

# The Problem of Suffering

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Just to be human is to deal with emotional and physical pain on a day-to-day basis. This is the practical and existential problem of suffering that affects, and is affected by, our world view. Even Christians, who confess a living God (Matthew 16:16), may wonder: Where is this God when we need Him? Why doesn't He **do** something? These questions may lead to doubt, and then to disbelief. Atheists see only vindication in events like the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. They hear a mother on the evening news proclaiming, "It's a miracle that my baby survived," and wonder: Would it have been much bother for God to have done the same for everyone else? This is not a new argument. But given academic freedom in the modern secular university, unbelievers are able to wield the extent and depth of human suffering with devastating effect on ungrounded faith.

If we understand the intellectual problem of suffering, we may have a better chance of coming through the emotional side of the problem. However, my primary goal is to defend theism, and Christianity in particular, against the charges leveled by atheists. In so doing, I intend to show how one common tactic may distract us from a God-centered response.

## THE ARGUMENT

The intellectual problem of suffering is a challenge unique to theists. By "theist" I mean anyone who believes in a Being Who exists beyond or outside the natural world, yet Who is able to be involved in the course of human events. This excludes deists, for example, who believe that a Supreme Being created the world, and left it alone. Christians, Jews, and Moslems, for the most part, count themselves as theists. Specifically, most readers of this article will be Christians who believe that God has attributes that are infinite in degree: that He is eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, and so on.

Then the following question arises: How do we reconcile the existence of suffering with the existence of an all-loving, all-knowing God? The argument goes something like this:

1. If God is all-powerful, He could do something to prevent or end suffering.
2. If God is all-loving, He would want to prevent or end suffering.
3. There is a tremendous amount of suffering in the world.
4. Therefore, God either is not all-loving or not all-powerful.

The reason I say that this is a problem for the theist is that the atheist does not believe in the first two premises. He rejects that there is a God Who **could** do something about suffering if He had the power, and he rejects that there is a God Who **would** do something about suffering if He had the inclination. He does not deny the third premise—that there is suffering. Like every human being, he faces the existential problem of suffering. As far as he is concerned, suffering **just is**: it is part of our unplanned, purposeless existence. We live, we die—end of story. Only for the sake of the present argument does the atheist grant God's existence. All he is asking us to do, as theists, is reconcile or justify suffering, given that God is supposed to be an all-loving and all-powerful Being.

### Skirting the Problem

Some people have tried to sidestep the problem by denying one of the three premises listed above. This was the approach taken by Harold Kushner, a Jewish rabbi who lost his son at an early age to a cruel and debilitating disease. God is infinitely good, Kushner concluded in his immensely popular book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981), but He is not all-powerful.

Other theologians have suggested that God neither is infinitely powerful nor infinitely good, but only in the **process** of acquiring these attributes. So it is understandable that there should be imperfections in our world because God, while great, likewise is imperfect or incomplete. Like Kushner, their "solution" is to abandon the God of conventional theism (e.g., Edwards, 1972, p. 213). Unfortunately, as John M. Frame has observed, such a finite god offers no "sure hope for the overcoming of evil" (1994, p. 157). In the end, this god is not the God that most Christians would want to defend.

Finally, someone may wish to deny the third premise by maintaining that suffering is not real. What we call "suffering," they might say, is just an illusion. This is the position of Eastern mysticism, not of theism. Spinoza, a radical Jewish philosopher, maintained that evil was mere deprivation. When we

think we are suffering, all we are doing is acting like children who have been denied toys or candy. If only we had a complete picture of reality, Spinoza would say, we would know God, and nothing would appear imperfect. But for Spinoza, nature and God were one and the same. Again, this is not the God of theism. Most Christians, like most atheists, acknowledge that suffering is all too real. Indeed, that Jesus suffered for the sake of mankind is a vital element of the Christian faith (Matthew 16:21; Luke 24:26; Acts 17:3; Philippians 3:10; 1 Peter 2:20-25; 4:12-19; etc.).

## Dismissing the Problem

So, let us say that we want to deal with this problem without giving up any of God's essential characteristics. Where do we begin? One approach is to maintain that no explanation is necessary. We, as mere mortals, should not have to "justify the ways of God to Men" (to use a phrase of John Milton's). Or, in the words of a Simon and Garfunkel song, "God has a plan, but it's not available to the common man." If God is Who we think He is, then there must be an explanation, but it is beyond our grasp.

Alvin Plantinga (1977) takes a more defensive approach. He points out that suffering, and the claims about God, are not contradictory. It is **not** like saying, for example,

Only birds have feathers.  
Tweety has feathers.  
Therefore, Tweety is not a bird.

Clearly, the last line contradicts the preceding lines. But where is the contradiction in affirming both that there is suffering, and that God is an all-loving and all-powerful Being? What a critic must do is supply some extra premises (e.g., Mackie, 1990, p. 26). He would have to insist, for instance, that the theist's perfectly good God always would eliminate evil insofar as He could. That there is so much evil is supposed to show that God is not all-good. Further, a critic would have to insist that there are no limits to what this Being could do. That there is so much evil is supposed to show that God's powers are limited.

The trouble is, these additional claims for what God would or could do fail to take into account a complete picture of God. For God to "eliminate evil insofar as He could" still may mean that we have a lot of evil in the world, because to reduce it any further might violate one of God's other attributes. We simply do not know what conditions would make the existence of both God and evil logically contradictory (also see Pike, 1990, pp. 48,52). As to God's power, there are no limits as to what He **could** bring to bear in any one situation. However, the **actual** power He uses would depend on other characteristics, such as grace, love, mercy, and so on. At the time of His arrest, the Son of God could have called on twelve legions of angels, but not without contradicting the promises of His Father in heaven (Matthew 26:52-56).

Plantinga has given us a good place to start. Theists could say, at least initially, that there is nothing irrational about believing in God and acknowledging the reality of evil. Still, people may think that this is a problem that Christians need to address. Have we got anything more to say?

## Answering the Problem

One reason to suspect that there must be more answers is that the Bible—the foundation of our faith (Romans 10:17)—is not exactly silent on the subject. The Book of Job shows that God stood back and allowed a man to suffer at the hands of the Adversary. Job's world collapsed around him. He lost his property, his children, and his health. During this time, he had no idea why these things were happening to him. Job's wife told him to "curse God and die" (2:9). Three of his friends thought terrible sins must lie at the root of such misfortunes. Job himself came to question God's goodness and power. In the end, of course, Job regained his faith, wealth, and much more.

But could we say that all these terrible events were necessary? Perhaps we can learn something from these events, but how can we justify the collateral damage? A great wind collapsed a house on Job's children, killing everyone inside (1:18-19). Natural calamities killed his animals, and raiders killed his servants (1:15-17). Was all this death necessary to teach Job, and us, a lesson about suffering?

And what about the death of Christ? Maybe—just maybe—the skeptic might go along with us and agree that Jesus had to die to save us from our sins. But why did He have to die with such humiliation, with scourging and beatings, and a tortuous death on the cross? Why did God not do a better job of arranging events so that His own Son could die in a more humane way? Besides, if humankind is guilty, why not punish the whole of mankind? Why did it have to be taken out on Someone else?

To those outside the faith, all this makes no sense, yet it is central to Christianity. And therein lies the problem. When I say it "makes no sense," I mean it makes no sense without appeal to religious concepts found in Scripture. "But why should I believe the Bible?," a critic will respond. That is a good

question, to which Christians can offer all sorts of good reasons, but that is not what the skeptic has asked us to do in this case. The fact is, every concept important to Christianity comes from the Bible, and so it is to the Bible we must go if we are to find answers that are consistent with the claims we are making about Christianity. Ultimately, I suspect, this is why well-grounded Christians remain immune to the atheists' attacks on this front. To some degree or another, they know that suffering does not reflect badly on what they understand of God.

Likewise, if we introduce concepts such as sin, salvation, miracles, and so on, the atheist often will respond, "Yes, but they depend on the existence of God. If God does not exist, then these explanations disappear." Again, whether God exists is beside the point. Atheists have challenged us to reconcile certain attributes of God with the existence of evil. They were not challenging us (on this occasion) to defend the existence of God. The very problem, as it is posed to us, grants that God exists.

This is such a common tactic that I must make this point absolutely clear: the atheist cannot accuse us of a contradiction within our faith, and then block us from introducing the entire content of that faith (as opposed to discussing just the logical claims that are made about God's attributes). Perhaps this is why the argument gets bogged down in philosophy, when really, it is a theological issue. Marilyn McCord Adams agrees:

Where the internal coherence of a system of religious beliefs is at stake, successful arguments for its inconsistency must draw on premisses (explicitly or implicitly) internal to that system or obviously acceptable to its adherents; likewise for successful rebuttals or explanations of consistency (1990, p. 210).

## SOME ANSWERS

### The Origin of Suffering

As is often the case, the Book of Beginnings is the best place to start in dealing with fundamental questions. Genesis tells us that God put Adam and Eve in the Garden, and gave them access to the Tree of Life. They would live forever as long as they could eat from this tree (Genesis 3:22), but they were not immortal. God told them not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, otherwise they would surely die (Genesis 2:17).

At some point, apparently not too long after the creation week, Satan tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit and she, in turn, convinced Adam to do the same. This brought judgment from God. He separated them from the Tree of Life, and promised that people would suffer, and that Satan would be defeated (Genesis 3:14-19). It is difficult to grasp the enormity of this situation. We suffer—even innocent children suffer—because of the sin of two people. How could God allow so much suffering to exist for so long?

### God is Sovereign

From God's perspective, the first step is not to answer a question like this, but to deal with our accusations. Job is a case in point. The old patriarch accused God of

- judging him falsely (9:20)
- wronging him (19:6)
- persecuting him (19:22)
- not judging the wicked (24:1-12), and
- ignoring all his good works (31:1ff.).
- Job's cry, like our own, seems to be "Why God? **Why?!**"

God's response was to ask some probing questions of Job:

Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? He who rebukes God, let him answer it.... Would you indeed annul My judgment? Would you condemn Me that you may be justified? (40:2,8).

In his questioning, Job assumed that God was at fault. His three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—assumed that Job was at fault for some great sin that he must have committed, and God chastened them for this presumption, too (42:7ff.).

Finally, young Elihu recognized that, on occasion, suffering can have a purpose. God can use it to judge the wicked, strengthen the faithful, aid the oppressed, and bless the righteous. And yet, throughout his criticism of Job, the level-headed Elihu affirmed the sovereignty of God: "Why do you contend with Him? For He does not give an accounting of any of His words" (33:13).

Paul followed the same theme in Romans 9. The apostle was responding to a “not fair” claim on the part of Jewish Christians. Apparently, some of them felt that they, as descendants of Abraham, merited a greater share in the inheritance of God’s kingdom. Of course, as Paul pointed out in verse 8, it is the children of the **promise**, not the children of **flesh**, who were to be the children of God and, therefore, heirs of salvation. He illustrated this with the example of Esau and Jacob. Some might point out that Jacob’s having a higher place than his older brother was an injustice, but God had a plan that did not take into account manmade customs of inheritance. To anyone who would accuse God of being unjust in this case (vs. 14), Paul would remind them of God’s sovereignty: “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (vs. 15).

While he was at it, Paul dealt with another familiar accusation: “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?’” (vs. 19). In other words, “if the things that happen in my life are God’s will, then surely they are out of my control, and if my life is not my own, then why should God hold me responsible for the things I do? It’s not fair for us to suffer if God is supposed to be in control.” Again, Paul responded with a countercharge: “Who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’” (vs. 20). Our duty is to do what is right, not to worry about what God is doing and why.

On returning to the original question concerning Gentiles, Paul pointed out that God had been working throughout history to bring about His mercy. Along the way, He suffered the disobedience of Gentiles and Jews alike. God “endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (vs. 22). But, by His teaching and the unveiling of a redemptive plan, God had made “known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy” (vs. 23). Both Jews and Gentiles were vessels filled with iniquity, but God rescued those whom He called, and has filled them with His mercy (vs. 24).

## God is Just

Paul’s comments about mercy lead us to a second response: not only is God sovereign, but His mercy demonstrates that He is just. Mercy is revealed in God’s redemptive plan: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). God’s goal is redemption. He does not wish suffering on any of us; He wishes that we were with Him in heaven where there is no pain and suffering. Let us revisit Romans, but chapter 3 this time. Paul wrote: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation [an appeasing sacrifice—TM] by His blood, through faith” (vss. 23-25a).

By justifying us, God shows that He is just; by making us righteous, He shows that He is righteous. We are justified through faith

...to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (vss. 25b-26).

Often we think of God’s justifying us, but here we see that God’s justness is revealed to us at the same time. This was not so evident to the people of the Old Testament who lacked the clear testimony of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. If God already has revealed so much to us in history, we can only wait in wonder to see what will be revealed to us in the future: “If we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance” (Romans 8:18,25).

In Frame’s view, Romans is the New Testament equivalent of Job. It is as much about the justification of God (a theodicy) as it is about the justification of man.

Romans confirms, therefore, what we have seen elsewhere in Scripture. (1) We have no right to complain against God, and when we do, we expose ourselves as disobedient. (2) God is under no obligation to give us an intellectually satisfying answer to the problem of evil. He expects us to trust him in spite of that. (3) God’s sovereignty is not to be questioned in connection with the problem of evil; it is rather to be underscored. (4) God’s word, his truth, is altogether reliable. (5) As a matter of fact, God is not unjust. He is holy, just, and good (Frame, 1994, p. 178).

## CONCLUSION

God is all-good, God is all-powerful, and yes, there is an abundance of suffering. People have struggled with this apparent dilemma throughout the ages. Sometimes we mortals may try to vindicate our God by presuming to know His mind, but God says “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (Exodus 33:19). In short, God is sovereign. There is nothing wrong with asking “why” questions, but when they turn into accusations, we challenge His sovereignty. Why was this woman raped? Why did thousands die in a tropical cyclone? No one can answer these specific questions adequately, anymore than the two-year old can understand

why she must undergo heart surgery (Adams, 1990, p. 217; see also Frame, 1994, pp. 150-151). The little girl does not hate her parents for the pain, but continues to love and trust them based on her life experience.

Given the tremendous amount of suffering in this world, could we not assume that God is sovereign, but some sort of malevolent ruler? On the contrary, Christ's willing sacrifice on the cross has shown God to be just.

Well-grounded Christians, I am convinced, have a strong intuition that the atheists' standard arguments on the problem of suffering are wrong. The answers they find have more to do with the "how" of Christian faith, than the "why" of presumption against God. They want to respond with Job, and they want to respond with Christ, because these examples make sense out of suffering for them, but the atheists always try to block this part of the conversation. They ridicule the Bible and the Christian experience. They give anecdotal stories about people who lost their faith in the face of suffering. They admit freely that the intellectual problem of suffering was crucial to their own walk away from faith. And, if all else fails, there is the old standby of incredulity: "I just can't believe you [are stupid enough to] worship a God Who [is so heinous that He] would allow so much suffering in this world." Yet the conditions of the discussion at the very outset assume that God exists. From that point on, it does not matter **for the sake of argument** whether the critics believe that the Bible is true, or that we all are sinners in need of salvation, or that God raised His Son from the grave. As Adams argues:

Just as philosophers may or may not find the existence of God plausible, so they may be variously attracted or repelled by Christian values of grace and redemptive sacrifice. But agreement on truth-value is not necessary to consensus on internal consistency. My contention has been that it is not only legitimate, but, given horrendous evils, necessary for Christians to dip into their richer store of valuables to exhibit the consistency of [an all-loving, all-powerful God] and [the existence of evil] (1990, p. 220).

This "richer store of valuables" for the Christian includes not only an intellectual acceptance of God's sovereignty and justice, but an abiding experience of God in their lives. Hope for a better world has enabled Christians to survive the worst of times. This is not an explanation for why we have suffering, but a justification of God's love, in that we would expect our Creator to endow us with the ability to find an essential worth in our own existence (Adams, 1990, p. 216).

Contrary to the atheists' assertion, a Christian's faith in God is not a humiliating emotional crutch, but a source of joy in overcoming the practical and existential problem of suffering. Christians, I believe, know within themselves that their faith has been a source of strength. All they see in the atheists' charges is an allegation of internal inconsistency leveled by people who, frequently, know little to nothing of Scripture, and who, perhaps, never have experienced a full, spiritual life.

Only by being faithful to God can we attest to the perfect revealing of His redemptive plan, which is for us to live with Him forever. "Don't you think it's awful," the atheist speaks with incredulity once more, "that God will condemn all those people who don't bow down and worship Him and only Him?" What would be worse is if there were no God to punish the Neros, Hitlers, and child molesters of this world. There is a God, if there is any justice at all. In the meantime, the words of Peter remind us that the Lord "is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God is just before us; the only question that remains is: Are we just before Him?

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