil

The world is filled with unimaginable suffering: Disease, war, death, loss, pain, sorrow, depression, anxiety, torture, and countless other horrors. There is what we call natural evil, things like hurricanes, floods, cancer, and other problems that cause destruction without any human help. But then there is moral evil, things like stealing, abuse, murder, violence, and anything else where one human hurts another human. One of the hardest questions for Christians to answer is the question of evil: why is there so much suffering in a world that was made by a good and all-powerful God?

We could break this question down further into two sub-questions: where did evil even come from in the first place, and why doesn't God stop evil now? Some have refused to accept Christ because they see all the suffering around them. Some believers have struggled to believe that God is good given the suffering they have experienced or observed. The Bible is sufficient, however, to answer even our most challenging questions.

As we examine this issue, we need to realize two things: 1) The Bible will give us answers to help us as we wrestle through the problem of evil, but the Bible will not give us exhaustive answers. God will tell us everything we need to know, not necessarily everything we want to know. 2) In the end, we must respond with faith. Faith here means trusting God when He says He is good and has a good plan even as we watch a world that feels like it is spiraling out of control.

Why do you think God does not answer every question we have and instead requires faith from us?

Where did evil come from?

This question is famously posed in a quote David Hume attributed to the Greek philosopher Epicurus:

"Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent.

Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"

How would you respond to this statement? Where do you think it breaks down?

Such a statement comes loaded with assumptions about God's character and nature. It judges God from our finite viewpoint and decides that He should have acted differently. Such a question could be attacked philosophically by examining each of the premises and seeking to show where they are faulty,

and such an approach has value.¹ In our study, however, we will focus on the help that Scripture gives to the problem of evil. As we have said, in the end we will have everything we need to respond to the reality of evil with faith, even if we have some unanswered questions at the end of our study.

1. The Bible teaches that God created everything good (Genesis 1).

The Bible does not leave any question in our mind about what God's creation looked like when He was done. Genesis 1:31 tells us that as God gets to the conclusion of His creative activity, He looks out and what He sees is very good. There was no death and no suffering, because at that point there was no rebellion. The evil that we see in the world today is not what God had originally intended for the world. Some religions teach that there are two forces, one evil and one good, that are locked in a perpetual battle. The Bible teaches that there is a good Creator who made a good world that was later marred by sin.

2. The Bible teaches that God does not tempt with evil (James 1:13-15).

God does not want people to do evil, and He does not try to get people to do evil. God is not telling us to stay away from evil on one hand and then secretly trying to get us to disobey on the other hand. The temptation and pull to do wrong does not come from God. Adam tried to blame his sin on God when he stated that it was the woman God gave him that convinced him to rebel. God ignored His blame-shifting and held Adam responsible for His actions. Similarly, none of us are able to go to God and say that it was really His fault that we failed. We are all responsible for our own choices.

In what ways do people try to blame God for their own sinful decisions?

3. The Bible teaches that man rebelled at Satan's bidding (Genesis 3).

Man sinned, yes, but if we want to ask how such sin came to be the only other actor is Satan. In some ways this is an answer, but in some ways it raises more questions. Why did God allow Satan to talk to Adam and Eve? Why did God create Satan in the first place? How was it that Satan, a once perfect creature, rebelled? It is at this point that we don't have clear answers. The Bible indicates that Satan's pride led to his downfall (Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 28), but when did that happen and how did that happen and what did it look like. Once again, we are given enough information to live a life of faith, but not enough to satisfy every question we might have.

Is Satan primarily responsible for man's sin, or is man?

4. The Bible teaches that God is sovereign over human choices (Genesis 50:20; Proverbs 16:9; 21:1; Acts 2:23).

Part of the challenge in all of this is that God is sovereign over man's choices. The Bible clearly teaches that in some way, no one acts without God allowing them to. The Bible both teaches that man is responsible for his actions, but also that God is sovereign over those actions. How these teachings can coexist is challenging, and many believers try to drop one or the other. They either deny that God is totally sovereign over human choices, or they essentially deny that man has a free will. But the Bible teaches both, and so we must believe both as challenging as that might be for us.

¹ See for example chapter four in *When Skeptics Ask: A Handbook on Christian Evidences* by Norman Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks.

So where does evil come from? Evil is rebellion against God. God created man with the ability to choose obedience or rebellion, and man chose rebellion. But could God have prevented this? Why did God create Satan knowing Satan would rebel and drag humans with him? How can God be sovereign over the choices we make and yet hold us responsible? The Bible doesn't give exhaustive answers to these questions. Instead, it asks us to trust God where are nice, neat theories fail to cover everything we read in Scripture or experience.

What would you tell a believer who was struggling to believe that God is good because of the suffering we face?

Why doesn't God end evil?

A second question that comes up is why God doesn't stop all the evil in the world. After all, if God can do whatever He wants, why does He not simply end all the suffering right now. God could do so if He wanted, so why doesn't He?

1. God will one day undo evil once and for all (1 Corinthians 15:22-26; Revelation 21:4).

When we ask why God doesn't end evil, we need to be specific. We are really asking why God hasn't ended evil yet. Because God will stop evil once and for all. Evil will one day take its final stand and will lose miserably. For the believer paradise will be a place where tears are wiped away, and that terrible enemy death is defeated once and for all. As we think about the problem of evil, we need to realize that God has promised to deal finally and fully with the problem in the future. Evil will not be allowed to continue indefinitely.

This brings us back to the question of faith. Can we trust God despite the evil we see now because we truly believe that one day He will do what He has said? One theologian explained this well when he said: "At any rate, we may be assured that in the last day there will be no problem of evil. There will be no more doubt, no more complaint. If there is a residual theoretical problem, it will be one that we will be completely happy to live with. And if we believe now that that day will certainly come, can we not be content in the present?"²

Why do you think it's so hard to accept evil in the present even though we know the Bible teaches that God will deal with it in the future?

2. God uses evil for His purpose (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28).

To us, evil feels very much out of control, but to God nothing is out of control. In fact, God often uses evil for His own purpose. Joseph recognizes that this is the case when his brothers sold him into slavery. What they meant as evil God meant for good. Paul recognized this is the case when he looked at the way in which the trials of life produce the likeness of Christ in us. We will one day stand before God complete and in a world without suffering, but for now God is using the suffering of this world for His own purposes and glory.

² John Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, 188.

What are some of the ways that God is able to use evil for good? Do you have any personal examples?

Some might argue that “we should do evil that good may abound.” Why is this a dangerous way of thinking, and how would you respond?

3. God is giving sinners a chance to repent (2 Peter 3:9).

Peter raises the question of why God waits in his second letter. Believers were undergoing persecution, and no doubt many of them were wondering why Christ had not yet returned. Peter reminds them that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years is like one day. He then reminds them that the Lord isn't slack, He doesn't hesitate and wait around. The reason God is waiting is to give sinners a chance to repent.

One day God will destroy evil, but the problem is that evil is not just something out there, evil is a part of us as well. We are evil, as much as we might hate to admit it. And for God to wipe out all the evil would mean that He would have to wipe out a lot of people. One day He will, and those who refuse to trust in Christ will face an eternity of justice. But God does not desire that, He desires that lost people get saved. He desires that all come to repentance, and so He puts off final judgment one day longer so that more can have the opportunity to repent.

How should this knowledge impact the way we live?

Other Thoughts

As we think through the problem of evil, there are a few other random thoughts that will help us as we process this question and that we can use to help others who have questions about our faith. Some of these are biblical considerations, many of them are of a philosophical nature. While it's unlikely any one of these will stop an atheist dead in their tracks, they might spur thought or help a believer process suffering.

Without God, there is no such thing as good or evil.

From a purely naturalistic, materialistic worldview, there is no evil in the world. That's because “good” and “evil” are value terms, and as we saw in our previous lesson on the existence of God, there is no way to get from what “is” to what “ought to be” if there is nothing higher than the material world. Without a Creator to give value, we are nothing more than atoms bumping into each other, and concepts like “pain,” “suffering,” “wrong,” and “evil” are just subjective impressions.

1. God sees all evil in the world.

If we are bothered by the evil we see, let's not forget that God sees all of it. He sees the betrayal, the abuse, the wickedness of man in all its darkness. If you've ever been unable to finish reading a news story about an atrocity or had to turn off a cop show because you were so disturbed by the evil, remember that God sees all of it. One preacher remarked, “If we could see one ten-thousandth

of the suffering of the world at any given moment, we would collapse under the horror of it all. Only God can endure that sight and carry on.”³

2. The depth of suffering reflects the seriousness of sin.

We don't see sin as awful. Maybe we see some sins as awful, but not our own. We think that “little white lies” or “losing our cool” or “fudging the numbers a little” aren't that serious. Even when it comes to bigger sins, we are shocked at the long term, devastating consequences they leave behind. At least part of the awfulness of suffering is designed to wake us up to the stakes. Sin is awful. It exacts a heavy toll, and those who don't see sin as being deadly serious will be confused as to why the consequences of sin, with the resulting moral evil and natural evil, are so severe.

Why do we underestimate the seriousness of sin? How can we learn to take sin more seriously?

3. There is a difference between the intellectual question and the personal crisis.

This question can be broken down further into two sub questions: how do we explain evil as a whole, and how do we process individual instances of evil? Although these questions are related, there is a different approach we take to the philosophical problem of evil and the personal problem of evil. One asks why a good God would have allowed the Holocaust; one asks why God would allow my child to die from cancer. One hits us at the level of reasoning and logic; one hits us like a gut punch in our heart. Both need to be addressed. When it comes to dealing with personal suffering, the needed solution is not necessarily answers, but comfort. If you are suffering, or know someone who is, then a philosophical defense of the goodness of God is probably not what you need. Prayer, Scripture, comfort, and time are what are needed. Remember that the goal is to continue believing in God's goodness during these dark times, not necessarily to have a carefully developed explanation of why there is so much evil.

Have you ever gone through a time of deep suffering? What did you find to be most helpful during that time?

4. God came to earth and suffered and died.

It's very important as we think about suffering and evil that this is not an abstract question to our God. He is not a robot in heaven running calculations with no understanding of what we are going through. He Himself came to earth and suffered. He was rejected and despised. He was betrayed and tortured and ultimately unjustly killed. This means that God knows what we are going through. Hebrews reminds us that we have a High Priest who was touched with everything it means to be human, all our weakness and suffering (Hebrews 4:15).

Why does it matter that God knows what suffering is like for those who are undergoing suffering?

³ John Piper, “The Triumph of the Gospel in the New Heavens and the New Earth”
<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-triumph-of-the-gospel-in-the-new-heavens-and-the-new-earth--2>