

# **TOUGH QUESTIONS/ REAL ANSWERS: THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

**Job 42:1-6  
Romans 8:18-25**

*If God is good and powerful,  
why is there evil and suffering in the world?*

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Fort Smith, Arkansas  
September 17, 2023

This week we remembered a significant anniversary. Most of you who were aware 22 years ago can tell me exactly what happened at 8:46 a.m. on September 11, 2001. The first of four hijacked airliners crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City, beginning the worst act of terrorism in America's history. We still remember nearly 3,000 innocent people—heroes—who lost their lives in that evil act. We can't help asking, "Why did God allow that to happen?"

Nearly eighty years ago the world was aghast at the news that 6 million Jewish people had been imprisoned, tortured and killed by the Nazis in World War II. Since then, other holocausts, other acts of genocide, have been perpetrated by the Soviet Union, Communist China, Uganda and Rwanda. Why did God let evil people commit those atrocities?

It seems like every week we are confronting a new natural disaster. The beautiful coastal town of Lahaina on Maui burned to the ground, reducing homes, businesses, and churches to ash and killing at least 115 people. An earthquake hit Morocco last week, taking almost 3,000 lives. Floods in Libya this week took over 10,000 lives. Dams burst and washed entire neighborhoods into the ocean. How could a good and loving God let these things happen?

Closer to home, we know people who contract cancer, die in car wrecks, die from overdoses, go through a devastating divorce, commit suicide. Are you depressed enough yet? There is no end to it all. Here's the question: How can we profess faith in a God who is both good and powerful in the face of all the evil and the suffering in the world? This is the toughest question asked by people who are religious and by those who are not. Some people are not religious at all precisely because of this question.

Back in the 1940's, there was an evangelist named Charles Templeton. He was a gifted preacher, a colleague of Billy Graham, who eventually turned away from the Christian faith and became an advocate of atheism. Lee Strobel, a Christian writer, interviewed Templeton to find out what had turned him against Christianity. Templeton's loss of faith hinged on this question of evil and suffering. The turning point came one day when he saw a picture in *Life* magazine of a woman from a drought-stricken country in Africa holding her dead child. She was looking up to heaven with the most forlorn expression.

Charles Templeton told Lee Strobel, "I looked at it and thought, 'Is it possible to believe that there is a loving or caring Creator when all this woman needed was *rain*?' How could a loving God *do this* to that woman? Who runs the rain? I don't; you don't. *He* does—or that's what I thought. But when I saw that photograph, I immediately knew it is not possible for this to happen and for there to be a loving God. There was no way. Who else but a fiend could destroy a baby and virtually kill its mother with agony—when all that was needed was *rain*?"<sup>1</sup>

That is a passionate statement of the problem. If God is good and powerful, why is there evil? Why do innocent people suffer? Why doesn't God stop the pain? What I want to say to you today is that even to ask the question presupposes the answer. C. S. Lewis posed the question this way: "If there is a God, why is there evil? If there is no God, why is there good?"<sup>2</sup> You see, even to recognize evil, we have to know what good is, and good comes from God.

We recognize and are repelled by the evil in the world because we have an innate sense of the good. We feel the pain of suffering because we know that is not our original state. When God made the world, and when God made us, it was all good. Evil is an aberration of creation, the absence of good, the absence of God.

If evil is the absence of God, why would God be absent from some places in God's creation? Why would God allow suffering? Actually, God does not allow suffering. God allows freedom. Suffering and evil are by and large the result of freedom misused by someone. The greatest thing and the worst thing God did in creation was to give human beings free will. It was great, because only in freedom are we able to love and believe and hope. Freedom is what makes us fully human and capable of a relationship with God.

But the problem is, we universally and inevitably use our freedom against God. We sin. The sin of human beings in the beginning caused a brokenness, a rift to enter creation which became a barrier between us and God. All creation suffers the ill effects of sin. In Romans 8, Paul said, "*the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*"<sup>3</sup> God is good, and God is powerful. God is not the author of evil and suffering; that is the tragic product of God's good gift—human freedom.

If you have watched children grow up, you know the pain and the pleasure of free will. God has given children free will, too, and they will exert that free will no matter what you do. If you say, "Don't touch that," they will touch that. If you say, "Don't step in that," they are going to pounce on it and then say, "You didn't say I couldn't jump in it!" See what God has to put up with?

As a parent, the best you can do is to train your children, to bring them up in the proper way, and make sure they have a set of positive values. Then they are free to act on your parenting however they want to. They can follow your teaching, or they can reject it. If

they follow the values you have given them, there is great pride and joy. If they reject your teaching, there is heartbreak and suffering, on their part and yours. I don't know how many parents I have counseled over the years who have felt guilty because a son or daughter has made choices that destroyed their life. Most times it is not the parents' fault. Even with the advantages of a good upbringing, a child can choose the evil over the good. That's free will. Freedom misused is sin. Sin brings suffering.

Sometimes the suffering in our lives is caused by our own sin. We mess up, and we pay the consequences. We drink to excess and become an alcoholic. We smoke and develop lung cancer. We have illicit sex and destroy a marriage. We lie and break a relationship. God does not cause that. We would like to blame the Devil, but Satan does not have any authority that is not given to him by human choice. He will use a bad choice to destroy a life, but he cannot cause the destruction until we turn our will over to him.

Sometimes suffering is the result of others' sin. The victims of the World Trade Center attack or the Jewish Holocaust suffered because evil people made choices that affected innocent lives. Dams in Libya burst because the government failed to maintain their infrastructure. Someone gets drunk and drives, and an innocent person is injured or killed, and all the friends and family suffer because of someone else's sin. In a free world, those are tragic choices, and God does not stop them from happening.

I can understand that kind of evil, where there is a cause and effect. The hardest kind of evil to understand is the evil that has no apparent cause or purpose behind it. Some bad things just happen, and we cannot understand why. Natural disasters fit into this category. A hurricane devastates a coastline; a tornado overturns a trailer and kills everyone in it. A drought brings hunger and thirst and death to a nation. Sure, we can understand the meteorology of the thing, the effects of climate change, and all that. But we can't understand why these things happen. A young man develops a brain tumor, and dies leaving a wife and children devastated. Where is God?

The human answer is to say we live in a broken creation. There is freedom in human will, and there is freedom in natural forces. Bad things happen, and we simply can't explain it all. We have to figure out a faithful response or else lose our faith. (That's next week's sermon.)

But God does give us a better answer. When we cry, "Why, O Lord?" God answers not by explaining and defending, but by entering into our pain. God doesn't always tell us why bad things happen, but God always comes to be with us in our suffering.

Jewish novelist Elie Wiesel survived the horrors of the Holocaust during WWII and told his story in several books. One incident he recalled was a winter day when everyone was assembled to observe as three Jewish prisoners were hung on suspicion of sabotage. One of the prisoners being hanged was only a boy. As they were forced to stand and watch their brothers die, a man near Wiesel began to sob, "Where is God? Where is God?" A voice from deep within Elie Wiesel answered, "Where is He? This is where—hanging here from this gallows."<sup>4</sup>

The ultimate answer that God gives to suffering is to take the suffering of the world upon himself. That happened on the cross. Jesus, God and Son of God, died the horrible, painful death of crucifixion. In his suffering every evil is redeemed—every pain, every cancer, every disease, every tragic, untimely death, every natural disaster, every act of terror, every broken relationship—all of it is caught up in the overpowering love of God demonstrated when Jesus submitted to the pain of death.

British pastor John R. W. Stott, acknowledging that suffering is the greatest challenge to the Christian faith, says this:

I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross....In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who is immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing around his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through his hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering. "The cross of Christ...is God's only self-justification in such a world" as ours.<sup>5</sup>

God's answer to evil is really not an answer; it's an invitation. By entering into our suffering through the cross, God offers to come alongside us in our pain. We have an opportunity not to know the answer, but to know the Answerer. We can be in relationship with a good and powerful God in a world full of suffering and sin.

This was exactly the answer God gave to Job in the Old Testament. Job, a good man, had suffered the loss of everything—his herds, his home, his health, his children—all he had left was a wife, and she was fussing at him! For 37 chapters Job declares his innocence against the accusations of his friends and demands an audience with God. He wants to know the answer to our question today, "Why do the innocent suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why is there so much evil in the world?"

God finally appears to Job in a whirlwind—and doesn't answer the question! God says, "Who do you think you are? Can you do what I do? I am God, and you are not!"

To which Job replies, "Oops. *I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.*"<sup>6</sup>

The answer for Job—what brought him peace—was not an answer, but a relationship. What will bring us peace is not a complete answer to the question of suffering, but a relationship with the God who suffers with us in Christ on the cross.

One day a Christian was visiting with his barber, who was an outspoken atheist. The barber shop was in a rough part of town, and as they looked out the barber's window, he said to his customer, "There is why I can't believe in your God of love. If God were good, he wouldn't permit all this poverty, disease and violence. He wouldn't allow these street people to get addicted. I cannot believe in a God who permits such things."

Suddenly a street person walked in front of the barber shop. He had long, filthy, matted hair, and his beard was stringy and full of pieces of recent meals. The Christian customer said to the atheist barber, "You must not be much of a barber, or you wouldn't let a man walk around with his hair and beard looking like that."

The barber got indignant and said, “Why blame me for that man’s condition? He has never come into my shop. If he had, I could have fixed him up and made him look like a gentleman.”

The man said, “Then don’t blame God for allowing people the freedom to continue in their evil ways. He invites them to come in and be saved, if only they will.”<sup>7</sup>

If you have questions today about suffering and evil, maybe those questions are not merely philosophical. Maybe they’re very personal. Maybe they are breaking your heart. Sometimes we can figure out the answer; sometimes we can’t. But we can always know that God suffers with us, that God wants to come alongside us and help us deal with our problems. All you have to do is to come into God’s shop, and God will fix you right up.

Next week, we’re going to deal with that aspect of this question. How do we make sense out of suffering? How can we cope when tragedy strikes our lives? Tough question, but God’s got real answers.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Reference lost.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:19-21.

<sup>4</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 64-65.

<sup>5</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1986), p. 335f., quoted in Strobel, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> Job 42:3, 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Brett Kays, *PreachingToday.com*.