

ANSWER READY:

RESPONDING TO THE TOUGH OBJECTIONS IN EVANGELISM

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THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Evil is all around us. Where do you see its evidence? Its reality not only forces us to learn how to deal with it, but also causes us to theorize as to why it exists in the first place.

In the six-week discussion companion to his book, *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller includes the following discussion point in session 4 (TRFG):

A friend comes to you upset because he or she has recently experienced some form of personal suffering (for example, the death of a loved one) and says, “I can’t believe in a God who would allow this to happen to me—who would allow this evil and suffering.” Order these possible responses from most to least helpful and explain why.

- a. Reassuringly and thoughtfully remind your friend that God always “works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28).*
- b. Gently and with compassion try to tell your friend about why God might allow their suffering.*
- c. With compassion and love say things like, “I’m sure that somehow it’s all going to work out for the best.”*
- d. Listen to your friend without saying much of a response.*
- e. Put an arm around your friend and kindly use phrases such as, “Remember, it will make you stronger.”*

“D” is probably the best place to start, for when answering these questions, we cannot treat it primarily as a philosophical or theoretical problem. Since we have all experienced some form of suffering, it is a personal issue. We should always listen and respond with empathy and pastoral care. It is probably not helpful to say things like, “It will make

you stronger,” or “I’m sure that somehow it’s all going to work out for the best,” or “There is a greater purpose.” While these things may be true, they are not enough of a reason for the suffering. While it is commendable that Bildad and Zophar and Eliphaz were there for Job during his suffering, we should not model their counsel and demeanor toward him, but should instead “mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15). Initially, suffering people are looking for solace and alleviation, not an immediate and logical explanation. So, provide them with a gracious and comforting relationship, and wait to initiate an explanation.

The problem of evil is variously expressed, usually in the form of serious and puzzling questions. While we will seek to answer some of these nuanced questions, we must also acknowledge a great amount of mystery in this area (cf. Deuteronomy 29:29).

QUESTION 1 —

Why Do Bad Things Happen To Good People?

This is the very question Asaph struggles with in Psalm 73 — “Lord, why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer?”

1. **The explanation of the wicked’s prosperity (vv. 1-16)**
 - a. **Their prosperity produces pride in them (vv. 5-12).**
 - b. **Their prosperity produces perplexity in us (vv. 1-2, 3, 13-16).**
 - i. **Envy (v. 3)**
 - ii. **Regret (v. 13)**
 - iii. **Loneliness (vv. 14-15)**
 - iv. **Despair (v. 16)**
2. **The end of the wicked’s prosperity (vv. 17-28)**

When it comes to the issue of why the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer, we must keep the “end” in mind. This reality should terrify God’s enemy and comfort His people (i.e., vindication, confirmation, restoration: HOPE!).

a. The future end of the wicked (vv. 18-20, 27)

- PREVIEW: “no pangs *until death*” (v. 4)—After death is when this destruction begins.
- “Slippery places” & “ruin” (v. 18)
- “Destroyed” & “swept away utterly by terrors” (v. 19)
- God “despise[s] them as phantoms” (v. 20)
- “Perish” & “[be] put [to] an end” (v. 27)

b. The present position of the righteous (vv. 21-28)

i. Close to God (vv. 23-24a)

ii. Confident of glory (vv. 24b)

iii. Committed to faith (vv. 21-22, 25-26, 28)

- **Confession (vv. 21-22)**
- **Worship (v. 25)**
- **Communion (vv. 26, 28a-b)**
- **Evangelism (v. 28c)**

But, in the meantime, why does God allow Christians to suffer?

- **For their own sake:** to learn who God is (Psalm 46; Daniel 4:24-37), to learn to trust God (2 Corinthians 1:8-9; Psalm 73) and obey Him (Psalm 119:67-72), to become more like Jesus in a way that only suffering can accomplish (Romans 8:18-29), to reach maturity of character (Romans 5:3-4; Hebrews 12:1-11), to help us walk by faith and not by sight (Habakkuk; 2 Corinthians 5:1-7)
- **For the sake of others:** that God’s people may have courage (Philippians 1:14) and power (2 Corinthians 4:7-12) and comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3-7), that others might come to know God savingly (Philippians 1:12-13; Colossians 1:24ff—Paul endured wrongdoing, so that others might escape God’s wrath)

- **For Christ's sake:** to identify with Christ (Matthew 10; Galatians 2:20; 1 Peter), to share in His sufferings and glory (1 Peter 4:12-16; Philippians 1:29; Romans 8:17-18; 2 Corinthians 4:17), to magnify Christ (Philippians 1:12-18), to exemplify Him (1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 3:16), to know Him more richly (Philippians 3:8-10)

Illustration: The Bible depicts a Christian's suffering like the underside of a beautiful tapestry. On the top, the beautiful and intricate artistry is evident, but underneath, it looks like an ugly mass of thread.

QUESTION 2 —

In Light Of All The Evil, How Can God Be Both Good And Great?

Epicurus, a Greek Stoic philosopher, famously phrased the problem this way:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?

Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing?

Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing?

Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing?

Then why call him God?

The Bible clearly teaches that God is both good and great.

- 1. God is good** (Psalm 16:2; 86:5; 119:68; Luke 18:19; Rom. 8:28-30; 3 John 11).
- 2. God is great.** God is sovereign over (<http://wp.me/p5FX1O-6qj>):
 - a. Seemingly random things** (Proverbs 16:33)
 - b. The heart of rulers** (Proverbs 21:1)
 - c. Our daily lives and plans** (Proverbs 19:21; 20:24; James 4:13-15)
 - d. Salvation** (Romans 9:15-16; Acts 13:48; Romans 8:29-30)
 - e. Life and death** (Deuteronomy 32:39; 1 Samuel 2:6)
 - f. Disabilities** (Exodus 4:11)
 - g. Jesus' death** (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; Isaiah 53:10)

- h. **Evil things** (Amos 3:6; Isaiah 45:7; Job 1:21-22; 2:10; Psalm 105:17 [Genesis 50:21]) — Hebrew *ra'a* can refer to moral wickedness, physical harm, or disastrous calamity.
- i. **All things** (Ephesians 1:11; Psalm 115:3; Job 42:2; Daniel 4:35)

(TRFG) When this question is used to object to the existence or character of God, we must recognize that it rests on a mistaken premise. It assumes that a good God would not allow evil to continue. The faulty reasoning is that if we cannot think of any justifiable reason why God would allow suffering and evil to continue, then *God* cannot have such a reason. But, why should there be no reason just because we cannot think of one?

So, if God is both good and great (benevolent and sovereign), why does evil still exist? Alvin Plantinga offers a three-part response to this question (in *Warranted Christian Belief* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 466-467, and in “A Christian Live Partly Lived” in *Philosophers Who Believe*, ed. Kelly James Clark [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993], 70-71):

1. “Christians must concede that we don’t know. That is, we don’t know in any detail.”
2. “Given that [God] is omniscient and given our very substantial epistemic limitations, it isn’t at all surprising that his reasons...[might] escape us.”
3. “On a quite general level, we may know that God permits evil because he can achieve a world he sees as better by permitting evil [rather] than by preventing it.”

Moreover, if there is no God, people don’t really have a good basis for being outraged at the existence of suffering (cf. in the movie, *God’s Not Dead*, the student climaxes his debate with the professor by asking, “How can you be angry with someone who doesn’t exist?”). In a naturalistic worldview, death and destruction are perfectly natural, for the “survival of the fittest” is a genetic and fundamental principle. Someone can only object to injustice if they already believe in some kind of “supernatural” moral standard which stands in judgment on “natural” behavior. And where would such a supernatural standard come from if there is no God? So, eliminating God does not eliminate the problem of evil and suffering.

QUESTION 3 —

Why Didn't God Stop Evil When He Had The Chance?

“Most objections to suffering presuppose that people deserve a comfortable life from God, but that premise has been smuggled in without support. [We must] expose the assumption that we are good people who deserve a good life by explaining sin and its consequences. [This] helps put this issue into its proper context of the Fall—our evil rebellion against God and the resulting curse. Maybe the problem of evil is really—why does God allow so much happiness?” (TRFG)

1. God is not the source of original evil — we are (i.e., sin).

a. Evil is the natural consequence of our rebellion — brokenness (Genesis 1:31; 2:16-17; 3:1-24).

- i. Within people (Genesis 2:25; 3:7-10; cf. Romans 5:12; Mark 7:20-23)
- ii. Among people (Genesis 3:12, 16b; cf. Genesis 4:1-11)
- iii. Between people and creation (Genesis 2:15; 3:16a, 17-19, 21; cf. Romans 8:19-22)
- iv. Between people and God (Genesis 3:8, 22-24; cf. Isaiah 59:2)

“A great deal of suffering in the world should not be blamed on God, but is due to the mean, cruel, selfish, and inhumane choices people make” (TRFG).

b. Evil is the divine condemnation on our rebellion — punishment (Romans 1:18-32).

- i. In His holy justice, God may punish sin with evil (Habakkuk).
- ii. Evil is not always His punishment (John 9:1-3; Psalm 103:8-14).

2. God is the solution to original evil — His grace (i.e., salvation)!

a. The Fall provided the backdrop for God's grace to be displayed.

- Before the Fall, the angels knew God to be many things—powerful, majestic, holy, just, good, etc.—but they did not recognize that He was gracious (i.e., giving favor to the undeserving).
- At the Fall—a situation in which God's climactic creation no longer merited God's favor—God was able to display His grace (i.e., unmerited favor), and I believe the angels stood amazed (cf. Ephesians 2:10; 1 Peter 1:12).
- *Illustration:* Diamonds in a jewelry store are always put against a dark velvet background, because that makes the diamond “pop.” Likewise, sin provides a dark “unmeriting situation” against which God's grace “pops,” and where sin (“unmeriting situations”) abounds grace can much more abound (Romans 5:18-21).
- God's grace can powerfully impact man's will, drawing that man to Himself (cf. Romans 2:4; Titus 3:3-7) in repentant love (not robotic programming), which magnifies God's glory (cf. Ephesians 1:3-14) in a way nothing else can—that is, we actively and responsively chose to love *Him*!
- We wouldn't even be discussing this question if God was only holy and just and full of wrath—He would have treated us as He did Satan (cf. cast out of heaven—Isaiah 14:12-15; Luke 10:18). But, our presence here, even though it's in the midst of so much evil, is proof that God is more than just holy and just—He is also loving and gracious, extending His merciful kindness even towards those who don't deserve it (Matthew 5:45; Acts 17:25-31; 2 Peter 3:9). That's why there is a Genesis 3:7ffff, rather than immediate annihilation—God didn't just chose to deploy a rescue mission; His character demanded it. Both then at the beginning and now in the daily grind, evil allows Him to display His uniquely glorious grace (cf. Ephesians 2:1-7).

- Therefore, the supposed problem of evil is actually the very opportunity by which we see an important part of God that would have otherwise been hidden. Evil (and sin) is a problem, but it's not God's problem; rather, in His power, He turns it into an opportunity to show His grace so humans can have hope. Nowhere was this more clearly evident than at the cross. Calvary was the worst evil ever done by humanity (the worst day in human history), and yet it was the very bedrock from which eternal salvation would break forth (cf. Isaiah 53:10-12; Acts 2:23-24)!

b. The Cross provided the proof of a suffering God (solidarity).

- Not only that, but the Cross revealed something further about God that is often overlooked in this perplexity — that is, that the God of the Bible suffers with His creation!
 - (TRFG) Albert Camus, an author and philosopher who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, wrote, “The god-man [Jesus] suffers too, with patience. Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to him since he suffers and dies. The night on Golgotha is so important in the history of man only because, in its shadows, the divinity ostensibly abandoned its traditional privilege, and lived through to the end, despair included, the agony of death” (Essais [Paris: Gallimard, 1965], 444, translated and quoted by Bruce Ward in “Prometheus or Cain? Albert Camus’s Account of the Western Quest for Justice,” *Faith and Philosophy* [April 1991], 213).
 - (TRFG) Alvin Plantinga writes, “As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of his creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. ... Some...claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God’s capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. We don’t know why God permits evil; we do know, however, that he was prepared to accept suffering of which we can form no conception. ... That doesn’t answer the question,

Why does God permit evil? But it helps the Christian trust God as his loving father. ...His aims and goals may be beyond our ken...but he himself is prepared to share much greater suffering in the pursuit of those ends. In this regard Christianity contains a resource for dealing with this existential problem of evil—a resource denied other religions” (“A Christian Life Partly Lived,” 71).

Tim Keller adds, “Now we know what the reason for suffering isn’t. It can’t be that He doesn’t love us, and it can’t be that he could just snap his fingers and let it all go away and still have us. ... If he loves us enough to suffer for us, then he must have a good reason for allowing it to go on.” Though we cannot discern the reason that God might have for allowing evil, there is remarkable assurance that he does have one. He himself has suffered infinitely with us, for us, on the cross. This proves that God is not indifferent to suffering, since he became involved—he is a feeling, emotional God (cf. Matthew 14:10-13; John 4:6; 11:35; Hebrews 4:15).

The problem of evil and suffering is the strongest objection to the Christian faith. It is strong because it is an irreducible problem. It can never be removed by argument. However, evil and suffering creates an even greater problem for alternative views and positions. Atheists have no basis to be outraged at suffering and evil (e.g., the *God’s Not Dead* scenario referenced above). Other religions have a God who does not suffer. Christianity is the only religion with a God that suffers. Confidence in the character of God—his love, his justice, and his wisdom—becomes possible only when people see what he did in coming himself to die on the cross in order to halt the greatest evil and suffering of all—separation from him (cf. 1 Peter 3:18).

The “theoretical” or philosophical and “personal” answers converge here. What confirmation is there that God has some good reason for allowing suffering and evil to (temporarily [cf. Psalm 73]) continue? The cross! God must hate evil, too, or he would not have done

that. If he hates evil that much, he must have some good reason for letting history continue.

The poem, “Jesus of the Scars” by Edward Shillito (<http://bit.ly/12mmwJ9>) vividly portrays the distinctive way that Christianity gives to people a handle on their evil and suffering.

*The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to Thy throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And no god has wounds, but Thou alone.*

c. The Resurrection provided the promise of evil’s destruction.

- (TRFG) Christianity says that when God comes back he is going to renew and cleanse this earth. Bodies, loved ones, homes will be restored, purified, and beautified. Resurrection is the restoration of life. Jesus’ resurrection means resurrection for all those who believe in him into this new heaven and new earth. It means that everything sad is going to be made infinitely better for all the suffering and evil having once been true (cf. Romans 8).

Keller uses this illustration: we can remember certain things happening to us that, as six-year-olds, we thought of as irreparable, tragic, emotional wounds that would never heal. Yet we got over them eventually. In addition to illustrating how we might be like six-year-olds who just are unable to grasp the reasons and purposes for their suffering, this also serves to illustrate the possibility of our current suffering one day becoming rather infinitesimal. We can at least imagine the possibility of a glory and a bliss that goes on for a trillion (and more) years that could be so great, it would make anything we go through here look like a fairly dim memory.

RESOURCES

TRFG — Tim Keller. *The Reason for God: Conversations on Faith and Life*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). crossimpactui.org/the-reason-for-god