

SESSION 4 NOTES
Why Does God Allow Suffering?
Why Is There So Much Evil in the World?

Opening Thought

Albert Camus, the author and philosopher who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, wrote, “The god-man [Jesus] suffers too, with patience. Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to him since he suffers and dies. The night on Golgotha is so important in the history of man only because, in its shadows, the divinity ostensibly abandoned its traditional privilege, and lived through to the end, despair included, the agony of death” (Essais [Paris: Gallimard, 1965], 444, translated and quoted by Bruce Ward in “Prometheus or Cain? Albert Camus’s Account of the Western Quest for Justice,” *Faith and Philosophy* [April 1991], 213).

The Objection

People say that the fact of appalling evil and suffering in the world is one of the main reasons they cannot believe in the traditional God of the Bible, because the God of the Bible is portrayed as a God who is both all-powerful and all good. If that God exists, he would not create a world filled with pointless evil. Yet the world is filled with pointless evil, therefore the God of the Bible cannot exist.

Video Notes — http://youtu.be/O_M7Q-bN2SA

Questions for Discussion

1. In this scenario: a friend comes to you upset because he or she has recently experienced some form of personal suffering (for example, the death of a loved one) and says, “I can’t believe in a God who would allow this to happen to me—who would allow this evil and suffering.” Order these possible responses from most to least helpful and explain why.
 - a. Reassuringly and thoughtfully remind your friend that God always “works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28).
 - b. Gently and with compassion try to tell your friend about why God might allow their suffering.
 - c. With compassion and love say things like, “I’m sure that somehow it’s all going to work out for the best.”
 - d. Listen to your friend without saying much of a response.

- e. Put an arm around your friend and kindly use phrases such as, “Remember, it will make you stronger.”

“D” is probably the best place to start, for when answering these questions, we cannot treat it primarily as a philosophical or theoretical problem. Since we have all experienced some form of suffering, it is a personal issue. We should always listen and respond with empathy and pastoral care. It is probably not helpful to say things like, “It will make you stronger,” or “I’m sure that somehow it’s all going to work out for the best,” or “There is a greater purpose.” While these things may be true, they are not enough of a reason for the suffering. We should not be the kind of friends that Bildad and Zophar and Eliphaz were for Job, but should “mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15). Initially, suffering people are looking for solace and alleviation, not an immediate and logical explanation. So, provide them with a gracious and comforting relationship, and wait to initiate an explanation.

2. David Hume in his famous discourses concerning natural religion writes, “Epicurus’ old questions are yet unanswered. Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? That he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?” The idea is that God cannot be both powerful and good if evil is allowed to continue in the world, as it apparently is—therefore, the God of biblical Christianity cannot exist. How would you answer?

This objection to the existence or character of God hinges on a mistaken premise. It assumes that a good God would not allow evil to continue. The faulty reasoning is that if we cannot think of any justifiable reason why God would allow suffering and evil to continue, then God cannot have such a reason. But, why should there be no reason just because we cannot think of one?

Alvin Plantinga offers a three-part response to this question (in *Warranted Christian Belief* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 466-467, and in “A Christian Live Partly Lived” in *Philosophers Who Believe*, ed. Kelly James Clark [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993], 70-71):

1. “Christians must concede that we don’t know. That is, we don’t know in any detail.”
2. “Given that [God] is omniscient and given our very substantial epistemic limitations, it isn’t at all surprising that his reasons...[might] escape us.”
3. “On a quite general level, we may know that God permits evil because he can achieve a world he sees as better by permitting evil [rather] than by preventing it.”

Moreover, if there is no God, people don't really have a good basis for being outraged at the existence of suffering (cf. in the movie, *God's Not Dead*, the student climaxes his debate with the professor by asking, "How can you be angry with someone who doesn't exist?"). In a naturalistic worldview, death and destruction are perfectly natural, for the "survival of the fittest" is a genetic and fundamental principle. Someone can only object to injustice if they already believe in some kind of "supernatural" moral standard which stands in judgment on "natural" behavior. And where would such a supernatural standard come from if there is no God? So, eliminating God does not eliminate the problem of evil and suffering.

3. **One of the video participants said, "When the question is asked, 'Why does God allow suffering?'—my first thought is—why not? ... Suffering is life, that is a given, so there is no reason to question why it's there or even to extricate it from your life." Do people you know feel this way? Do you think this is a satisfactory answer to the problem of suffering?**

Job agreed in Job 5:7 and 14:1, but that wasn't an ultimately satisfying answer for him—he still asked (demanded), "Why?!" The sovereignty and loving faithfulness of God were his ultimate strength.

4. **Over the years, people who try to defend the existence of God have come up with theodicies—good reasons why God allows evil. Here are the two most common theodicies. What is helpful and what is problematic about each theodicy?**

- a. ***The Punishment Theodicy*: "Because humankind rebelled, the suffering of the world is the deserved punishment for sin."**

Helpful — Most objections to suffering presuppose that people deserve a comfortable life from God, but that premise has been smuggled in without support. This theodicy helps expose the assumption that we are good people who deserve a good life by explaining sin and its consequences. It helps put this issue into its proper context of the Fall—our evil rebellion against God and the resulting curse. Maybe the problem of evil is really—why does God allow so much happiness?

Problematic — This doesn't answer the seemingly random, arbitrary, and unfair distribution of punishment/suffering. It also does not explain why God allowed human sin and thus evil in the first place.

- b. ***The Free Will Theodicy*: "If God wanted people to freely choose the good, they would have to have been free to choose evil. The greater good of having true children (rather than robots) entails the risk of abuse of free will."**

Helpful — This perspective helpfully reminds us that a great deal of suffering in the world should not be blamed on God, but is due to the mean, cruel, selfish, and inhumane choices people make. It helps explain the beauty of God's grace (i.e., like a diamond against a black backdrop, God's grace is only discovered and magnified [cf. Ephesians 1:3-14; 3:10] in a situation that doesn't merit His love and goodness), which is impressed upon man's free will; rather than God merely programming human robots.

Problematic — It doesn't explain natural, nonhuman evil such as earthquakes. Nor does it explain why God does not intervene in our bad choices (like a parent would with his child), or block the harm to others of our bad choices.

5. **The Bible is filled with the cries of people—including many biblical authors—who are deeply perplexed and baffled by the magnitude and the unjust distribution of instances of evil and suffering. Can you recall some of these?**

Judges 6:13; Job 23:2-9; Psalm 73:2-14; Ecclesiastes 3:16; 4:1; 7:15; Jeremiah 12:1-4; Habakkuk 1:2-4

6. **The Bible is also filled with many verses that help Christians understand the general purposes for suffering. Can you recall some of these?**

Christians suffer:

- For their own sake: to learn who God is (Psalm 46; Daniel 4:24-37), to learn to trust God (2 Corinthians 1:8-9; Psalm 73) and obey Him (Psalm 119:67-72), to become more like Jesus (Romans 8:18-29), to reach maturity of character (Romans 5:3-4; Hebrews 12:1-11), to help us walk by faith and not by sight (Habakkuk; 2 Corinthians 5:1-7)
- For the sake of others: that God's people may have courage (Philippians 1:14) and power (2 Corinthians 4:7-12) and comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3-7), that others might come to know God savingly (Philippians 1:12-13; Colossians 1:24ff—Paul endured wrongdoing, so that others might escape God's wrath)
- For Christ's sake: to identify with Christ (Matthew 10; Galatians 2:20; 1 Peter), to share in His sufferings and glory (1 Peter 4:12-16; Philippians 1:29; Romans 8:17-18; 2 Corinthians 4:17), to magnify Christ (Philippians 1:12-18), to exemplify Him (1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 3:16), to know Him more richly (Philippians 3:8-10)

Illustration: The Bible depicts a Christian's suffering like the underside of a beautiful tapestry. On the top, the beautiful and intricate artistry is evident, but underneath, it looks like an ugly mass of thread.

7. **One of the video participants said, "Things happen and we suffer and then later we gain understanding about what that suffering was." Another said, "I sweep it under the rug and just try and forget about it, just cross it out of my mind and pretend it never happened, and that's one way that I can usually deal with suffering." What do you think of these responses? How do people you know usually deal with suffering?**

Regarding the first — That is often true!

Regarding the second — That usually doesn't work: it usually produces bitterness, resentment, or an eventual (bad) reaction.

The video host shared the illustration of Horatio Spafford's finding comfort in Christ after the loss of his four daughters and then writing "It is Well With My Soul." Drawing from that illustration, he then shared why Jesus Christ can be such a powerful aid for those working through personal suffering: "Two things can happen when you suffer. One is you think, 'I'm being punished.' But the cross [i.e., the suffering of our God] says, no, Jesus took your punishment. ... The second question comes up, 'Well, maybe God doesn't care.' But the cross says God does care; He's lost a child out of His love for you." (NOTE: His first piece of advice is not as simple as he states it, for according to the Bible, [1] God does continue to lovingly and purposefully chasten/discipline His children [Hebrews 12:3-11], and [2] the unforgiven sin of an unbeliever is under the wrath of God temporally and eventually eternally, since Christ's payment has been rejected [John 3:36]. Nonetheless, the Bible also teaches that we cannot look at a person's suffering and make an immediate connection to some sin in their life [John 9:1-3].)

8. **One of the video participants said, "How do I feel about a suffering God in Christianity? It actually made me think that it is a unique aspect of Christianity. ... And I actually felt it might be a useful thing to help somebody get through a tragedy. It seems like we need that. We need to feel that there are people, or there's a force, or some being that can empathize and go through these things with us. I think that that is something I realize in my own life and it seems like if Christianity can offer that, that might be a useful thing to think about." Does the concept that God suffered help you deal with suffering? Give examples from your own life or the lives of those you know.**

Alvin Plantinga writes, "As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of his creatures. He enters into and

shares our suffering. ... Some...claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. We don't know why God permits evil; we do know, however, that he was prepared to accept suffering of which we can form no conception. ... That doesn't answer the question, Why does God permit evil? But it helps the Christian trust God as his loving father. ...His aims and goals may be beyond our ken...but he himself is prepared to share much greater suffering in the pursuit of those ends. In this regard Christianity contains a resource for dealing with this existential problem of evil—a resource denied other religions" ("A Christian Live Partly Lived," 71).

The video host added, "Now we know what the reason for suffering isn't. It can't be that He doesn't love us, and it can't be that he could just snap his fingers and let it all go away and still have us. ... If he loves us enough to suffer for us, then he must have a good reason for allowing it to go on." Though we cannot discern the reason that God might have for allowing evil, there is remarkable assurance that he does have one. He himself has suffered infinitely with us, for us, on the cross. This proves that God is not indifferent to suffering, since he became involved—he is a feeling, emotional God (cf. Matthew 14:10-13; John 4:6; 11:35; Hebrews 4:15).

The problem of evil and suffering is the strongest objection to the Christian faith. It is strong because it is an irreducible problem. It can never be removed by argument. However, evil and suffering creates an even greater problem for alternative views and positions. Atheists have no basis to be outraged at suffering and evil. Other religions have a God who does not suffer. Christianity is the only religion with a God that suffers. Confidence in the character of God—his love, his justice, and his wisdom—becomes possible only when people see what he did in coming himself to die on the cross in order to halt the greatest evil and suffering of all—separation from him (cf. 1 Peter 3:18).

The "theoretical" or philosophical and "personal" answers converge here. What confirmation is there that God has some good reason for allowing suffering and evil to (temporarily [cf. Psalm 73]) continue? The cross! God must hate evil, too, or he would not have done that. If he hates evil that much, he must have some good reason for letting history continue.

The poem, "Jesus of the Scars" by Edward Shillito (<http://bit.ly/12mmwJ9>) vividly portrays the distinctive way that Christianity gives to people a handle on evil and suffering.

*The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to Thy throne;*

*But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And no god has wounds, but Thou alone.*

9. How does the Christian belief in the resurrection provide a resource for dealing with and understanding suffering?

Christianity says that when God comes back he is going to renew and cleanse this earth. Bodies, loved ones, homes will be restored, purified, and beautified. Resurrection is the restoration of life. Jesus' resurrection means resurrection for all those who believe in him into this new heaven and new earth. It means that everything sad is going to be made infinitely better for all the suffering and evil having once been true (cf. Romans 8).

The video used this illustration: we can remember certain things happening to us that, as six-year-olds, we thought of as irreparable, tragic, emotional wounds that would never heal. Yet we got over them eventually. In addition to illustrating how we might be like six-year-olds who just are unable to grasp the reasons and purposes for their suffering, this also serves to illustrate the possibility of our current suffering one day becoming rather infinitesimal. We can at least imagine the possibility of a glory and a bliss that goes on for a trillion (and more) years that could be so great, it would make anything we go through here look like a fairly dim memory.

Final Thought

Job repeatedly asked God to explain to him the reason for his suffering. And when God finally met with Job at the end of the book, God never gave him an answer. And the fact is, that if at any point God had said to Job, "Let me tell you all the reasons why you're suffering" then Job would have said, "Oh, so that's it! I'm going to be famous, I'm going to inspire millions of people with my courage and nobility." Here's the irony—Job never would have become the great person that he became if he knew why he was suffering. And when we are in the middle of suffering, we should not try to imagine reasons that would justify it. That is really not the best thing for our heart.