**House Church**

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**The Problem of Evil (Theodicy)**

**Why Does God Allow Evil and Human Suffering?**

**1. The Problem**

1. If God is omniscient (all-knowing), God must know about evil and suffering. If God is omnipotent (all-powerful, almighty), God must be able to stop evil and prevent suffering. If God is perfect love, God must want to protect us from evil and keep us and the world God loves from suffering (John 3:16).
2. We believe in the providence of God, that God is “working all things together for good for those who love Him,” but this foundational element of faith is continuously challenged by the on-going presence of evil in our world, particularly among Christians who have suffered unimaginable loss, when it seems that no good has come from evil, or when the good that has come is out of proportion to the magnitude of the evil that produced it.
3. If it is true that God is all-knowing, perfect love and almighty, **why then does God allow us to experience evil and suffer?** Why after all the elapsed time from Jesus to today, does this problem persist, as much as ever?

**2. Starting points for anyone who wants to address this problem**

1. This is question is personal. This is not just an interesting intellectual theological matter. Who among us has not called out to God in prayer for help and waited endlessly for an answer, or receive no answer at all? Who has not experienced evil or pain (physical or emotional) and wondered, “Why God.” (Habakkuk 1:2-4; Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:1-2). My experience as a pastor.
2. No one in the history of Christianity has developed an adequate answer to this question. All answers that theology provides seem pitifully weak and unsatisfactory. All reflections on the Providence of God in the midst of radical evil are broken and incomplete. Radical evil is the thorn in the flesh of all our theological thinking and our speaking about the providential rule of God in our lives. We must approach this question with humility. As it is with all things that pertain to God, the motives and ways of God are often hidden from us. Our knowledge of God is not exhaustive (1 Corinthians 13:12). Be careful around people who know too much about God. To have faith means that we are always humbly “seeking understanding.”
3. If we as Christians are to begin to understand what God is doing, we must begin with Jesus and his relationship to God the Father, and to the Spirit, whom God sent as the Sanctifier and Comforter. We will end up here today: the best we can do with this problem may be practical and not intellectual.

**3. Elements of Truth. Three prominent (but limited or inadequate) answers to the problem of evil**. All have biblical underpinnings, we’ve all heard these answers, all begin with belief in the Providence of God: “God reigns and evil is firmly under the control of God.”

1. The incomprehensibility of God. We don’t know why there is so much evil in the world, or why it is distributed so unevenly, but we are to trust God and have patience.
   1. Biblical support, the story of Job (chapters 38-41): God reminds Job of his finitude and his inability to understand the ways of God.
      * Our knowledge of God is limited
      * Silence is often a better response than our feeble attempts to answer the question “Why?”
2. Problem: this view may tend to suppress all questions and encourage the acceptance of all suffering. At the end of the book of God, Job is commended by God for his questions, for speaking the truth (Job 42:7). We have many biblical example of people of faith who asked “Why?”
3. Divine punishment of the wicked or chastisement of the people of God. Both the good and the wicked get what they deserve from the hand of God, in this life and eternally.
   1. Jesus calls this view into question
      * John 9:1-3. The cause of a man’s blindness was not the result of his sin or the sins of his parents (a belief common in Jesus’ day)
      * Luke 13:4. It was not because of their wickedness that a tower fell on the people of Siloam.
4. The theodicy of divine punishment easily blames the victim but often ignores the victimizers. Is God punishing people who have incurable diseases or the millions who have perished in the variety of holocausts the world experienced in the 20th Century?
5. Human deeds have consequences, but an answer that associates a person’s sin with God-caused suffering is much too simplistic (middle voice verbs in the New Testament).
6. Not all suffering can be related to sin, and to place guilt on top of grief for victims of medical conditions, natural disasters or human injustice is unconscionable.
7. Divine Pedagogy (God’s way of teaching us). Suffering is God’s way of turning us to God.
   1. God sends poverty, bereavement, diseases and other perils of life to wean us away from the benefits of the present life and have us focus on heaven.
   2. Certainly, we can learn from our suffering, but this does not necessarily lead to the belief that God caused it or that suffering is good.
   3. There are no passages of scripture that indicate that God places evil, pain, or suffering in our way in order to test us (James 1:13-16: “Let no one say when his is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God.’ For God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one.”). There are however, many verses where it is allowed, but none where God actually places the suffering in our paths. This view leaves the question, why is it allowed?

**4. Some contemporary views (more elements of truth, but not completely aligned with the Biblical witness)**

1. Protest Theodicy (John Roth): We should question the total goodness of God, quarrel with the idea that God is loving. There is just too much evil and injustice in the world. We must therefore protest about the silence and inaction of God and remind God of the promises He has seemed to forget (“How long, oh Lord” Ps 13, 35, 74, 82, 89, 90, 94).
2. Process Theodicy (John Cobb and others): God has restricted his own power and is persuasive rather than coercive. Persuasion is the only way power can influence without violating the freedom of the other. Much to commend here; yet this view limits the sovereignty of God’s love and raises the question: can we ever have hope of a definitive victory over suffering and evil.
3. Person-making theodicy (John Hick). The reality and experience of evil are the conditions for the possibility of growth toward free and mature humanity in the image of God. Without choices, learning and the formation of character are impossible. Evil exists because it is part of the process by which God makes us what we were intended to be. Problematic is the stress on the acceptance of suffering rather than our resistance to it. Moreover, there are aspects of suffering that literally consume those who experience it and do not provide opportunities for spiritual growth.

**5. A Practical View: Describing the Providence (Lordship) of God in the Light of the Ministry, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.** The power of God is not raw omnipotence, but the power of suffering, liberating, reconciling love. The God who creates and preserves the world is not an abstract omnipotence who rules by coercion, but is a God who loves us like a Father, who experiences humanity’s suffering (Jesus the Son), and who now accompanies us as we experience and confront evil (The Spirit). This view gives us as Christians a role to play in resistance to evil and ministry to those who suffer.

1. God the Father is working not only where life is sustained and enhanced, but also where all that jeopardizes life and its fulfilment is resisted and set under judgment.
   1. God is the primary combatant in the struggle against all that threatens life.
   2. When Jesus does the work of the One who sent him, he enters conflict with the forces of society that threaten to enslave and destroy human life (calling people to repentance, empowering the poor, the sick, social outcasts, women, children, etc.)
   3. The career of Jesus is God’s passionate protest against the evil powers that resist the will of God and hold human life in bondage. The crucifixion is God’s experience of suffering, loss and injustice, and the resurrection is God overcoming it for us.
   4. For us the practical lesson is to distance ourselves from patience in the presence of evil. The providence of God does not foster fatalism. God works through our impatience and courageous resistance to evil.
2. The love of God the Son is at work in the heights and depths of our experience, both when we are strong and when we are weak. God is faithful, we are never alone (Romans 8:28).
   1. God is not just with us when life is good, God accompanies us always. It is God’s intention that no one suffers alone. God mourns the people of Israel in their affliction, God is present in hell (Psalm 139:8), a place that Jesus descended to. Jesus has compassion on the crowds because they were harassed and helpless (Matthew 9:36). God is present as a co-sufferer with all the wretched in the world. (Mother Theresa)
   2. God is present as a co-sufferer where ever we are present in love to those who are in need, the unexpected companions of those who are suffering.
   3. In the face of the fierce reality of evil, the self-hatred and affliction that nature and our fellow humans instill, the companionship of God and God’s people with those who suffer is touchstone of Christian doctrine and a description of Christian discipleship.
3. The love of God the Spirit as the sanctifier is at work everywhere, resisting evil, planting seeds of hope, renewing and transforming all things.
   1. Wherever new freedom breaks the chains of bondage, in an individual, a community or a nation, the Spirit of God is present and active.
   2. The way that God rules and overrules the events of each human life and all history, is by the power of His sanctifying Spirit that works in the lives of all people to bring life out of death, wholeness out of brokenness. This is the power of love, this is our purpose. This is what makes life relevant.
   3. We must work, pray struggle for God’s new world wherever evil exists and in the company of those who suffer and cry for deliverance.