

How Can a Good God Allow Evil and Suffering?

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[0:00] Okay, well, Erin, it seems like we hear a lot of Christians talking about how God is love and he's this really good guy, but it seems that a lot of people would find difficulty with believing that God could be good and loving based on all the suffering that we see in the world around us.

It seems to disprove the existence of the God, or at least the God that you claim to believe in, one who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, as in one who knows everything, can do everything, and is good.

If God can do anything, he'd be able to prevent suffering. If he knew everything, he'd know how to prevent suffering. If he was good, he would want to prevent suffering.

And yet, we still just have to look around to see that suffering and evil exist. So, it seems like either he's not good, not powerful, or doesn't really know what to do.

And I think this is why a lot of people struggle to believe in a Christian God, or the Christian God that you believe in. Yes, yes, yes, yes. See, I think the existence of suffering and evil is completely compatible with a God who is totally good, who can do anything, and knows everything.

[1:15] Please, make your case. Right, okay. Well, first of all, what we need to do is we need to categorize between types of suffering. So, there's the suffering caused by humans, so that's like murder and abuse and assault, etc., right?

And then there's the suffering caused by natural forces like disasters, tornadoes, diseases, etc. So, human-caused suffering, and suffering caused by nature.

And I want to deal with, we'll begin just by talking about the human one first. Yes? Go ahead. Okay. Well, I think we can explain why God allows so much moral evil to exist, because he gave humans free will.

So, with free will comes people making bad decisions. And I think that's one of the main causes of suffering and evil in the world. People do stupid things, they suffer as a result, and other people suffer as a result.

Okay, I'm following you, but you're telling me that God set this up. God made it this way. Yeah. Why? Yeah, well, if we work on the assumption that God knows everything, he knew that evil would arise from free will.

[2:30] So, that's, you know, I'm giving you that. Like, God knew that would happen. But it would seem, God believes that a universe with free agents, with free will, and evil is better than a universe with no evil and no free will.

Okay. Well, you have a lot to explain there. First, you say that the best type of universe is one that contains free agents. That's a big claim. Why should I believe that? Have you seen *Moulin Rouge*? The movie. Yes. Right. Okay. So, Ewan McGregor's character, he's got this line through the movie, and he says it throughout the movie. He says this, the greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.

Okay. Right. Okay. Do you think that, do you believe that? Is that, do you believe that the greatest thing is to be loved and to love? Maybe. Right. Okay, good.

Well, I believe this. And I believe there's nothing greater in life than loving God and loving people and in return being loved by God and being loved by other people.

[3:38] Now, life without love is going to be miserable. It's not a life that's no one, it's not a life that somebody would want. In fact, I'd say it's so great, it's so wonderful that a life containing both love and suffering is far superior to a life containing no suffering but no love.

Okay, so how do you tie this to your point? Okay, so my point is this. You cannot love if you're not free. You cannot, you cannot love that is programmed, love that it's like a robot can't love.

Love has got to be a choice, and that doesn't exist without free will. Okay, so then why doesn't God just get rid of the people who make bad choices? That's a fairly quick, you know, solve the problem, very morally justifiable, clean it up.

Right, sort it out, wham bam. Okay, yes, fair question. So if God was going to squash all the evil, like you said, squash it like a cockroach, he would have to squash all of us.

Because evil is a team sport. For example, I know, Miss Roth, that you're a nice person. Like, you're nice, you're not like out, you're not beating people, you're not like doing really bad stuff.

[4 : 51] But you, I mean, just as an example, you probably own one piece of clothing that was put together in a sweatshirt. I mean, you're not snow white, clean here. I mean, we're all implicated in the evil of the world.

So if God was to make a clean sweep, like starting a clean sweep, I'd get it rid of all the bad people. It's all over for all of us. In fact, the fact that he doesn't do that is an indication that God is loving, that he's merciful.

Okay, so let's suppose that I'm willing to accept that part of the argument and that that works. Even if I do, it only explains part of the evil and suffering that we see in the world.

And probably the easiest part to explain. You still need to explain this idea of natural evil. Why does God allow children to die of starvation, men and women to be wracked with diseases?

Yeah, no, yeah, excellent, excellent, yes. Because I mean, I think there's a good argument to be made to sort of explain the existence of natural evil and the existence of God.

[5 : 53] Before I do that, I want to point out that suffering caused by natural forces, a really good chunk of that could be prevented if humans acted less selfishly than they do.

Got it? Explain. Right, okay. So you turn on your TV and you see people in a faraway country dying, famine, disease, etc. Right? And you can say, right, you see, God doesn't care about them.

All God would have to do, why doesn't God just like in the Sudan, why does it just rain? Why does he just like get a really good crop for these guys and they wouldn't die? But no, God is stingy.

That's what people think. God is stingy. He doesn't exist, you know? Now, you can think that way, as people often do, but I think when we do that, we're kind of evading our responsibility in this matter here.

See, if there's no moral evil in the world, if everyone lives in accordance with the teachings of Jesus, for example, then much of the suffering we blame on God would be abolished. You know, let's say there's a drought in the Sudan.

[6 : 55] The world would rally and rush aid to this place, would prevent famine. The wealth of the world would be redistributed instead of hoarded sort of in, you know, Western countries. As a result, diseases would be greatly diminished.

Medical care would be more readily available. People would live in, like, for example, people would live in decent housing instead of shacks that are just, or, you know, these really poorly built buildings that just collapse at the smallest earthquake, you know?

Now, of course, terrible natural evil would remain. Disasters would remain. Accidents would occur. But if there was no moral evil, a good chunk of the consequences would disappear.

Okay, fair enough. If people were more selfless, the suffering that we see could be dramatically reduced. But there's still a lot of natural evil that occurs and would occur regardless of how selfless people were.

I mean, cancer. Yes. Yes, and that's very, that's a very fair point to make. And I don't know why God does many of the things that he does.

[7 : 58] Perhaps we suffer to enable us to grow. I mean, even Nietzsche, who's like a, you know, like the poster boy for atheism, talked about the discipline of suffering making people stronger.

So, perhaps suffering is, will make us more patient or humble or will give us a heightened sense of life's other joys. There are certain good things that only come out of difficulty and suffering.

Well, think about it this way. If the greatest good in life was hedonistic pleasure, then I'd agree.

Much of the suffering in the world would make little pleasure, right? If pleasure is life's greatest good, then it makes no sense that God would refuse to snuff out, you know, Hitler or Pol Pot, etc.

Or diseases like cancer. But let's not assume that the greatest good is pleasure. Instead, let's assume the greatest good is loving God. And if our greatest good is loving God, and if permitting suffering into the world is a way that God can get people to freely choose to love him, then it follows that God is justified in permitting some natural suffering.

That seems cruel. Do you really believe that? I do believe that. Because I think suffering is capable of bringing out the best in people.

[9 : 10] And it can also bring out the worst in people. But it is capable of bringing out the good. Okay. So, we say suffering often brings out the best in people.

Or we hear amazing stories of, you know, selflessness and love coming out of suffering. And nobody is going to disagree with that. But you're contending that suffering is one of the main ways that God can get a person to freely choose to love him.

How is this possible? And is that really free? Well, it's, no. That's a very fair thing to say. Perhaps, yeah.

Like, let me say it like this. There is a great sickness in the world that humans suffer from. And it's pride. Human pride. Right? And the worst kind of pride is spiritual pride. And spiritual pride is a state where you don't acknowledge God is kind and merciful and good.

And you don't acknowledge that God is all-powerful. And you don't acknowledge that God makes, you know, all of life possible. And suffering can serve as a bit of a wake-up. I'm saying it can, right? Like, it can.

[10 : 14] It doesn't always. But it can serve as a wake-up. Because it can humble us. And when we suffer, we realize that we aren't, you know, uber-man. We are weak and we are vulnerable.

And our life is not in our own hands. It forces us to see these things. And it can actually turn us to our creator. And acknowledge the fact that we are dependent on him.

It can lead us to humble ourselves. It can lead us to repent. It can lead us to give honor to God who made us. So God allows soldiers to be tortured to death in prisoner of war camps because it draws them to him?

Yeah, I know. Your examples you give are really bad. But, I mean, really good and really bad because it takes us to the extreme example, right? But perhaps, maybe.

You know, I don't think God enjoys seeing people suffer. He looks down on the suffering and hates it more than we do. He's more sad about it than we'll ever be sad about it.

[11 : 18] But it would seem that sometimes the highest good that God looks for can only come through our suffering.

There's a Christian philosopher called Peter Crepe. He said this. It's sort of a longish quote to bear with me. I do not think that any fairly mature Christian can look back on his or her life and identify some point of suffering that made them much closer to God than they ever thought possible.

Before this happened, they would have said, I don't really see how this can accomplish any good at all. But after they emerge from the suffering, they say, that's amazing. I learned something I never could have learned. I don't think that my weak and rebellious will was capable of such strength.

But God, with his grace, gave me the strength for that moment. If it weren't for suffering, it wouldn't have been possible. The closeness to God, the similarity to God, the conformity to God, not just the feeling of being close to God, but the ontological real closeness to God.

The God-likeness of the soul emerging from suffering with remarkable efficiency. Sure. And I mean, that makes a lot of sense.

[12 : 24] But at the same time, if we go back to our original question of if God's omnipotent, if God's all-powerful, couldn't he come up with some other way to do this? Yeah, I would think probably.

But it would seem that suffering is very effective. C.S. Lewis said this. He said, God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain.

It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. Humans don't really hear God. Often don't hear God when he speaks in a whisper. He usually has to yell to get our attention.

And if God were to use a kinder instrument to draw people to himself, I'm sure he would. But perhaps it wouldn't accomplish the desired purpose. Okay, so what about the other side of it then? What about people who suffer immensely and as a result lose their faith? Yeah, that happens, right? That definitely happens. And that's really tragic. But that's people freely choosing not to learn from suffering.

[13 : 22] That's people. And we can't blame God for that, right? We can't blame God for people making bad choices. Instead, we should be thankful that God actually puts us through things that will draw him to him.

Yeah. Okay, well, that could make sense. But then what about someone who's incapable of processing what's happening to them? What about the evil and suffering that happens to children or people who are severely disabled, who can't process this idea that maybe God could be speaking to them?

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. That is, like, I think the hardest example to try and wrap our heads around. A baby with a terrible disease.

I mean, I just don't know. I don't know. I don't, and I don't think we, I don't think the goal is to know. Like, I don't think the goal is when we're suffering to go, what is God trying to teach me?

Maybe. Perhaps it can be. But in that case you've just mentioned, I just don't know. And we might never know. And given the fact that I'm finite and God's infinite, it shouldn't be a surprise to us that we don't know.

[14 : 34] In fact, given the fact that I am finite and God is infinite, it would follow that there are many things that we cannot explain, like the really good example you just brought up.

So that's it. Throwing up your arms. Yep. I don't know. Yeah. It's not much of an argument. No, no. I mean, I don't expect you to be able to perfectly understand the infinite, but if all you can do is say it's a mystery and that's it, then I think it's fair to say you don't have a solid position.

Yes. Yes. And that would be the case, except that we haven't really even scratched the surface of this pain and suffering yet thing.

We've thrown out a few good ideas, but we haven't begun to talk about the cross. And that's what I'm going to do in my sermon now. It's such a joke.

The ends needed a little bit of work. I don't know how to transition out of that. And what do you say? Right. And I say, that's that then.

[15 : 42] That's how it ends. Okay. Thanks, Kathy. Kathy Roth. Well done. Well done. We are going to have a reading from God's Word now, and then I'm going to preach on the cross of Jesus, which is, when you talk about, when you talk about evil and suffering, that's the thing you want to talk about.

So we're going to get there. But first, would you prepare your hearts for a reading from God's Word? The reading this evening is found on page 853 of the three Bibles.

It's Mark 15, verses 33 to 39, page 853. And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, Elwi, Elwi, lima sabachthani, which means, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And some of the bystanders hearing it said, behold, he's calling Elijah. And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink, saying, wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.

[17 : 29] And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion who stood facing him saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, truly, this man was the son of God.

This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Amen. Amen. Okay, so, so the reading you've just heard, that, that is, that's a small part of the story of the crucifixion of Jesus.

And, look, if you're new to this whole Bible thing, it's probably helpful to know, that even though this reading was quite short, the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are usually a sort of a good third of the, of the Gospel story, is, is dedicated to the last 24 hours of Jesus' life.

And that's not because, you know, the Gospel writers wanted this really sort of heroic end, you know, like kind of like a, um, a big storybook, noble kind of death, you know, courageous example for us to follow.

No, the reason the Gospels give so much attention to these last 24 hours, the cross, the resurrection, the reason they give it so much attention, is because, the fundamental reason, that Jesus came, was to die.

[19 : 01] And that puts the cross, at the center of the Christian faith. So, what I want to do, this evening, is that, I'm just going to preach for like, five to ten minutes, is I want to walk through these verses quite quickly, and at the end, I'll talk about how they relate to what we're talking about tonight, the problem, of evil and suffering.

The way I want to do that, is I just want to pick up on sort of the elements, there's about sort of four or five elements, in this passage. I want to pick up on those, and talk about them, and at the end,

we'll tie it into our conversation.

Okay, first element, the darkness. So, it's the sixth hour, so the hours were measured by like, six hours from sunset, so it's like midday, right? So, the passage says, at about the sixth hour, darkness came over the whole land, the Bible says.

So, it wasn't an eclipse. We know that, because it was Passover, and the moon would have been in the wrong part of the sky, for an eclipse. No, the reason for this phenomena, is it happened to underline the fact, that whatever was going on, whatever was happening on the cross, it involved all of creation.

At the brightest part of the day, when the sun should have been the brightest, and the hottest, it was dark, it was like night. The depth and the horror, of what was happening on that cross, it was like, it was like creation, sees it, and, and turns away.

[20 : 29] So, whatever was happening there, the darkness is meant to tell us that, folks, this is, this cross, this is bigger than, a good man, is wrongly convicted, and dies.

That's the first element. Second element, the cry of Jesus. In Mark's gospel, Jesus only speaks once. And what he says, is so important, that Mark repeats it, he says it twice.

First, in the original language, which is Aramaic, and then, second in Greek, and it's been translated for us in English. So, this is verse 34. And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried out, it's like a mega voice in the Greek, mega voice, with a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, Lema Sabathani, which means, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

I've read that, whilst people were dying on the cross, at this time, it was pretty common, for people to call out curses, and promises of vengeance.

But Jesus doesn't do that, he quotes Psalm 22, which we read together, at the start of the service. So, let me read a little bit more, of that Psalm to you. Psalm 22, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[21 : 42] Why are you so far, from saving me, from the words of my groaning? Oh my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.

When Jesus was, back in the days, when people quoted, the first line of a Psalm, in the minds of the hearers, it was supposed to, they were supposed to think of the whole Psalm.

Now, some scholars have had, through the ages, have had a real problem with this passage, because it sounds like Jesus is losing it, that he's lost his faith, he's doubting this whole plan, but no, Jesus is in genuine agony, and this Psalm, is him explaining, what is happening to him.

Now, I say agony, when I say agony, it's not so much the physical agony, although his body was being, you know, ruined at this point. No, his pain, and the pain explored in the Psalm, if you read the whole thing, the pain of the Psalm, is the pain of separation, being separated from God.

So, Jesus' body is being destroyed, up on the cross there, but that was nothing, that was a scratch, compared to what was happening, in his soul. See, Jesus' relationship with his Father, is what?

[22 : 53] It's, it's beginningless. It was, it's infinitely greater, and more intimate, than any human relationship, ever could be, and on the cross, for the first time in eternity, Jesus was cut off, from his heavenly Father, and that's why he cries out.

Now, let me just explain, the separation of it, but why is that? What's happening up there? The Bible repeatedly says, things like this, in 2 Corinthians, read this to you, for our sake, he made him, that's Jesus, to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him, we might become, the righteousness of God.

This means this, right? Instead of, judging the world, Kathy and I talked about this, instead of God, judging everybody, just wiping everything, just judging everybody, God poured his judgment out, on his son, Jesus, on the cross, and he did that, so we, wouldn't receive God's anger, so that we, could be forgiven, so what does this look like, for Jesus?

It looks like this, so the Trinity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, beginningless, more intimate, than, we can ever imagine, that relationship, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it means that Trinity, on the cross, was torn apart, and Jesus looked to his Father, who had always heard his prayers, who had always been part of, with, and instead of, the love that Jesus, had always known, Jesus experienced, the anger, and the wrath, of God.

Have a look at verse 37 there, and Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed, his last. It's a very interesting detail there, I think. He breathed his last, what does that mean?

[24 : 43] Why this detail? Jesus didn't die like, others died, when they were crucified. And I think this sudden, this line here, is pointing to, like a sudden choice. Jesus, chose to die.

He breathed his last. He gave up his life. His life wasn't taken from him, he gave up his life. And that's the great wonder, of this whole thing here. When Jesus was cut off from God, when he went into the deepest, pit of loneliness, beyond all imagining, when he experienced, the full wrath, of God, he did it voluntarily, and he did it, in obedience to the Father, and he did it for us.

Jesus put himself, on the hook, for us. We deserved, endless separation from God, but instead, Jesus was separated, from God for us, because he loves us.

Now the next element here, the torn curtain. What's going on there? So the passage says, that there's a curtain in the temple, and it was torn in two.

So in the temple, the place where the Israelites worshiped, there's a lot of places you can go, right? But there was this one room, called the Holy of Holies, cut off from the rest of the temple.

[25 : 57] That was supposed to be the place, where God dealt, sort of specially dealt, right? The only person allowed in there, was the high priest, who was allowed in there, once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

And the curtain, what did the curtain represent? It wasn't just sort of, make it look nice, right? Or just sort of like, well here's a convenient way, of kind of like, covering the door, or something. The curtain, represented, separation from God.

It represented, it represented a separation, from God. A separation that existed, because of human sin, because of our disobedience. So when Jesus died on the cross, that massive thing, that represented separation from God, was split down the middle.

So what does that mean? It means, all that God had against us, has gone. It's been swept away. There is no longer a barrier, between you and God.

It means we can have friendship with God, because of what Jesus had done. Now the final element here, the centurion. So the centurion, witnessing this, says something that no other human, in Mark's gospel has said.

[27 : 03] He says this, truly this was the son of God. Now this is a centurion, he's a warrior. He would have seen a lot of people die, and likely, you know, a lot of people being crucified. But there was something about this death, that was different.

And I think we see in him, something we should see in ourselves, and that is a journey of faith. This is a person, moving from, the place of being just, sort of an objective observer, to a participant.

And this is what we should see, in our lives. Faith is us moving from, God is something out there, that, you know, theology, whatever, it's just something sort of out there, to something in here.

And this has got to happen for us. We must come to the realization, that Jesus died on the cross, for me. That Jesus loves me. These passages, have to become personal for you.

Finally, and quickly, what has this all got to do, with the topic at hand? What has this all got to do, with the problem of evil, and suffering? So I'll ask the question again, how can a good God, allow evil, and suffering?

[28 : 16] And at the end of my conversation, with Kathy, I, at the end of it, I said, I just don't know. we can sort of, you know, we can sort of come up with some, general theological ideas, which might be helpful, but basically, we don't know.

We don't know why God, allows such things to happen. But, but, but, but, the reason God allows it, can't be, it can't be, because he doesn't love us.

It can't be, because God is unconcerned. It can't be, because God is detached. Think about the sacrifice. Jesus entered our world, out of a great love, for us, to become a horror, to his father, so that we can have life, and friendship with him.

Why does God allow us, evil and suffering? Folks, the Bible, it does not give us, an airtight, philosophical answer. It gives us, a man.

The father, does not give you, an answer to why, you have suffered. He gives you, his son. He gives you, his son, who enters, who entered, into our suffering, with us.

[29 : 36] So that we, can, resist the evil, of the world. So that we can be forgiven, for our part, in the evil. So that we can, patiently endure, our own suffering, knowing that Jesus, went through, immense suffering, for us.

And that God, has entered, our world. And suffers with us. Amen.