

Skeptical: Why do Bad Things Happen if God is Good? 5/26/19

Atheist Philosopher J.L. Mackie put the argument like this: "If a good and powerful God exists, he would not allow pointless evil, but because there is much unjustifiable, pointless evil in the world, it is probable that the traditional good and powerful God does not exist." This is how a philosopher puts it, but I appreciate more how a comedian says it:

George Carlin- I cleaned it up...

When it comes to believing in God, I really tried. But I gotta tell ya, the longer you live, the more you look around and realize something is messed up. Something is wrong here. War, disease, death, destruction, hunger, poverty, torture, crime, corruption and the ice-capades. Something is definitely wrong. This is not good work. If this is the best God can do, I am not impressed. Results like these do not belong on the resume of a supreme being. This is the kind of stuff you would expect from an office temp with a bad attitude. Just between you and me, in any decently run universe, this guy would have been out on his all-powerful butt a long time ago.

[Title Slide] Sarcastic and Jaded...but not completely without merit at face value is it? I want to take some time, like I did in the message about the existence of God considering this from a rational level, But this is not merely a rational issue for any of us, it is personal and visceral. Raise your hand if you have experienced any kind of suffering- physical, emotional, spiritual- OK, you aren't alone, this is topic regularly addressed in the Bible- whether it is David crying out, "God, why do you turn your eye to my cries of help?" or Job and his 3 friends pondering the question. And so we cannot only treat this like a classroom, we also need to treat this like a counselor's office because when we are in the midst of pain, what we need is not philosophy but real, actionable help and hope. I will attempt to do both today. **A Christian Response to the Problem of Evil and Suffering**

Problem #1 God cannot be Good because Evil Exists

If evil exists, and God created everything that exists, then that means God created evil. Therefore, God is not good.

Did God create evil? The Bible says in 1 John 1:5 "God is light and in him is no darkness." That he is pure and holy and good and is not the author of evil, so how do we reconcile this? We often think of evil as a thing...but I'd like to give you another perspective. Have you ever eaten a donut hole?" Not something you can eat, it isn't something, it is the absence of dough. What is cold? It isn't actually a thing, It is the absence of a thing- heat. What is darkness, it is the absence of light. **Evil is the rejection of God's Goodness or the absence of Goodness.**

Ok, even it's more like a donut hole... **Why would God allow evil to come into existence?** Truth is, we don't know for certain. But there are some hints, some ideas that are helpful, one prominent response credited to St. Augustine and popularized by C.S. Lewis is called the **Free Will Argument**. **He is relational and He is love, he has created beings with free will, to choose to love him** because real love cannot be forced. This came with a risk, that his creation would reject his love and be plunged into the results of the absence and separation of God, evil. And

so God is not the author of evil but allowed it in order to achieve the greater good real love relationships for eternity.

Philip Yancey, Disappointment with God

Makes observations based on the Biblical account of the Israelites and their rebellious response to God's displays of power before them.

Power can do everything but the most important thing: It cannot control love. He created us to love him but his most impressive displays of miracles- the kind we may secretly long for- do nothing to foster that love. "God's problem" is not that God is not able to do certain things. "God's problem" is that God loves. Love complicates the life of God as it complicates every life.

This argument is not without its problems. Honestly, we don't know.

What is the Source of Evil and Suffering in the world?

The problem of evil and suffering is most often posed to Bible people...but we must realize the problem of evil and suffering is also a problem for every religion and philosophy...yes even atheists.

Atheism Has No Explanation for Evil nor a Moral Response to Suffering

I touched on this in the last message but I want to look at this from another angle. If life is intrinsically accidental and meaningless, then there is no basis for calling anything good or evil. And therefore, for an atheist- Suffering is the universe's love language.

MLK Jr. in his Letters from Birmingham Jail said, "If there is no divine higher law, there is no way to understand if something is just or not. If there is no God, than how is any historical event unjust?"

Dostoevsky- "If God does not exist, everything is permitted." Carlin, Mackie...you have no grounding for being outraged over injustice or strong nations preying on weak nations, or strong races preying on weak races? And yet you are, and you ought to be. Everything in you screams out, this is not right, this is not natural, this is not how it is supposed to be! This is the very realization that led C.S. Lewis to belief in God. He realized that his reasons for finding wickedness appalling were more than mere feelings, but actual and grounded in something transcendent in him that said, things are not the way they are supposed to be. That nature is unnatural.

For the Christian, there is a clear answer to the source of evil and suffering and why we feel the way we feel about it. **Creation and Fall Genesis 1-3**. Genesis 1-2, God created the world good, there was shalom- peace, harmony, love and wholeness between God, man and the world. But the choice of rebellion in Genesis 3 resulted in the break of shalom, the fracturing of love, harmony and wholeness between God, man and the world. Chapter 3 is a virtual catalogue of all forms of suffering- spiritual alienation, inner psychological pain, social and interpersonal conflict and cruelty, natural disasters, disease, and death. Therefore, the Christian explanation for the evil and suffering of all kinds that we see in the world today is that things are not the way God intended them to be, mosquitos weren't intended to spread malaria, nature is unnatural, and morally, this is why we know what we ought not to do but it is the very thing we keep on doing. Here is the hard but true reality, much of the suffering of the world is a direct

result the evil of the human heart. It is why no amount of technology or advancement or education can create utopia, "We have met the enemy and he is us." But because we are made in the image of God, we have the sense of rightness and wrongness in our DNA. And this is why anywhere we observe morality, goodness and blessing we are able see it as a sign and restoration of God's original design. So while we don't have all the answers about why God allows evil, the Christian understanding of its origins and experience has far more answers than an atheistic perspective.

Problem #2 Suffering disproves God's existence because it is pointless.

Tim Keller says, "Tucked away within the assertion that the world is filled with pointless evil is a hidden premise, namely, that if evil appears pointless to me, then it must be pointless. This shows enormous faith in one's own cognitive faculties."

Alvin Plantinga uses this illustration: If you look into your tent for a St. Bernard, and you don't see one, it is reasonable to assume that there is no St. Bernard in your tent. But if you look into your tent for a "No-See-Um" (an extremely small insect with a bite that is disproportional to its size) and you don't see any, it is not reasonable to assume they aren't there. Many assume that if there were good reasons for the existence of evil and suffering, they would be accessible to our minds, more like St. Bernards than life no-see-ums, but why should that be the case?

Is suffering pointless?

Here's my argument, that if we can see good reasons for some forms of suffering and we have incredibly limited perspective and cognitive faculties, couldn't God have reasons for all suffering beyond my comprehension? I think the answer would have to be yes. God gives us glimpses of some reasons for suffering. This is illustrated in the stories many people in Scripture like Joseph, Job and Paul. Let me hit you rapid fire with a few stated in Scripture:

- Justice: Natural Consequences for wrong choices- Deuteronomy 28
- To bring people to repentance and faith- Luke 13:1-5
- To rely on God and not false security- 2 Corinthians 1:8-9
- Testing our Faith- James 1:1-5
- For humility and the producing of Christ-like character- Romans 8:28-30.
- As a testament of faith to others- Hebrews 11
- So we can experientially know Christ and share in his suffering- Philippians 3:10
- To prepare us for the glory of eternity- 2 Corinthians 4:17

All these can bring great comfort to Christians who are afflicted... and this leads us to a key problem with an atheistic perspective: **Useless for the Actual experience of Suffering.** Atheist Philosopher, Bertrand Russell once said, "How can you talk about God when you are kneeling at the bed of a dying child?" very compelling at first. But I have a question back "What is the atheist Bertrand Russell going to say at the bedside of the dying child? "That's the way it goes? It's all meaningless?" He has nothing to offer. So the solution? "Avoid reality at all costs."

While the philosophical existence of evil and suffering is a problem for Christian belief, when it comes to the experience of **actual suffering, Christianity is rich with real resources.**

Christianity is the only belief system that has a God who suffers. All other systems have a God that is so transcendent that He cannot relate to the experience of suffering. Tim Keller tells a story of a Muslim man after a talk about Jesus' suffering who stood up and said, "How preposterous 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." And in response the minister said, "What the Muslim denounces as blasphemy the Christian holds precious: God has wounds."

See what this means? While we do not know the reasons why God allows evil and suffering, but we know what the reason is not. It is not because he doesn't love us. Keller says, "He is so committed to our ultimate happiness that he is willing to plunge into the greatest depths of suffering himself. He understands us, he has been there, and he assures us that he has a plan to eventually wipe away every tear. Someone might say, "But that's only half an answer to the question 'why?' Yes, but it is the half we need."

And so we can have real resources when we suffer even the deepest pain, because we know he loves us, he is with us in it, and because of his death, he will one day restore shalom. This is the great hope of the Bible.

Romans 8:18, 21

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us... [We have] hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

C.S. Lewis

They say of some temporal suffering, "No future bliss can make up for it," not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory.

And eternal perspective is so critical to facing suffering and evil. Rope Illustration.

Atheist Says: If God is an all-good God he would destroy evil, if God is all-powerful he could destroy evil. Even exists and therefore God is not all good or all powerful.

Response of Faith:

If God is all good, he will destroy evil. If God is all-powerful he can destroy evil. Evil is not yet defeated, therefore God will one day destroy evil.

10 Pastoral Thoughts about Suffering

1. Avoid Clichés, Exhortations and Easy Answers in Comforting those suffering- When we do this, we end up more like Job's three friends who would have better served Job by staying quiet.

2. Grieve with those who Grieve. 1 Corinthians 12:26. For the Griever, don't do it alone. You need others, and GreifShare is helpful. For those trying to comfort the grieving. For the 15 years of ministry and growing up as a PK, watching seasoned pastors and being among those grieving.

This is what I have learned- The ministry of presence is needed. When in doubt, show up. Silence, holding a hand, weeping with those who weep. Pray, read their favorite Scriptures. Hold their faith for them when they can't manage to. Consider what they need done- clean the house, food, groceries, bills, cut the grass. Invite widows and the grieving over for dinner.

3. The only way to get through grief is to go through grief. You can't go around it, over it, under it. Grief has fairly predictable cycles but not all people go through it linearly or in the same amount of time. It can take a long time and don't be hard on yourself or others who may say you need to "get over it."

4. Suffering is always a result of the FALL, but not necessarily a result of your FALL. Be introspective, ask God to search your heart, but remember that suffering is often indiscriminate.

5. It is OK to ask "Why?" to God and express your deepest pain to Him. He can handle it. Reading the Psalms and Laments are helpful.

6. Faith is holding on to a God you cannot put in a box or control. But it is trusting He is good.

7. Some forms of suffering ought to be prevented or intervened upon. Physical, Sexual Abuse, Drug Abuse, Starvation, Treatable issues.

8. Don't lose hope. Even if a silver lining can't be found right now, always look for it. There is the ultimate silver lining coming one day.

9. Be skeptical of Anti-Suffering Theology. Any theology that tries to convince you that it is God's will that you avoid suffering and He wants you to have your "Best Life Now"

10. Don't ask for Suffering, but Embrace the Refining Fire when it comes. 1 Peter 4:12, Go deep to know God and yourself.