

## WHY DOES A GOOD AND ALL-POWERFUL GOD ALLOW SUFFERING?

Joe Infranco | May 23, 2021

A survey including the question: "If you could ask God only one question and you knew He would give you an answer, what would you ask?" The most common response, offered by those who could think of a question was "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?"

1. What is the "problem" of suffering (and related subject, evil), and why does it pose a challenge for Christians?
2. What are the explanations for how a good God allows this – the theodicy question.
3. What is the example of Christ for us in His life and teachings?
4. Can suffering be redemptive and fulfill God's purposes?

The different types of suffering – natural and man-induced (with overlap).

**Moral evil** is evil that is caused by human activity. Murder, rape, robbery, embezzlement, hatred, jealousy, etc., are all moral evils. When people, created in the image of God, choose to act in defiance of God's law, the result is moral evil. Moral evil can also be linked to inaction - to purposefully ignore a cry for help is a moral evil.

**Natural evil** is that which causes pain and suffering to humanity but which is not due to direct human involvement. Congenital diseases, tsunamis, earthquakes, drought, and famine are all cases of natural evil. There is no apparent morality involved in such events.

### 1. What is the "problem" of suffering (and related subject, evil), and why does it pose a challenge for Christians?

The "problem" is usually stated something like this: God is all-powerful (omnipotent) and good. If He has the desire to prevent suffering and evil, but not the power, then He is not omnipotent. If He has the power, but not the desire, He is not good. But if He has both the power and the desire, then why doesn't He do so?

**Some preliminary thoughts on this framing of the problem:**



**First, God's ways and thoughts are not ours.** Isa. 55:8-9: " 'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' says the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.' " God alone holds the power of life and death and is the author of all creation. Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God (Rom. 14:12). Life is a gift from Him, and He can withdraw it any time and way He pleases.

**Second, God's power and love should not be confused with our own understanding of those words.** They must be understood as God reveals them to us in His Word.

1. Power: What does "omnipotence" or all-powerful mean? First, there are things He cannot do. He cannot lie or break a promise. (There are, of course, conditional promises – which are a different matter.) He cannot cease to be "good" or change any more than He could deny His own nature.

Also, He can do all things logically possible. Self-contradictory statements are not honest questions, i.e., "Can He make a rock so heavy that He can't lift it?" A question like, "Can He make a square triangle?" is just nonsense, because words have meanings. (If we take nonsense and place a "can God" before it, it remains nonsense.)

2. Love. What is the meaning of love from God's perspective? Godly love desires the best for another and is other-centered as in, for example, 1 Cor. c. 13). C.S. Lewis says the "problem" of love is insoluble only so long as we fix a trivial meaning to the word and make ourselves the center of creation - it's about our happiness.

God gives us pictures - incomplete, but intimate and real in some respect - of His love for us. He uses examples like the love of a parent for a child and the love of a faithful and good husband for a wife. Both point to a love that seeks the best for the loved, that will sacrifice and even die for the loved object, but that loves too well to leave the loved object unchanged. Love is demanding and not content to leave us in our present state but determined to make us into something inexpressibly beautiful - in the nature of Christ.

**Third, God was not made for our pleasure, but we were made for His.** (Rev. 4:11 "And for thy pleasure they are and were created." We often invert the order, as if God and this world were made for our pleasure.



The pursuit of pleasure and personal freedom that makes suffering so traumatic for western thought. Since highest value is individual freedom, suffering is just an interruption and an unfortunate or tragic hinderance. In a self-centered, rights-oriented culture, suffering has no discernable purpose, like anything else that interferes with personal autonomy.

Ancient persons, or much of the world now, would be surprised by our focus on suffering and fear of it. In Middle Ages of Europe, only half the children lived to ten years of age. Even now, Hinduism and Buddhism view suffering as part of soul's journey to the next life, and Buddhists see it as an illusion from desire.

In an increasingly secular culture, pain and suffering are to be avoided at all costs. The answer is therapy or medication, or if it is something in culture it must be reformed or removed. (There are times this is true, and the prophets often called for cultural reform – but it was grounded in God, not self-fulfillment). People must be blamed; jury verdicts must be large. Unjust social or moral institutions that bring discomfort must be destroyed.

## **2. What are the explanations for how a good God allows this – the theodicy question.**

A preliminary matter: Is suffering linked to sin – that is, do we suffer because of things we have done? (There are some religions that believe this, and explain suffering as payback for prior lives. A violation of the cosmic law in Buddhism-dharma - leads to bad karma) This was the charge of the three “comforters” who visited Job; you are clearly under judgment because you have sinned.

**Our attitude as Christians toward suffering:** Sometimes suffering is just, or linked to a choice or action, and a natural consequence. But sometimes suffering is unjust, and we are not supposed to pass judgment on the person. We may suffer consequences for bad decisions, but the same pattern can be seen in the “just and the unjust.”

Matthew 5:45: *“He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

Consider Luke 13:4-5: *“Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”*



John 9:1-4: *"As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work."*

## **How then do we understand human suffering?**

The Earth is under the judgment of God as a consequence of the fall.  
Romans 8:18-22 (Amplified Bible):

*"For I consider [from the standpoint of faith] that the sufferings of the present life are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is about to be revealed to us and in us! For [even the whole] creation [all nature] waits eagerly for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration and futility, not willingly [because of some intentional fault on its part], but by the will of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will also be freed from its bondage to decay [and gain entrance] into the glorious freedom of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been moaning together as in the pains of childbirth until now."*

Tim Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, gives this framework:

1. The Creation and Fall: God created us for perfect and eternal fellowship with Him. When we turned from God, we lost that relationship and with it, our ideal relationships with each other and even with nature itself. Keller asks, in light of our utter fall, why does God allow so much happiness?
2. There will be a final judgment and renewal of the world. The judgment will be perfect justice. *Isn't it possible that the eventual glory and joy we know will be infinitely greater than it would have been if there had been no evil?* For example, only if there is danger can there be courage. Only when there is trespass can we see forgiveness. Evil in the world allowed us to see the courage, love, and sacrifice of God on our behalf in a way that otherwise could not have happened
3. The incarnation and atonement. The suffering of humanity casts a different light when we see that the deepest most profound suffering was felt by Christ, but also by the Father himself. The Son of God entered into human suffering and



allowed evil to do its work, to end human suffering permanently and destroy evil itself.

*What about the problem of Moral Evil? Why doesn't God act to prevent evil acts by persons who harm others?*

Free will, as posed by St. Augustine and many others (including C.S. Lewis) attempts to explain this. We are not robots; God creates with the possibility of bad choices so the decision to love is more meaningful. In this, evil is not a created thing. Rather, it is the twisting of good - the destruction of the natural order of creation. A more recent restatement was popularized by Philosopher Alvin Plantinga, in *God, Freedom, and Evil* (1974).

### **3. What is the example of Christ for us in his life and teachings?**

The problem of suffering and evil in the world was not a mere theoretical concern for God. He entered into it, fully. He experienced every type of human pain.

How did Jesus suffer? He knew betrayal, emotional and physical pain of the worst sort, and even separation from his Father for the first time ever. He is called a "Man of Suffering" in the Bible (Isa. 53:3) – it was a description of his life and mission. There was likely not a time in his conscious humanity that the thought did not hang over his head.

He thoroughly experienced the following:

- The humanly unbearable weight and pain of the knowledge and burden of thousands of years of mankind's sins.
- The horrifying fact that, as the sins of the world were being laid upon Him, He was *actually becoming* the sin of the world (II Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13).
- The knowledge that His Father must now turn away from Him because of the sin that He – Jesus - bore and was now becoming.
- The thought of the fast-approaching total separation from His Father.

#### ***How did Jesus view the suffering of this world?***

He felt the pain and suffering of this world deeply, mourned over it, and ministered to it in the middle of his own call to suffer. ***Even now, Jesus identifies with our suffering: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*** Our suffering is His suffering:





Luke 13:34-35: *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'"*

John 11:35: *"Jesus wept."* (at the grave of Lazarus).

Matt. 8:3: *He was willing to heal those who came to Him. (If you are willing, you can make me clean [of leprosy]).*

Matt. 9:36: *"But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary (harassed) and scattered like sheep having no shepherd".*

Matt. 14:14: *"And when Jesus went out, He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them and healed their sick".*

***When we see the works of Jesus and hear his words, we hear the exact heart of the Father.***

John 14:8-10: Philip said to Him, *"Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us."* Jesus said to him, *"Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.*

When one loves, one feels grief at the suffering of the object of that love. God even now feels grief and tenderness over our suffering, seen not only directly in Jesus, but in the Father. Hosea 11:8-9. See Mark 3:5, John 11:35, 12:27. He offered prayers with cries and tears, Hebr. 5:7, Luke 22:44. Jesus "learned" from what he suffered. Hebr. 5:8.

#### **4. Can suffering be redemptive and fulfill God's purposes?**

*"Suffering plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul."*

*"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain."*

C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*



Sorrow ultimately works to bring joy when we submit to God's will, and 1 Peter 1:6-7 says it proves the genuineness of our faith. It's not as simple as direct reaction, but a process - a coming to trust God deeply and inwardly, that does a work in us that can't be reached another way.

Psalm 30:5: *"For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning".*

Hebr. 12:2: *"Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God".*

So, Paul could say the light afflictions of this world are not worthy to be compared to the glory that will be revealed. Or, in 1 Cor. 2:9, that *"Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him,"* and further:

2 Cor. 4:17-18. *"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal."*

The only hope for people in a world filled with evil is Jesus Christ. He does not promise escape from the evil in this world. In fact, He promises that his followers will experience tribulation (John 16:33). But He also promises that believers will have an inheritance in the **new heavens and new earth**, conformed to the image of Christ, in which there is no evil or suffering of any kind (Revelation 21:1).

## How can God use our suffering?

Tim Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*  
From Chapter 9: Learning to Walk. "How God Uses Suffering" (p. 190).

"First, suffering transforms our attitude towards ourselves. It humbles us and removes unrealistic self-regard and pride. It shows us how fragile we are... Suffering removes the blinders. It does not so much make us helpless and out of control as it shows us we have *always* been vulnerable and dependent on God."



“Second, suffering will profoundly change our relationship to the good things in our lives. We see that some things have become too important.”

“Third, and most of all, suffering can strengthen to God as nothing else can... It can certainly tempt us to be so angry at God and at life that we have no desire to pray. Yet it also has the resources to greatly deepen our divine friendship.”

“Finally, suffering is almost a prerequisite if we are going to be of much use to other people, especially when they go through their own trials. Adversity makes us far more compassionate than we would have been otherwise.” (see 2 Cor. 1: 3-7)

**The Strength of Community:** Church fathers noted, as have some historians, that the early Christians “died well.” This was not because they were rugged individualists, but because they were comforted and strengthened by their community. This is an important concept for us today as well.





## APPENDIX

"The Problem of Natural Evil", found at:

<https://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/documents/TheProblemofNaturalEvil.pdf>

The Problem of Natural Evil Natural Evil: The problem of natural evil involves pain and suffering that results from natural disasters, diseases, or genetic defects, including that of animal pain and suffering. Like the problem of moral evil, the problem of natural evil examines whether the existence of natural evil is compatible with an all-perfect, all-knowing, loving, and powerful God. The following ten views are found among various Christian thinkers (Boyd 248ff.):

1. "Natural evil fulfills a higher divine purpose." Pain, suffering, and disorder in the natural world are ultimately part of a larger good plan of cosmic order. (Augustine)
2. Natural evil is the result of human sin. God subjected or cursed the natural world to decay and death because of human rebellion. In doing so, God brings about a world where we are no longer comfortable in our present moral autonomy from the Creator.
3. Natural "evil" isn't evil per se. It is simply a function of the world of time. Only moral evil is truly evil.
4. "Natural evil is the inevitable by-product of God's aim of developing souls with moral character." (John Hick) There must exist between imperfect, immature humans and the perfect God an "epistemic distance" that makes our growth possible. As such, the world has an imperfect character.
5. "Natural evil is nature's way of participating in the self-sacrificial life of God" (Murphy & Ellis). All of life has a kenotic or cruciform quality to it—some must give their lives that others might live.
6. Natural evil exists because nature is imperfect, having been created and being sustained by a God who limits himself to persuasion (Process Theology). In process thought, the world may resist God at every level, including the natural one.
7. Natural evil results from the potential hazards in a world that makes morally significant choices possible. We cannot conceive of a world which would allow for moral evil without natural evil because natural evil is part of an orderly system with consequences (Richard Swinburne, Peterson).



8. Natural evil results from the random spontaneity that the natural world must have in order to be a changing system that is separate from God (John Polkinghorne).

9. Natural evil is the nothingness or non-being that results whenever God creates something and that continues to try and encroach on creation (Karl Barth).

10. Natural evil is the result of demonic forces who control matter in part and oppose God's will for creation (Gregory Boyd). Boyd, Gregory A. Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy. Downers Grove: IVP, 2001



