

If God Is Real and Good, Why is there Evil and Suffering?

I. The Problem of Defining Evil.

- Evil can be viewed as evidence against God. If God exists, why is the world this way?

- But it can also be viewed as evidence for God.
 - o If people are right in responding to evil with outrage, then there must be a genuine difference between good and evil.
 - Some actions/events are objectively good/right.
 - Some actions/events are objectively evil/wrong.

 - o But where do we get the objective standard for determining what is truly good and truly evil? There seem to be only three options:
 1. The standard is based on individual preference:
 - a. An action is right or wrong if you think it is. You don't like rape, murder, and torturing children, so those things are wrong for you.

 - b. But what about rapists, murderers and child predators who like to do these things? It's your opinion against theirs.

c. Ultimately there's no objective basis for saying they're wrong and you're right. It's just a matter of taste.

2. The standard is based on cultural preference

a. An action is right or wrong if a culture says it is. Our culture doesn't like murder, rape and child abuse, so we view those things as wrong and make laws against them.

b. But what about cultures that allow or approve of actions we dislike? A few examples include:

- The genocide of over six million Jews in Nazi Germany in the 1930s & 40s.
- Slavery in pre-civil war southern United States, and discrimination against minorities by the white American majority.
- Treating women as property in parts of the Muslim world.

c. Again, it's our opinion against theirs. And ultimately there's no basis for saying we're right and they're wrong. It's just a matter of taste.

3. The standard is based on an objective moral law.

a. An action/event is right or wrong depending whether it conforms to the objective moral law. But, where does this law come from and where does it get its authority?

b. It only makes sense to believe in such a law if it was given by a Supreme Creator and Judge; not arbitrarily, but as a reflection of his perfect nature. And it only makes sense to pay attention to such a law if this Lawgiver will hold his creatures accountable to it.

c. An objective moral law does not fit within any other worldview

- Atheism—Random evolution
- Pantheism—no distinctions between good and evil.

o Thus, when people recognize evil, they are unintentionally testifying to the reality of God by assuming there's an objective standard by which they determine that something is truly evil. If there is no God, then where did we get the standard of goodness by which we judge evil as evil?

- Yet, the question remains: "If God exists, why is the world this way?"

II. The Logical Problem of Evil:

- Christians believe:

1. *God exists*
2. *God is all-wise so he knows how to prevent evil.*
3. *God is all-powerful so he has the ability to prevent evil.*
4. *God is all-good so he wants to prevent evil.*
5. *Evil exists.*

- One of these beliefs must be false or we must not understand it rightly.

- A few theists have sought to redefine omnipotence or omniscience in such a way that God can't prevent evil. However, traditionally Christians have challenged the fourth premise. They maintain that God's perfect goodness and hatred of evil does not imply that He must always prevent evil. Some goods may only be attainable by allowing evil to exist.

III. Free Will

- The classic theistic defense against the problem of evil is to say that it's not logically possible to have free will and no possibility of moral evil. In other words, the definition of free-will includes the freedom to choose whether or not to sin.

- Even an all-powerful God could not have created a world in which finite people had genuine freedom and yet there was no potential for sin. Built into creating persons with free will is the chance they will choose to do evil and, consequently, the suffering that results.

- Mature love must be chosen. But giving finite people the choice of whether to love and trust God (and each other), creates the possibility that they will chose not to do so.

- So God did not create evil, he created the possibility of evil. People actualized that possibility. The source of evil is not God's power but mankind's freedom.

IV. The Glory of God

- Another traditional, yet counterintuitive response, says that God has allowed evil to exist in order to show His greatness more clearly.

- His moral perfection shines more brilliantly against a dark backdrop of sin and evil. The greatness of his power and intelligence are shown in his ability to work through sinful, weak humans and use Satan's strategies against him by bringing good out of evil. His justice and hatred of evil are revealed in his punishment of unrepentant sinners, while His incredible mercy and grace are shown towards those who repent.

- Jonathon Edwards explains it this way:

If by 'the author of sin,' be meant the sinner, the agent, or the actor of sin, or the *doer* of a wicked thing . . . it would be a reproach and blasphemy, to suppose God to be the author of sin. In this sense, I utterly deny God to be the author of sin...

His willing to order things so that evil should come to pass, for the sake of the contrary good, is no argument that he doesn't hate evil, as evil: and if so, then it is no reason why he may not reasonably forbid evil as evil, and punish it as such. It is evident from what has been said that it is not because he delights in evil as evil. Rather he wills that evil come to pass... that good may come of it...

It is a proper and excellent thing for infinite glory to shine forth; and for the same reason, it is proper that the shining forth of God's glory should be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth, that every beauty should be proportionally effulgent, that the beholder may have a proper notion of God. It is not proper that one glory should be exceedingly manifested, and another not at all. . . Thus it is necessary, that God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God's glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all...

If it were not right that God should decree and permit and punish sin, there could be no manifestation of God's holiness in hatred of sin, or in showing any preference, in his providence, of godliness before it. There would be no manifestation of God's grace or true goodness, if there was no sin to be pardoned, no misery to be saved from. How much happiness soever he bestowed, his goodness would not be so much prized and admired...

So evil is necessary, in order to the highest happiness of the creature, and the completeness of that communication of God, for which he made the world; because the creature's happiness consists in the knowledge of God, and the sense of his love. And if the knowledge of him be imperfect, the happiness of the creature must be proportionally imperfect.

- If God is truly all-knowing, then His wisdom vastly exceeds ours. Thus, it's *possible* that a loving God may deliberately allow evil because he foresees that in the long run His glory will be clearer and the joy of children greater, than if He prevented it.

- God demonstrated this at the cross where He used the very worst thing that has ever happened in the history of the world to bring about the very best thing that has ever happened in the history of the world.

- The Bible is clear that the pattern of the cross is not unique. When the devil attacks God's people, God brings himself glory by using that evil for good. Christians often say that their sufferings ended up bringing them closer to God and helped them minister to others.
 - A favorite quote of the early Christians was that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.

- But how can God be just and allow innocent people to suffer, even for a higher good?

- Answer: There are no good people. Jeremiah said that “from the least to the greatest all are greedy for gain,” and Isaiah said that “all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”

- If sinful humans lived forever and could do whatever they wanted, the world would not be a utopia; it would literally become a hell on earth. And if God insulated us from all pain and gave free entertainment and pleasure, most, if not all, of our great literature, art and music would disappear because they were inspired through struggles. There would be no great saints and leaders because their character would not have been forged through trials. Instead, we’d be impossibly spoiled brats, focused only on immediate gratification of our desires. Our sinful disposition would fester and rot until we were constantly unhappy, no matter what our external circumstances. We need salvation, not just from external evil, but from the evil in our own hearts!

- So, God in his mercy allowed struggle, suffering and death to enter our existence (Gen 3:16-19). These things limit the amount of evil sinful humans can do during their lifetime. Most of our energy during these years is taken up just trying to survive and provide for our families.

- Evil and suffering serve as a warning from God that we are sinful and we need to turn to him before it is too late and our fate is sealed. To quote C.S. Lewis: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

- This earthly life is our opportunity to choose our destiny. Despite our sinful choices, God does limit evil during this period. However, if we do not choose to turn to him for salvation, when we die we will go to a place where God does not limit evil: hell.

- Thus, a major purpose of suffering in this life is that it leads to repentance, so that we can escape eternal suffering. Pain and suffering are frequently the means by which we become motivated to finally surrender to God and to seek the cure of Christ. That's what will bring us the supreme joy of knowing Jesus forever. Any suffering is worth that result.

- Yet how can God allow his own children, who have put their faith in Christ and accepted Him as Father, to experience horrible sufferings? How can we trust a father like this?

- If I sat and did nothing while my child suffered from a treatable illness, I wouldn't be good in any sense of the word. Yet God seems to do the equivalent of that. He sits by and refuses to perform miracles to deliver us from suffering and pain. So isn't he bad?

- The answer is that the disparity between our perspective and God's is huge. The fact that God deliberately allows certain things, within His eternal perspective, does not count against him the way it would if we allowed those things.

- An example of this is our own children. We protect them from things that are truly dangerous—life threatening or deforming. But we do not protect them from every

hurt because that would not help them in the long run. We allow them to fall as they learn to walk, instead of carrying them. We don't do their homework. We don't intervene each time someone hurts their feelings.

- In the same way God protects his children from things which are truly hazardous, things which endanger our eternal life with him. But he does not protect us from every hurt.

- He's wise enough to know that we need some pain for reasons which we may not understand but which he foresees will be necessary for our good. Moral character is formed through hardship, through overcoming obstacles, through enduring despite difficulties.

- Courage, for example, would be impossible in a world without pain.
 - Dentists, coaches, teachers and parents know that sometimes to be good is *not* to be kind.

- No human being has the character to bear perpetual success in this life. We need failure, pain and dryness to break the power of our pride and self-sufficiency. Paul testified to this when he wrote that "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

- Scripture says that "in all things God is working for the good of those who love him." And what is this good that God is working for in our lives? It is "to be conformed to the image of his Son..."

- We learn from our mistakes and sufferings. The point of our earthly lives isn't comfort, but growing in Christ-likeness. Scripture tells us that even Jesus "learned obedience through suffering." It is difficult to think of a perfect Person "learning" anything. Yet somehow pain was necessary for Him and He benefited from it. If Jesus needed pain, how much more do we?

- Scripture describes our suffering as being light and momentary compared to what God's children will experience in heaven. Mother Teresa once said, "In light of heaven, the worst sufferings on earth will be seen to be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel."

- Paul (who suffered tremendously) said that if you put all Christian sufferings on a scale, they would not compare to the joys of heaven. He also said that the best this world has to offer is "dung" compared to knowing Christ. Nothing compares to the blessedness of knowing God forever. The joy of God is going to infinitely outweigh all of the sufferings—and even the joys of this world.

- How can a Good God tolerate terrible injustice?

- Justice delayed is not necessarily justice denied. There will come a day when God will settle accounts and people will be held responsible for the evil they've done and the suffering they've caused.

- Criticizing God for not doing it right now is like reading half a novel and criticizing the author for not resolving the plot. God will bring accountability at the

right time—but He delays the consummation of history out of his great love so that more people will turn to Him

- God's Ultimate Answer to Evil

- o God's ultimate answer to the problem of suffering is that he came right down into it. He didn't stay in heaven, insulated from our pain. He created a world with the potential for evil, and when that became a reality he entered into it and took the punishment for it. He came down to "carry our sorrows and pay for our sins" as Isaiah said. However much we may be tempted to blame him for allowing evil, we have to admit that he played by his own rules.

- o Corrie ten Boom, who endured a Nazi concentration camp, wrote: "No matter how deep our darkness, he is deeper still." He knows what it is like to suffer and he is near to us in our sufferings. The practical conclusion is that we can trust a God like this and face suffering with Him by our side.

- Appendix: What about natural evil and animal suffering?

- o In Genesis 1 God called the world good, but not perfect (humans were commanded to subdue it). God does not delight in pain for its own sake, but He could have good reasons for creating a natural system in which it exists; such as the goodness of the system and how it creates strong, uniquely adapted creatures (Job 38-41). Any viable ecosystem is going to involve animal predation and death for the health of the ecosystem as a whole; which requires a balance of predators and herbivores, and systems of nutrition, hydration, elimination, respiration, heating and cooling, etc. Even "bad" things like earthquakes, volcanos, tornadoes, tsunamis and forest fires are

necessary. Eliminating them or the conditions that lead to them would destroy life. This world is also tailored for free will and sin. God maintains epistemic distance so that people can choose to seek or ignore Him. The perfection of creation has been reserved for the return of Christ and redemption of humanity, when God will sustain everything directly (Romans 8:18-22; Revelation 21-22). Meanwhile, God limits how animals experience pain. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for consciousness and self-awareness. Few animals have it, and the human one is far more complex than any other. Animal pain is cognitively different from human pain and lacks the self-awareness necessary for suffering to be experienced as evil.

- Neurologists distinguish three levels of pain.

- The lowest level is simply a reaction to noxious stimuli – the way an amoeba will recoil if poked with a needle (most creatures).
- The second level is a conscious experience of pain (some animals)
- The third level is first person self-awareness that I am in pain (human).

- It is also possible that animals with greater conscious capacity to experience pain may enjoy an afterlife, though we cannot be dogmatic (Scripture may hint at this when it talks about creation longing to be redeemed and made new). Pets connected to redeemed humans may experience the next life together.

- Could or should God have created a better natural world? The burden of proof is on the person who says so to prove that God could not have good reasons for creating this world. But our perspective is too finite to know this. Thus any argument against God from natural evil is bound to fail. We must simply trust Him.