

The Existence of God and the Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intro: The Greek philosopher Epicurus expressed the classic argument against the existence of God: “Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to; or he cannot and does not want. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, and does not want to, he is wicked. But, if God both can and wants to abolish evil, then how comes evil into the world?” The argument of Epicurus has a special appeal to those who reject God and is often offered as the primary proof of his non-existence.

However, the problem of evil in the world challenges people of faith as well. A Barna poll once asked adults, “If you could ask one question of God, what would it be?” 17% responded, “Why is there pain and suffering in the world?” Do you ever wonder where God is when evil ravages the innocent?

Can the problem of suffering be reconciled with the concept of the Bible’s God? Can a just and loving God exist, who also allows suffering and evil to exist? Let think about how we might respond to this commonly asserted argument.

The argument from evil is self-contradictory.

The problem of evil and man’s assessment of it might be as much an argument for God instead of one against Him!

Arguments against evil and suffering depend upon a moral sense of what ought to be, what is right and what is wrong. But if God does not exist, then morality can’t either! If we use moral judgments to question the existence of God, then we, by those very judgments, suggest a standard of right and wrong conduct (even if for God) that implies that God exists.

God’s character is the reference point for defining moral conduct, of defining right and wrong.

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23)

If God doesn’t exist, as the atheist affirms, then good and evil cannot exist.

To argue from the premise that suffering is evil is to also acknowledge the existence of God!

The argument from evil smacks of intellectual arrogance and presumption.

To stand in judgment of God’s actions is to presume to know at least as much about the world as God and to call into question the appropriateness of his actions. Those who rebuke God imply that their knowledge is as great as His. Is it true?

For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? (Romans 11:34-35)

When Job became testy about the way God had handled his situation, God responded by reminding Job of his limitations as man and of His power and knowledge as the creator.

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? “Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you instruct Me! (Job 38:2-3)

There followings a barrage of questions about all aspects of the created world. Finally God closes His case with this statement:

“Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it.” (Job 40:2)

The power of the argument is undeniable: “If you cannot know what I know and do what I do, then why do you presume to judge my actions!?”

We could wish that all men who “rebuke” God would answer as Job!

“Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to Thee? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; Even twice, and I will add no more.” (Job 40:4-5)

The argument from evil fails to consider that God knows what we cannot know and sees what we cannot see!

If God’s knowledge is far beyond our own, then is it possible that he might have purposes for suffering that we might not fully understand or know? Epicurus and other unbelievers deny that there is any necessary benefit to suffering and pain; but God can see what men often cannot see.

Take the cross as an example of suffering that seemed to all that were there totally meaningless. How could any good thing have come from the unjust slaughter of Jesus by his enemies? and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. (1 Peter 2:24)

Is it possible that what we do not see is the good that God can bring about through evil and suffering? He has already brought about our good through one of the most horrendous evils of the ages.

Can God then use our suffering for our good?

It is sometimes a pain that send you to the doctor and causes you get treatment for a disease which might take your life. A pain is often a warning that something far more dangerous is lurking, unknown to the person who is hurting.

All of us must confess that to some degree we have stood by and watched others like our children struggle with some difficulty rather than intervene, knowing that overcoming the struggle would enable them to develop character and inner strength. And so it is with God, that He allows us to suffer that we might be strengthened.

But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. (1 Peter 5:9-10)

God may use suffering as a wake up call to the unrepentant. CS Lewis called suffering a “megaphone to rouse a deaf world”.

It is sometimes the suffering of a sinful life that causes us to draw near to God.

“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. “Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. “For My yoke is easy, and My load is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Conclusion: In our lesson tonight we will continue the conversation. I’ve tried today not to give trite or easy answers to these tough questions. But in the end, when all is said, the answer to all suffering is the cross.

John Stott wrote:

“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 was 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 round 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 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.