

How Can A Good God Allow Evil and Suffering?

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[0 : 00] Welcome again to another of our big questions. This one perhaps the most challenging having thought about truth.

Now we're going to think about the goodness of God and especially how can a good God allow evil and suffering? Something that I hope will be helpful to us, especially if you find yourself in a place where you're suffering right now.

And we're going to begin hearing God's word. We're going to join a story where Jesus has heard of the illness of his friend Lazarus that he knows is going to end in his death.

But beyond that, Jesus says God's glory and God's son will be glorified through it all. But we're going to pick up our reading in John 11 at verse 17.

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.

[1 : 23] When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask. Jesus said to her, your brother will rise again. Martha answered, I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die. And whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?

Yes, Lord, she replied. I believe that you are the Messiah, the son of God, who is to come into the world. After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside.

The teacher is here, she said, and is asking for you. When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.

[2 : 21] When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house comforting her noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

Where have you laid him? He asked. Come and see, Lord, they replied. Jesus went. Then the Jews said, see how he loved him.

But some of them said, could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying? Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb.

It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. Take away the stone, he said. But Lord, said Martha, the sister of the dead man, by this time there is a bad odour for he has been there four days.

[3 : 27] Then Jesus said, did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God? So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here that they may believe that you sent me. When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth round his face. Jesus said to them, take off the grave clothes and let him go.

Now, as we begin our reflections, we need to recognise, don't we, that suffering is everywhere.

Maybe it's been seen so clearly just now between the pandemic and the issues around racism and the refugee crisis.

[4 : 30] We see it on the global scale. But we also know in a personal situation too, in a normal lifespan, illness and rejection and loss and tragedy will happen to us and to those around us.

We appreciate too that there are times when the weight of evil can feel overwhelming.

Genocide, terrorism, human trafficking. And then of course there is death. The great enemy. The human problem.

Maybe COVID and the pandemic was a time of collective reflection on our mortality.

We have been used to, I guess, comfort and security and death has felt far away from us as a society. But together we were forced to reflect on our mortality.

[5 : 43] Because no one is immune from suffering, the search for meaning and purpose in and beyond pain and suffering becomes almost universal.

Many ask, and perhaps you have asked, why God, why this, why me? And can I just say to those who are listening who are Christians, when we know people who are in the furnace of suffering, that it's a time for us to learn to listen well, to love and support.

It's probably not the time for philosophy. Probably not the right time to give sort of pat answers. But it's a time for friendship.

It's a time for coming alongside someone in their tears. So today we're going to look at the problem of evil and suffering.

And we're going to consider some of the solutions, the ways of looking at it and coping with it that are around. And we're going to compare that with the message of Christianity and what we discovered there of the God of the Bible.

[7 : 00] The Bible is an honest book, of course. It's full of people crying out to God, how long, oh Lord? There are stories of real suffering, such as Joseph and Job.

There are books of the Bible addressed to those who are suffering, like Hebrews and 1 Peter. There's a recognition that not all suffering is just. And we see that especially in the trial and the death of Jesus, the Son of God.

And what I hope from this evening is that we will come to appreciate that the Bible and Christianity has unique resources for facing the pain and suffering of our lives.

To borrow from Tim Keller's helpful book, that we can walk with God and know God walking with us through pain and suffering.

To appreciate that suffering in and of itself need not be a wrecking ball that smashes faith. But rather it's a crucial foundation of our faith.

[8 : 09] So let's begin thinking about the problem of evil and suffering. Perhaps you remember the horror of the 2004 tsunami around Christmas time that killed 250,000 people.

Well, one journalist speaking and writing for many perhaps wrote this. Where was God? If God is God, he's not good. God is good, he's not God.

You can't have it both ways, especially after the Indian Ocean. For that journalist, evil and suffering became evidence that there could not possibly be God.

In my experience, and I imagine it will probably be true for you as well, that suffering, seeing suffering, seeing evil, experiencing it, drives people both ways in a sense.

In one of two ways. For some, it will drive them away from God. For some, it will drive them away from God. But others are driven towards God, recognising he is the only source of help in that situation.

[9 : 29] But I want us to think for a little about the drive away from God. Or attempts to limit God. And to ask ourselves, does that way of thinking help to give answers and does it help to give hope?

One person who has considered that is a man called Dr. Paul Brand. Having spent 30 or so years as a leprosy doctor in India, he returned to America.

Returning to a society he considered to be less equipped and more traumatised by suffering than the society, the religious society that he left behind in India.

But let's think about the possible solutions that people suggest to coping with the problem of evil and suffering to providing answers or a way in.

One is to simply to deny that God exists. Like that journalist to take the view, well, I cannot imagine a reason why suffering could be allowed if there is a God.

[10 : 46] Therefore, there must not be God since there is suffering. And it has been remarked that there are significant problems in that way of thinking. If we remove God and if we remove an absolute and ultimate moral authority, who then is able to say what is evil or what is good?

All we are left with are particular preferences, our cultural preferences. As C.S. Lewis engaged with this in his own thinking, he realised, how can I say a line is crooked without a sense of what is straight?

That reality of justice, a sense of right and wrong and those things being absolute, actually points us towards God.

And that actually to take God out of the picture still leaves atheism the problem of evil. Because in a belief system where everything is meaningless and random and chance, there then is no internal help within that way of thinking for helping people to cope and to find meaning and purpose.

To deny that God exists.

[12 : 29] That God's right.

Okay, nobody was arguing. Life is meaningless. No, we responded in a Christian way. With generosity and compassion. Richard Dawkins.

Richard Dawkins, he wrote that we have purpose on the brain and that's a negative thing in his view. He says that we go through agony because we won't accept that life is meaningless and indifferent.

But to really live as if life is a key part of human dignity would deny a key part of human dignity. It would be to rob us of the value that we know that we have.

To wrestle and to struggle and to think and to reflect is part of the dignity of being made in the image of God. The Bible would teach us. It gives us value.

[13 : 52] It gives us value. There is a different solution to addressing the problem of evil and suffering which is when people try to deny God's power.

And some schools of Christian theology have tried to do this in a sense to try and get God off the hook. To argue that God was not involved. God was not present in a particular suffering.

An attempt to rescue God from accusations of being unfair or less than good. But the result is you end up with a non-God. A God you cannot trust.

A God you cannot hope in. A God who would love to help but lacks the power is no God at all. A God who would love to help but lacks the power is no God at all.

God's commandments have chosen to hurt and to hate. But still we need to recognise that God as he's presented in the Bible is actively present.

[15 : 19] And therefore we must say that he would be able to intervene. And we certainly can never say that he is unaware of the evil and the suffering that fills the world.

We cannot make God less than God to make him more comfortable. Better is the way of looking at life and God shown by someone like the Nigerian pastor Sigarga Nivalga.

He was interviewed after two of his friends were murdered by Islamists. And he spoke in this interview of his child of six having been attacked because he's part of a Christian family.

Of being on a bus that was ambushed by terrorists in Nigeria. Many people being killed. And Sigarga said this. He said, we see God in the middle of the difficulty.

And it helps us to strive through situations that seem hopeless. He said, I am strengthened by Jesus' words. In this world you will have trouble.

[16 : 36] God is not powerless. God is seen to be with and in the midst as his people suffer.

And there is that great promise from Jesus that he has overcome the darkness. And that will be revealed in the end.

Another solution people look to in asking and answering the question about evil and suffering is to deny God's goodness.

So people look at suffering and evil. Cannot imagine any good for it. Anything positive that could come out of it. And draw the conclusion, well, if God is king, then he is a bad king.

And this overlooks some of the many ways that God is good to us.

[17 : 46] It tends to just look at one aspect and neglects the other. To think about the realities of life and love and beauty.

Our ability to create and relate. Now, these are all gifts of a good God. And we need to learn to see the goodness of the God, of God in his world.

And we also need to be perhaps hesitant about making our judgments on a situation and saying there is no possible way that anything good can come out of this.

Because there's a flip side in the sense that stories of human suffering have caused people to seek and to find God, have caused God's people to grow in their character, to draw on God's resources.

So that pain and suffering have actually served to strengthen. So that people would give the testimony that while situations were desperately painful, as they realised all that God had done, they wouldn't necessarily change them.

[19 : 06] I remember years ago listening to Jonathan Aitken sharing something of his life. He was the former MP who was convicted for perjury and spent 18 months in prison.

And he said it was only in that process of being found out, of being humbled, being in prison, that he came to know God.

He came to delight in God. And that totally transformed his life. And so we need to, I think, allow for the passing of time and a change of perspective.

And to have a sense of humility that says, there may be times when I cannot understand how God can use this for good.

But I don't want to judge it and say, well, this is evidence that there can never be a God. Faith involves trust.

[20 : 14] The words of Joseph towards the end of his story are helpful. Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers, who was falsely imprisoned and forgotten about for many years, could say to his brothers, you intended this for evil, but God intended this for good time, perspective.

And Joseph realised God had a good and a saving purpose behind it. So thinking about what we've said, the best solution to approaching the problem of evil and suffering from a Christian point of view is to live in the tension, where we're not trying to get God off the hook, where we're not trying to ignore what the Bible teaches.

We want to affirm that God is God, that God is powerful and God is good. But that means sometimes we're going to wrestle with how things can be the way they are.

That tension is real. I've just finished a book by an American pastor by the name of David Platt called Something Needs to Change. A story of his trek through some of the highest mountains and most remote villages in the world.

And on that eight day trek, he met victims of child trafficking, people whose lives were horribly changed by terrible disease, people who lived just with a daily struggle to survive.

[21 : 45] And he found himself constantly wrestling, why them and not me? Why do I have so much wealth and so many opportunities and they don't? Why God? Christians wrestle and struggle with this as everybody else does.

But there is great comfort when we think about our foundation, the Bible, that we are in the hands of a wise, powerful, good, infinite God that's more comforting than chance.

And it gives the hope of purpose even while we suffer. And that's why I want us to look for the rest of our time at the unique Christian resources that we find in the Bible for coping with pain and suffering, for facing pain and suffering.

So that takes us back to John chapter 11, to Jesus and these two sisters, Martha and Mary, who've been left grieving by the death of their brother Lazarus.

Now, what resources can we find in this text to help us? Well, the first thing to notice is the presence of Jesus.

[22 : 59] Jesus is not remote and distant and unconcerned.

Jesus has entered into a suffering world. Jesus moves towards suffering people. Jesus is described as a man of sorrows.

Jesus is familiar with grief. And that matters because as the book of Hebrews says, in Jesus, who is God, you will find someone who is able to sympathise with you.

He has been there. He has walked in our shoes. And he is at the same time almighty God who is able to give strength and to help you to persevere.

So the presence of Jesus matters to these sisters and to you and to me. Related to that is the comfort of Jesus.

[24 : 15] In this text that we read is the shortest verse in the Bible, which is also so profound. Jesus wept.

Jesus wept. Confronted by misery. Confronted by grief. Jesus wept.

Even as he knew what he would shortly do. He would bring resurrection life. He still wept.

Jesus carried that grief. He answers the promise of Isaiah 53 that God's Saviour would bear our sorrows.

Jesus holds us close. As his people lament and suffer, Jesus is there to extend comfort.

[25 : 17] There is also the great hope in the resurrection of Jesus. Here again, the words of Jesus to Martha.

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die. Jesus' words are amazing.

What does Jesus say to Martha? What is it that you and I need in the face of suffering and death? We need Jesus.

Because he is in himself life. True life. Again, it's the hope of Sagarga, Nivalga in Nigeria and his church as they suffer.

He said a lot of people are looking forward to heaven. Of course, nobody wants to die. But the way things are happening, you don't know when or who will be the next person.

[26 : 23] So the consolation for the church in Nigeria, he said, is to go back to the Bible. And what do you find there? You find there Jesus who promises life beyond death.

Who says that pain and suffering is not the end of the story. Resurrection life. Real, physical, perfected resurrection life is the great hope of Christianity.

At the end of the Bible, what do we discover? We discover Jesus will return. He will make the world new. Evil will be gone forever. And Jesus and his people will live together forever in a world of perfect love and joy.

With all tears wiped away. With all pain and suffering gone. Jesus shouted, come out to his friend Lazarus.

And one day that cry will be heard by all his followers who will rise to perfect physical life. And there is hope. Hope that the endless, seemingly endless cycle of pain and suffering and misery, it will be broken.

[27 : 32] Death itself will come untrue and be no more. And that's true because of the cross of Jesus.

That's the other great resource within Christianity for helping us to cope. The cross of Jesus. We know from our Bibles that not long after raising Lazarus, this life-giving Jesus, the Son of God, would die on the cross.

And in his dying, there are great resources for comfort and hope. There is the promise that we can live because he died for us and rose again.

Jesus, on the cross, lost a sense of the infinite love of his Father. He experienced spiritual abandonment.

He experienced a depth of suffering. We never will so that by faith in him, we need never be alone as we suffer. We need never be cut off from our God.

[28 : 40] We need never be cut off from hope. Jesus extends to us hope beyond pain and suffering and death because he offers in his sacrificial death forgiveness and eternal life.

So that as we look at the cross, we cannot say God is distant or remote, that God doesn't love us. Rather, we see that God loves us so much that he enters into a suffering world, that he takes our misery so seriously that he comes and takes it on himself.

What we have at the centre of Christianity is Jesus, God in the flesh, who offers himself to you to walk with you in pain and suffering, having walked that path before you in order to give the gift of salvation, if you would put your faith in him to offer you the certain prospect of infinite love and joy of a world of glory beyond suffering.

Ultimately, as we look at pain and suffering, as we struggle through it, Jesus is God's answer to the problem.

Let's pray together. Lord God, thank you that while the Bible is honest about pain and suffering, it tells us of trials that will come.

[30 : 18] It tells us of heartache and heartbreak. It also gives us wonderful resources to give us strength to endure. We thank you that you are a wise and powerful and loving God, that you're not distant and remote.

We thank you for the suffering of Jesus. We thank you for his love and his sympathy, his being willing to bear our sorrows.

We thank you for the cross of Jesus that gives us assurance that we can be saved, that we can have peace with God, that we can look forward to life with you forever.

We thank you for the resurrection of Jesus and the hope that just as Jesus rose again, so we can anticipate a perfect life forever if our faith is in him.

Lord, we want to pray. We want to pray for those who need this hope today, for those who are going through that furnace of trials and tears and pain and suffering, for those who are grieving, for those who are unsure what their future holds.

[31 : 34] Lord, we pray that you would draw near to them, that you would walk with them, that you would reveal your heart and your hope to them.

Lord, this is beyond philosophy and reasoning. Lord, we need a truth to cling on to.

We need meaning and purpose as we suffer. Lord, may we find it in the Lord Jesus. Amen. Now we're going to close with a couple of songs again.

Abide with me and then a section from Psalm 27. And just a heads up that next week, we'll look at another difficult topic. I'm thinking about how can God be good?

Can God be good if he judges people, if he sends people to hell? So again, another hugely important topic that maybe we have a very emotional response to.

[32 : 36] But I would encourage you to come and to think together about that. So until next time, take care.