

Week 4: IF GOD IS GOOD, WHY ALL THIS EVIL AND SUFFERING IN THE WORLD?

*I don't know why a good man will fall
While the wicked one stands
And our lives blow about like flags on the land...
I don't know why the innocents fall
While the monsters still stand
And our lives blow about like flags on the land*
-Flags, Brooke Fraser
(Recommended listen on Youtube, Spotify, iTunes)

Opening Question:

- Have you ever experienced suffering that made you wonder where God was?

For Discussion:

Have you ever heard it said: "There isn't a good God, God isn't real because if there were, there wouldn't be all this suffering in the world."

- Can you identify what worldview or system of belief has allowed for the thought that evil and suffering means God does not exist? Where does that thought come from?
- How do people in other generations, other parts of the world, other walks of life think of suffering and evil and the presence of God?

A Syrian toddler's body washed up on the shore of a beach in Turkey; millions of refugees displaced from their homes, their countries, camped in refugee camp settlements; systemic racism; disproportionate incarceration of African Americans in the US and natives in Canada; human trafficking in red-light districts in Southeast Asian countries; famine ravaging the land and bodies of children in southeastern African countries; gun violence and untimely deaths in our states; loss of life with abortion; loss of a relationship; loss of a home.

Wherever people find themselves faith-wise, most people do not disagree that there is a lot of pain in the world.

There is the *psychological problem* of evil, where we try to make sense of and reconcile within ourselves the reality of a good God with the presence of evil and suffering in the world, while we try to cultivate trust and belief in this God when we are faced with suffering and evil.

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There is the *practical problem* of evil—of living out our faith and trust in God when we encounter suffering or evil.¹

Tragedy, suffering, or evil experienced in our own lives can cause us to question God's positioning, role, and power in the midst of our suffering. Someone you love has died, perhaps died in an untimely manner—a parent, a sibling, a friend, a young child—and you wonder why a good God would allow such a thing to happen. This is you wrestling with the *psychological* problem of evil by way of experiencing the *practical* problem of evil.

There is a common argument used against the existence of God based on evil's existence that goes like this:

1. If God exists, then God is perfect
2. If God is perfect, then God is all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient), and all good (omnibenevolent).
3. If God is all 3, then there is no evil.²

The following logic that leads to the conclusion that God does not exist follows this argument:

1. If God exists, then there is no evil.
2. But there is evil.
3. Therefore, God does not exist.³

The assumptions underlying these arguments are: if God is able to stop suffering but does not, then God is not all-good. Either God is all-powerful and able to stop suffering and doesn't, therefore God is not all-good; OR God is not able to stop the suffering though God wants to, therefore God is not all-powerful. You see the conundrum?

¹ James E. Taylor, *Introducing Apologetics: Cultivating Christian Commitment*, 142-3.

² Taylor 144.

³ Ibid.

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One way to address the question of “If God can stop suffering, why doesn’t God? And how can God be good then if God doesn’t?” is by way of the analogy of parents.

Imagine a parent with a young child learning how to ride a bike. That parent, knowing their child will likely fall and hurt themselves in the process of learning how to ride a bike, goes ahead and watches from the curb as their child tries again and again to keep upright. Their child will fall, scrape knees and palms, maybe cry from the pain of the bruises and the disappointment. But that parent, a good and loving parent, can allow their child to ride, fall, get up again and again because they know the delight their child will feel when she finally stays upright.

The *greater good* of the delight and pleasure and freedom their child will feel when she learns how to stay upright on the bike will come through the pain of cut knees and disappointed hopes while she’s learning.

Now, that is an *incredibly simple* analogy to understand what is possibly going on at the cosmic level. Scraped knees cannot be equated with the death of a loved one, or the suffering people experience individually or as communities, but we can think that *perhaps* there is something else going on that we may not or are not able to be aware of, that there might be something that is good that can come from suffering or evil. This is not to say that the ends justify the means—that the end of a potential good justifies great suffering or evil now. What it does say is that there is a possible greater good that can come from utterly terrible events and situations. Note though: argument of a greater good being accomplished by present suffering *is not something you say to someone in the midst of their suffering*.

When you have experienced the death of a loved one, especially a death come too soon, or the loss of a dream or hope or place, the hole that’s opened up in your life cannot be filled by rehearsing arguments for a greater good. What knowing this *can* do is bring reassurance when you are farther down the path of grieving. When you are able to reflect on your loved one’s life

or on your own journey down the line, then you can think on how God is able to use even the deepest wounds, even the most awful situations for good.⁴

For Christians, we worship a Savior who knew suffering intimately and personally. He knew death of a loved one⁵ and abuse of his body and ultimately a gruesome death.⁶ Jesus, whom the gospels tell us knew the Father had a plan with his death,⁷ was still overcome with agony when he understood the suffering he would undergo.⁸ After Jesus was killed, his disciples hid away in rooms and locked the doors behind them because they were afraid of the people who had put Jesus to death,⁹ and were probably wondering “what now?” in the midst of their immense grief. The way that Jesus died—by crucifixion—was brutal, cruel, ghastly. In itself, it was not good, nor a good.

But then the resurrection happens. Jesus is raised from the dead.¹⁰ From that awful, painful, terrifying death—for Jesus and his disciples—God brings about good: resurrection, and redemption for humankind.¹¹ Resurrection—a foretaste of the fullness of God’s kingdom that will come when Jesus returns to earth. Resurrection promises that we who belong to Jesus will also be raised to new life with him.¹² The crucifixion of Jesus was a horrific evil; but not even the event of his crucifixion which was wrought with injustices and evil, of Jesus suffering on our behalf¹³—is beyond God’s being able to bring good out of it.

This *greater good argument* does *not* argue that suffering in itself is good. A person dying or experiencing loss or evil is not good in and of itself, but good—distinct from the suffering—can come from it.

⁴ Romans 8:28

⁵ John 11:1-43

⁶ Matthew 27:32-55

⁷ Matthew 26:36-42

⁸ Luke 22:39-44

⁹ John 20:19

¹⁰ Romans 8:11

¹¹ Matthew 28:1-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-24

¹² 1 Corinthians 15:12-24

¹³ 1 John 2:2

This may be rationally satisfying, but still feel wrong in your gut—that is fitting and makes sense. This is not necessarily a source of comfort when we are faced with suffering or evil. While you are in the midst of your suffering, remember that the creator God is with you in the midst of your pain. When you do not know what to pray, the Spirit intercedes for you.¹⁴ When you need to cry out to God, we have a way to do that—God gives us words to cry out in our pain, when we are faced with evil. We are invited to bring those to God, to “complain in the right direction.”¹⁵

Trouble in the World

There is much brokenness in the world, in our city, our own lives. It is disheartening. However, before we succumb to despair, remember what Christians of old have held to in light of suffering in the world: the assurance that God has entered the suffering of the world.¹⁶

The God of the Old and New Testaments, the God Christians profess—has not snapped divine fingers to make right all things immediately. Instead, the God of the Bible has entered the suffering of the world. God became flesh—God took on all the things that make us bleed in the person of Jesus Christ, God’s Son.¹⁷

God became a human being who felt anguish and loneliness; God became flesh in Jesus Christ, Jesus whose parents had to whisk him away from Bethlehem to avoid a murderous king committing infanticide;¹⁸ Jesus who suffered oppression and was ostracized as a Jew living under Roman occupation,¹⁹ whose own family thought he was loony,²⁰ who was homeless as he

¹⁴ Romans 8:26-28

¹⁵ A few psalms of lament & supplication (asking): Psalm 13, 22, 42, 55)—pray the psalms. Phrase taken from Brooke Fraser.

¹⁶ The incarnational ministry of Jesus Christ: Phil. 2:5-8

¹⁷ Phil. 2:5-8

¹⁸ Matthew 2:13-18

¹⁹ Luke 20:21-25; Luke 2:1-7

²⁰ Mark 3:20-21

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traveled and taught with his friends;²¹ Jesus, who longed to see Jerusalem restored, who longed for the day of redemption to come.²² God didn't get rid of the process—God entered into the process. Jesus knows our frailty and suffering.²³ Jesus knows genocide, war, systemic oppression, poverty, being a refugee, loneliness, being pushed to the fringes, death of a loved one—so, God knows these things intimately.

Being able to hold the existence of God and the existence of evil and suffering together depends a lot on who you believe Jesus to be.

If Jesus was just a Palestinian Jew who was killed by the Roman government in cahoots with the Jewish religious leadership, and that is the end of the story—then, wondering about what to do with the problem of evil is a soul-despairing endeavor.

If Jesus was a Palestinian Jew who was also the Son of God, the Messiah, who was killed by the Roman government with the Jewish authorities, who then rose in bodily form from the dead, and talked and taught his disciples for 40 more days after being raised again to life, and then ascended into heaven to be seated at the right of the Father after ushering in the kingdom of God in a new way—meaning, God is making all things new in Christ. Well, then you have a theology of a suffering Messiah, a theology of an embodied, incarnate Christ who is like us in every way, except he was without sin.

Jesus makes all the difference.

God enters the process in Jesus Christ—the process of human life, the process of human suffering because of sin and evil. More than that, God is a God of redemption, working out for our good all the ways that the world hurts, all the ways the world and us in it bleed.

So, if you believe God is a God who can allow for suffering and evil, even immense, incomprehensible evil to occur because it is *possible* that there is a greater good being brought out of it—then it is *possible* that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, *and* that evil

²¹ Luke 9:58

²² Luke 19:41-42

²³ Hebrews 4:15

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exists. Believing these two statements to be true is not incoherent. The problem of evil need not defeat your belief in God.

It is actually true—God is a good God, and evil exists in the world, but God is able to and is bringing good out of the evil in the world. Remember, God is there with people in the midst of the suffering, in the face of great evil. God welcomes and receives our pain, our laments, our anger, our weeping.²⁴

Concluding Question:

- How do you feel hearing all that? What are your emotions?

²⁴ More psalms of lament: Psalm 44, 60, 74, 79.

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Resources Used:

James E. Taylor, *Introducing Apologetics: Cultivating Christian Commitment*, Baker Academic, 2006.

