

Why is there so much suffering and evil in the world? (Part I)

CHAPTER 8

“How can an all-powerful, all-loving God allow so much suffering and evil in the world?”



In her book entitled *When God Weeps*, Joni Eareckson Tada writes the following about her friend, John McAllister, whose degenerative nerve disease leaves him bedridden and unable to move:

“Nighttime is no longer friendly. Shadows cast jerking, jagging shapes across the room. Gravity is his enemy as the weight of the air settles on his chest. Breathing is heavy labor. Calling out is impossible. He needs to call out tonight. In the darkness an ant finds him. The scout sends for others and they come. First hundreds, then thousands. A noiseless legion inches its way down the chimney, across the floor, secretly crawling up his urine tube, up, over and onto his bed. They fan out over the hills and valleys of John’s blanket, tunneling under and onto his body. He is covered by a black, wriggling, invasion ... John’s wife, along with a nurse, found him in the early morning with ants still in his hair, mouth, and eyes. His skin was badly bitten and burned ... John is a Christian. His God can see in the dark. Why, in the name of heaven, why? God, who are you? ... This is suffering stalking a person down and ripping into his sanity. This is affliction spinning out of control ... Is this God’s idea of accomplishing something deep and profound in our lives? Is there anyone out there who can make sense of this? Who actually believes this?”¹

Millions upon millions of similar, horrific stories like this, as well as personal experiences with suffering, have driven scores of people to question God’s character, justice, power, goodness and love. Peter De Vries describes the age old mystery of pain as “the question mark turned like a fishhook in the human heart.”² The jagged edges of the reality of suffering and evil in the world have even led many to deduce that an all-powerful, all-loving God can not possibly exist.

The Christian lecturer, Michael Ramsden succinctly sums up the problem of suffering this way: “For a while now, at least in the Western world, the existence of any form of pain, suffering or evil has been regarded as evidence for the non-existence of God. If a good God existed, people say, these things wouldn’t. But they do and, therefore, he doesn’t.” Nineteenth century minister, Joseph Parker, conveyed these feelings with forthright honesty, anguish and anger following the death of his wife:

“In that dark hour, I became almost an atheist. For God had set his foot upon my prayers and treated my petitions with contempt. If I had seen a dog in such agony as mine, I would have pitied and helped the dumb beast; yet God spat upon me and cast me out as an offence – out into the waste wilderness and the night black and starless.”³

STATING THE PROBLEM⁴

The presence of suffering and evil in the world undoubtedly presents the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith. Henri Blocher, commenting on this challenge, writes, “while it is evil that tortures human bodies, it is the problem of evil that torments the human mind.”⁵ Even the prophets in the Bible raise the question in various forms. For example, the prophet Habakkuk asked God, “How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?” (Habakkuk 1:2-3) Jeremiah challenged God by saying, “I would speak with you about your justice: why does the way of the wicked prosper?” (Jeremiah 12:1) However the issue is articulated, it is ultimately God’s character and moral trustworthiness that are called into question.

SOME IMPORTANT POINTS TO BEGIN WITH

It is important to say at the outset that when examining the question of suffering and evil we should have a proper degree of humility and realize that we are dealing with a profound mystery for which no one has an exhaustively satisfying answer. The human mind seeking to explain this mystery is like a harmonica interpreting Beethoven. The music is too majestic for the instrument.

Further, it must be acknowledged that every world religion and worldview must give an explanation for evil and suffering. This is not just a Christian question.

Finally, it should be pointed out that if someone puts forth an explanation for the problem of suffering and evil, it should make sense logically, intellectually, philosophically and emotionally.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE ANSWERS?

Let us begin by examining and evaluating how other worldviews go about formulating a response to the mystery of suffering and evil.

One way that people choose to resolve this problem is to say that evil and suffering really do not exist. Many Eastern religions go this route. For example, many pantheistic⁶ religions teach, “*If God is all, and God is good, then evil can not exist.*” Hinduism, Taoism, some forms of Buddhism, the Christian Science Church, Unitarians, and others teach that the way to resolve the problem of evil is to realize that it really does not exist at all. It is an illusion. Thus, in order to overcome pain, suffering and evil, we must learn to believe that everything in the physical world is non-real -- then the illusion will have no grip on us.

Many would contend that this explanation does not make sense emotionally. I can't imagine having to tell a rape victim - “The evil and pain you have encountered is just an illusion.”

It could also be argued that the pantheistic explanation of evil and suffering does not make sense intellectually. Ravi Zacharias tells the humorous story of India's leading philosopher, Shankara who had just finished lecturing the king on the deception of the mind and its delusion of material reality when an elephant went on a rampage. Promptly, Shankara climbed up a tree to find safety. When the king asked him why he ran if the elephant was non-real, Shankara, not to be outdone, said, “What the king actually saw was a non-real me climbing up a non-real tree!” Zacharias offers this addendum: “One might add, ‘this is a non-real answer.’”⁷

Another example of an explanation that does not make sense logically or emotionally is atheism. Atheism puts forth the following response to the question of human suffering: “We are living in an impersonal, accidental universe in which some people get lucky and others don't. There is no point of thinking of a creator-god to whom we can attribute goodness or badness – it is all matter plus time plus chance. We are all simply part of a cosmic casino and no questions should be asked.”⁸

Many atheists and skeptics begin their challenge to God's existence by saying, “*God can't exist because evil exists.*” However, there are logical problems with this statement. Consider the following dialogue by Ravi Zacharias and a university student from a question and answer session:⁹

Student: There is too much evil in this world; therefore, there cannot be a God!

Speaker: Would you mind if I asked you something? You said, "God cannot exist because there is too much evil." If there is such a thing as evil, aren't you assuming that there is such a thing as good?

Student: I guess so.

Speaker: When you accept the existence of goodness, you must affirm a moral law on the basis of which to differentiate between good and evil. But when you admit to a moral law, you must posit a moral lawgiver. That, however, is who you are trying to disprove and not prove. For, if there is no moral lawgiver, there is no moral law. If there is no moral law, there is no good. If there is no good, there is no evil. What, then, is your question?

Student: What, then, am I asking you?

This student just realized that the question of evil and suffering is only valid if God, in fact, exists. In other words, as soon as you take God out of the picture, terms like "Good" and "Evil" can only be defined by conflicting human opinions and personal feelings. If morality is defined by human opinion, we are reduced to asking ourselves, "*Which human's opinion do we choose to follow?*" "Seen in this light," Zacharias concludes, "the reality of evil actually requires the existence of God rather than disproves it."¹⁰

So, atheism's explanation for the problem of evil and suffering does not make sense logically. Also, it does not make sense emotionally. Listen to what Oxford University professor, Richard Dawkins, says about why people suffer:

"In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no other good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music."¹¹

Would Dawkins honestly tell a rape victim that the rapist was merely dancing to his DNA?¹²

We have seen that non-Christian worldviews struggle to give us satisfactory answers to the problem of suffering and evil. Let us now consider the Christian position on this mystery. If it is true that the question of evil is valid only if God exists, how can the stark reality of suffering in the world possibly be reconciled with the Christian affirmation that God is sovereign, just, and good?

“Why did God create a world where evil and suffering exists?”



Most human suffering can be put into two broad categories:

- 1) Suffering caused by moral evil or sin.
- 2) Suffering brought on by natural causes.

When examining the question of responsibility and origin of these two categories, it is helpful to consider the possible worlds God could have created.

Think about four possible worlds God could have created:

1. God could have created no world at all

Would a non-world be better than our world? While this might be an interesting question for philosophers to wrestle with, it is not very helpful to our discussion for “something” and “nothing” cannot be compared. As Norman Geisler put it, it is like “comparing apples and non-apples, insisting that non-apples taste better.”¹³

2. God could have created a world where only goodness could be chosen

In this type of world, suffering caused by moral evil or human sin would not exist. While this sounds wonderful at first glance, the result of creating this type of world would be the negation of free choice. In fact, if God created a non-moral world it would also be a non-free world. Freedom of choice is necessary if the word “morality” is to have any meaning. Again, Geisler sums this up well: “A non-moral world cannot be morally better than a moral world.”

If God did not create us with the freedom to choose, we would be like robots. Certainly, God could have created humans that had no choice to love him or not. This, however, would have made real love impossible. **For example...**

Imagine a man who programmed his computer to say “*I love you!*” every few minutes.



Would this be real love?

One of the greatest gifts God has given us is the freedom and ability to choose. However, free choice always leaves the possibility of a wrong choice. “Not even an all-powerful God,” John Stott reminds us, “could give man freedom and at the same time guarantee that he would use it wisely.”¹⁴ In other words, “it is not possible to force people to freely choose the good. Forced freedom is a contradiction.”¹⁵ In his celebrated book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes:

“God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go either wrong or right. Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong; I cannot. If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata - of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating.”¹⁶

God does not force us to love him or obey him. If we choose to love God, it should follow that we will seek to obey him. If everyone chose to love and obey God, evil would not result. If people choose not to obey God, evil will result. This is where suffering caused by evil comes from. It comes from disobedience and the misuse of freedom. It does not come from God.

The Nature of Evil

As we consider the issue of free will, another question emerges that needs to be addressed: If God created everything and evil is a “thing” humans are confronted with, can’t we deduce that God created evil?

In addressing this question it is good to carefully consider the nature of evil. Christian thinkers, such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas helped develop the idea that evil should not be defined as a “thing” or an “initial ingredient of existence”¹⁷ but, rather, the absence of something. Michael Ramsden offers this helpful illustration: In order to make a room dark, we do not switch the darkness on – we switch the light off. Darkness is a negative entity that can be explained only as the absence of light. So it is with evil. Negative entities are not created.

This understanding of the nature of evil is in harmony with the first chapters of the Bible which teach that in the beginning God created a good world without suffering and uncontaminated by evil. Genesis 1:31 tells us, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” Angelic beings were also created as a part of God’s good creation. Finally, God created human beings and blessed them with the capacity to love, grow, learn and mature. In order to do this, it was necessary to create an environment where individuals possessed the freedom to obey or disobey, love or ignore their Creator. A particular created spirit called Satan - who was not created as evil - at some point, misused the freedom he was given and chose to rebel against God’s authority.¹⁸ This “fallen angel” eventually tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God and “sin entered the world” (Romans 5:12). Evil and suffering were now a part of human existence. Thus, according to the Bible, suffering caused by evil is an “alien intrusion into God’s good world”¹⁹ and “arises from the misuse of created freedom, that of the devil and then that of human beings.”²⁰

3. God could have created a world without suffering due to natural causes

A third possible world God could have created is one where there was no such thing as suffering due to natural causes. As we have seen, the original creation is described in Genesis as being “very good.” This implies that events such as tsunamis, hurricanes, cancer or death due to natural causes would not have been a concern. However, when Adam and Eve misused their freedom the results were catastrophic. Humanity became alienated internally (with shame, guilt, fear, anxiety), spiritually (with God), socially (with others), vocationally (with work) and even ecologically (with nature). Death, disease and decay not only became a part of the human experience, but nature itself became contaminated. We now live in a fallen world where even the ground is cursed (Genesis 3:17-19). Because of sin, we are subject to suffering due to natural causes that would not have occurred had humans remained obedient to God. John Blanchard writes, “the world as we now see it is not in its original condition, but it is radically ruined by sin, and we live on what someone has called a ‘stained planet.’”²¹ The Bible describes it this way:

“For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” (Romans 8:18-22)

4. Our World

The fourth possible world to consider is the world as we know it - where good and evil exist along with the possibility of choosing either. In his classic commentary on the problem of pain, C. S. Lewis writes the following:

“We want ... not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven – a senile benevolence who, as they say, ‘liked to see young people enjoying themselves’ and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, ‘a good time was had by all’ ... I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines. But since it is abundantly clear that I don’t, and since I have reason to believe, nevertheless, that God is Love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction.”²²

This marvelous quotation brings up an important question -- What was God’s purpose for creating everything in the first place? If God’s intention was to produce an environment where free humans could develop character and grow in their love for God and each other, then he succeeded. In the final analysis, of the four worlds described - ours is the only one where love is possible.²³ Norman Geisler summarizes this point well:

“This world is the **best way** to the **best world**. If God is to both preserve freedom and defeat evil, then this world is the best way to do it. Freedom is preserved in that each person makes his or her own free choice to determine their destiny. Evil is overcome in that once those who reject God are separated from the others, the decisions of all are honored and made permanent.”²⁴

The Question of Permission

Thus far, I have hoped to show that when looking for someone to blame for the origin of evil and suffering, we are not in a position to point an accusing finger at God. There is, however, another troubling question that emerges: Why does God *permit* so much suffering and evil in our world? Can’t partial blame be attributed to someone who has the ability to stop suffering, yet does not do so?

To address this question, let us now turn to the classic Biblical case study on the problem of suffering -- the book of Job. Although Job's saga supplies no exhaustive or definitive answer to the problem of evil and pain, there are many crucial teachings that are relevant to our discussion. Job is introduced as a good, blameless, upright, wealthy man who "feared God and shunned evil." Meanwhile, in a heavenly dialogue with God, Satan insinuates that the reason Job is so good and faithful is because he has been blessed with a great family, great riches, and great health. In response, God permits Satan to test Job and violent waves of death, destruction and carnage begin to crash in on Job's life. In a matter of hours, Job loses his livestock, servants and children. Yet, "in all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing" (Job 1:22). So, Satan again challenged God, "...stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face" (Job 2:4). Again, God allowed Satan to test Job. "So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head" (Job 2:7).

What can we learn from this episode about affixing blame for human suffering? Who is responsible for Job's suffering?

The book of Job investigates this question in depth. Job, himself, is interrogated throughout as a possible suspect. "Surely, these things wouldn't be happening if Job was not hiding some secret sin," reasoned Job's "comforters." However, the message of the book teaches just the opposite. If "Job's sinfulness" is not to blame, what is? We could certainly identify wicked people - the Sabeans (Job 1:15) and the Chaldeans (Job 1:17) - and bad weather - presumably lightening (Job 1:16) and a great wind (Job 1:19) - as the culprits. On a deeper level, Satan is clearly to blame.²⁵ Yet, it is the deepest level of understanding that is so troubling. Yes, the direct blame should go to bad people, bad weather and a bad angel. However, this does not tell the whole story. Indirectly, does not God share part of the blame? It is the awareness that God himself allowed, and even authorized, Job's sufferings that is so unsettling. What are we to make of this?

First of all, this is not an issue that is particular to the book of Job. God's supreme authority over all that happens on earth is a consistent teaching throughout Scripture. Indeed, whatever we can think of in this world that brings about suffering, we can find a biblical verse claiming God's sovereignty over it.

Second, if we are disturbed by the idea that God screens evil, consider how disconcerting it would be to find out that he didn't. Steven Estes responds to God's sovereignty in light of Job's suffering this way:

"Satan acted freely; no one forced his hand. God's reaction to the devil was merely to lengthen his leash ... What's clear immediately is that God permits all sorts of things he doesn't approve of ... Do we find repulsive a God who gives the nod to our tragedies? What if your trials weren't screened by any divine plan? Try to conceive of Lucifer unrestrained. Left to his own, the Devil would make Jobs of us all ... If God didn't control evil, the result would be evil uncontrolled. God permits what he hates to achieve what he loves."²⁶

Could it be that God allowed the tragic events we read about in the book of Job to show humanity what it would be like if he let go of Satan's leash? Is it possible that these events were recorded in Scripture so that everyone could vividly witness what the devil is really like and the suffering that he would inflict without God's restraining? Perhaps, the book of Job is an inspired glimpse of what hell is like and, just briefly, God deemed it necessary to pull back the curtain so that we could get a good look at the true character of this fallen angel we so flippantly flirt around with.

Job never received an exhaustive, theoretical answer as to why he was suffering. It is unlikely that a "reason" would have satisfied him anyway. In the end, the only thing that could fill the void in Job's afflicted life was the very presence of God. Indeed, the very thing that Job wanted and needed most was given to him – the opportunity to see God. Rather than revealing any ultimate "solution" to the problem of pain, God reveals himself. For Job, this was enough, as is evident in his response, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6).

The book of Job illustrates that "it is less important to know all the answers than to know and trust the one who does."²⁷ Job's saga ends with God presenting him sixty two questions. These questions seem to have answered Job's. But, do they answer ours? Rather than thundering out unanswerable questions at a wounded man, wouldn't it be more meaningful if God came down from the safety and comfort of heaven - into our world - and had to experience our pain? What if God actually accepted the blame and the punishment for the evil in our world? It is here that the Christian gospel becomes extremely relevant to our discussion.

NOTES

¹ Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes, *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 23-24.

² Philip Yancy, *Where is God When It Hurts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 9.

³ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 312.

⁴ The area of theology that is concerned with the problem of suffering and evil has come to be known as “theodicy” which means “a vindication of the justice of God in establishing a world in which evil exists.”

⁵ Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* (Leicester: Apollos, 1994), 9.

⁶ The word “pantheism” comes from two Greek words *πάν* (or '*pan*') meaning “all” and *θεός* (or '*theos*') meaning God. Pantheism literally means "God is All" and "All is God." It is the view that everything (the universe or nature) and God are equivalent.

⁷ Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 118.

⁸ This description of the atheistic worldview came from L.T. Jeyachandran, a Christian lecturer from South India.

⁹ Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1994), 182.

¹⁰ Ravi Zacharias and Norman Geisler, *Who Made God?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 2003), 35.

¹¹ Richard Dawkins, *Out of Eden* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 133.

¹² Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 114.

¹³ Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 224.

¹⁴ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 17.

¹⁵ Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 221.

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, HarperCollins Edition, 2001), 47-48.

¹⁷ Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 128.

¹⁸ How do we know that angels have been created with the capacity to choose between good and evil? The Bible tells us in 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 that some angels sinned and “abandoned their own home.”

¹⁹ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 313.

²⁰ Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 129.

²¹ John Blanchard, *Where Was God on September 11?* (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2002), 15.

²² C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain – C.S. Lewis Signature Classics Edition* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 33.

²³ Norman Geisler and Ron Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1990), 73.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ On several occasions, the Bible states that the devil can have a hand in sickness, deformities and disease (Luke 4:35, 39; 13:16; 18:11, 16; Acts 10:38; 2 Corinthians 12:7). Michael Green’s comments are helpful to add here: “... the Bible which asserts the reality and power of Satan is no less clear that the devil is not an equal and opposite figure to God. There is no dualism here. The devil remains ‘God’s devil’ as Luther called him. He is on a chain, albeit a long one. His eventual destiny is destruction, but in the meantime he is out to spoil God’s world in every way possible.” Michael Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), 199.

²⁶ Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes, *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 83-84.

²⁷ John Blanchard, *Where Was God on September 11?* (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2002), 23.