

# *Why Is There Suffering and Evil?*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

2<sup>nd</sup> in a six-part series

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*Genesis 1:31-2:2 (Common English Bible)*

<sup>31</sup>God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good. There was evening and there was morning: the sixth day. The heavens and the earth and all who live in them were completed. <sup>2</sup>On the sixth day God completed all the work that he had done, and on the seventh day God rested from all the work that he had done.

*1 John 4:7-10 (CEB)*

<sup>7</sup>Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup>This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. <sup>10</sup>This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.

*This week, we turn to our second question in this series on tough questions. Must there be suffering and evil in our world? Where is our good and loving God!*

For two millennia there has been no tougher question thrown at Christianity than that of evil and suffering. How can God be all-good, all-loving, and all powerful, yet so much evil and suffering persist in God's creation? Historically, it has been the most enduring argument against the existence of the God revealed in Scripture and proclaimed by his followers.

This isn't hard to understand. Look around. Pick up a newspaper. Check the internet. Turn on a TV. Wherever we turn we are bombarded by images of evil and wrong inflicted on innocent people. Where does it all come from? How could so much be wrong in a world supposedly created and cared for by an all-powerful, all-good deity? Perhaps this deity just isn't powerful to do something about it. Or perhaps this deity isn't really as good as we think he is.

You get the picture. First, understand that this is only a problem for monotheistic religions. If you believe that there are many gods, then the wrongs are simply inflicted by one or another of the lesser deities. In fact, you might live your life mostly trying to stay out of their way, as many of the ancient peoples did. In a polytheistic religion, there is no single all-powerful, all-good deity whom you could accuse.

And if you are basically a pantheist (everything is divine), then the many wrongs are simply just how things are. There is no one at whom you could point your finger in blame. In fact, you might even believe that all this is just an illusion.

If you are a Gnostic, then this world was made by a second-rate sort of god who botched the job. Hardly the picture of an all-powerful, all-good god. Such a bumbling deity needs our pity, not our accusations.

The "problem of evil," as it is often called, is a problem only for those who believe that there is only one god who made everything there is. Hence, it is a "problem" only for Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

Before we go further, let's talk about the meaning of "evil." Webster's is helpful here. "Evil" is defined as (1) "morally reprehensible" and (2) "the fact of suffering misfortune and wrong." These are often referred to as "moral evil" and "natural evil." Moral evil consists of the many wrongs we humans inflict on one another. Natural evil is the suffering inflicted by natural forces such as hurricanes, earthquakes, disease, and so on. Humans have the power to lessen the damage and suffering that goes with such events, but we don't inflict them on one another, or at least not most of the time.

### *Starting at the beginning*

I included the passage from Genesis as a reading today because it is the place where the problem of evil first arises. God created everything there is. Everything. Before God created, there was nothing. God didn't need any raw materials or a place to begin. God simply created.

And God pronounces his creation as good. Every last bit of it. Every corner. Just as God is good, so is his creation.

So where does evil come from? After all, surely it exists, doesn't it? We see evidence of moral and natural evil every day. So if God created everything, didn't God create evil as well? Yet, God surely *can't* be the author of evil if God is truly good and loving. Hence, Christian theologians have always been careful to say that "evil" is not created. Evil is not a "thing" like a chair or even kindness. Evil is simply nothingness. Evil is the absence of the good. Referring to "evil" is a way of referring to the absence of the good. Evil can never create anything; it can only destroy.

But could evil be destroyed? Since evil hasn't been created, we have to speak of its "destruction" in this way. Evil is destroyed when the good is enlarged. Think of it like turning on a light. The darkness is simply banished – it is no longer dark. Like evil, darkness isn't really created, it is the absence of light. More light = less darkness. More good = less evil.

So, what is the origin for all the evil acts we perpetrate on one another, the moral evil that rages across the planet? The biblical answer is that they originate in our free will. The biblical claim is that God created us in his image with the free will to do what is good and to do what is not good, i.e., what is evil. You and I make a myriad of these choices every day, some big and some seemingly so small that they go unnoticed. Do we act out of the interest of others (that's good) or our own interests (not so good)? Are we generous (good) or selfish (not good). Admittedly, we usually reserve the word "evil" for the big stuff and almost always for the wrongs done by others. But if we understand that evil is the lessening of what is good, than we can begin to understand that whether we are talking about "wrongs" or "injustice" or "evil," we are talking about those acts that diminish goodness.

But what about "natural evil" and all the suffering that goes with hurricanes and such? Here, we come to a pretty astonishing biblical claim. In the passage from Romans 8, Paul says that all creation is in bondage, awaiting its own redemption, Creation is in labor pains, waiting for the day when all will be put right. Thus, in the biblical view it isn't just us humans who need to be transformed so that we can love God and neighbor, but all the cosmos awaits its own renewal and restoration. Profound indeed were the consequences of humanity's rebellion against God.

*But . . .*

But all that said, we still rage at the suffering and injustices that surround us. There is something profoundly wrong with a world in which a child gets cancer. Philosophies and theologies don't really get us very far. We look to God and ask why. Why don't you do something about this? Why don't you save this little girl?! Why do we suffer? That is the question we always come back to. We are like Gideon. When an angel of the LORD shows up and tells Gideon to stay strong because "The LORD is with you," Gideon replies, "But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us." We would ask the same question of that angel.

Too often, we are so desperate for answers that we concoct all sorts of reasons, many of which can be found in the explanations offered by Job's friends when the world falls in on him. Terence Fretheim lists a few of these<sup>1</sup>:

- Suffering is the will of God.
- Suffering has been sent by God for a purpose.
- God could have prevented the suffering but chose not to.
- Suffering is specifically allowed by God, at least for a time.

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<sup>1</sup>From Fretheim's book, *Creation Untamed*, Baker Academic, 2010.

- Suffering is God's judgment because of sins committed.
- Suffering is bad and to be avoided at all costs.
- To suffer is to bear the cross.

*Why?*

The problem isn't that these explanations are *all* wrong, but neither are they *all* right. As Fretheim puts it, when we come to the Bible we have to be prepared for nuance. We might like the Bible to set things out in black and white, but the Bible simply doesn't when it comes to many of the questions we have. The bumper sticker reading "The Bible says it; I believe it" does an injustice to the full glories of the God-breathed Scriptures we have been given. Fretheim again:<sup>2</sup>

Faced with the realities of suffering and evil, Christians can say something, but they cannot say everything or even as much as they might like to say. They cannot "explain" suffering or "resolve" the problem of evil or provide "answers" to these issues or develop an airtight "theodicy." . . . [However,] the Bible does give its readers some room to speak between silence and "explanation."

Here's a few thoughts that might be helpful.

*Suffering is a function of human limitations.* We break easily. We get lonely and fearful. We are tempted into bad choices. These limitations are not the result of sin but are simply part of how God made us. Jesus was anxious and fearful in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Jesus grieved over Lazarus. And Jesus was without sin. Could Jesus have cut himself using his carpenter tools? Of course. In the Garden of Eden, could Adam have climbed a tree, fallen out, and broken his leg. Sure. The laws of physics operated in the Garden. Indeed, we can bet that "subduing" creation wasn't any easier back then than it is now. Does our sin increase the suffering? Sure. Adam might have been pushed out of the tree. (I won't say by whom, but the candidates were limited).

*Suffering results from the freedom we are given.* As we've seen, from the beginning, God pulled humanity into the work of creation. We are to multiply; there is no magic God-wand for making babies; a man and woman must become one flesh. We are to subdue an untamed and often dangerous planet. It is human gardeners who help beautiful flowers to flourish in ways they never could in the wild. How many varieties of roses have humans created? In this wild world, we have been given remarkable freedom to grow and to be challenged. The challenges of this world are often the means of our growth. How many parents believe that the best way to raise loving, responsible, well-adjusted adults is to give them everything they want and remove every obstacle and source of potential pain? Imagine for a moment that beginning thousands of years ago, all of humanity worked together to feed, to clothe, to cure disease – rather than pouring limitless energy and wealth into making war, taking from others, and protecting ourselves from the takers. Where would we be today in our taming of disease and suffering?

*Finally, suffering also stems from the fact that the LORD God Almighty has chosen to accomplish his purposes through us weak, finite humans.* This is the cosmos that God, in his infinite wisdom, *chose* to create. I suppose that God could wave a magic wand and fix all our problems, take away everything that might harm us, but then we would no longer be thinking, loving, and free creatures. What is love without the possibility of not loving? Consider those who have suffered the pain of unrequited love . . . for example, God.

Yes, there is mystery in suffering but it isn't all mystery. And always, we have to bear in mind and heart that God enters into our suffering with us. Far from any sort of remote absentee deity, the *God-Who-Is* has created a cosmos that is ever-changing and ever-challenging. We proclaim a God who not only suffered and died on the cross, but has always been deeply involved with us and with suffering.

*The God-Who-Suffers*

Like so much else in our admittedly odd proclamation to the world, all these questions come to Jesus on that cross. We easily proclaim that Jesus is God incarnate; we will soon

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<sup>2</sup> *Creation Untamed*, p. 100

come to another Christmas. But how often do we stop to contemplate that this God whom we proclaim really and truly suffered, just as the rest of humanity suffered? Or that his mother suffered as she stood at the foot of the cross and watched her tortured son die a humiliating death? Or that his Father suffered as his only begotten son met the worst that fallen humanity has to offer? That the one through whom, in whom, and for whom all things were created . . . yes, that One suffered and died.

We throw our accusations at God, failing to grasp that God has already received the worst from us. Bishop N. Thomas Wright put it this way:

“The Gospels thus tell the story, unique in the world’s great literature, religious theories, and philosophies: the story of the creator God taking responsibility for what’s happened to creation, bearing the weight of its problems on his own shoulders. As Sydney Carter put it in one of his finest songs, ‘It’s God they ought to crucify, instead of you and me.’ Or, as one old evangelistic tract put it, the nations of the world got together to pronounce sentence on God for all the evils in the world, only to realize with a shock that God had already served his sentence. The tidal wave of evil crashed over the head of God himself. The spear went into his side like a plane crashing into a great building. God has been there. He has taken the weight of the world’s evil on his own shoulders. This is not an explanation. It is not a philosophical conclusion. It is an event in which, as we gaze on in horror, we may perhaps glimpse God’s presence in the deepest darkness of our world, God’s strange unlooked-for victory over the evil of our world; and then, and only then, may glimpse also God’s vocation to us to work with him on the new solution to the new problem of evil.”

Jesus’ own suffering shows us the incomprehensible extent of God’s love for each of us. “God so loved the world that he gave his only son . . .” There is no one for whom I would allow my own son to be crucified. I am simply not capable of loving as God loves. In contrast, even in the most terrible circumstances of our lives, it is God’s concrete love expressed in Jesus’ suffering that grounds our own worth.

Each of us is defined by God’s love for us. It is God’s love and our knowing that we are loved, that not only sustains us through suffering but enables us to put it behind us, always pressing forward to the future. Just as Jesus’ crucifixion is the concrete expression of God’s love for us, Jesus’ resurrection is the concrete affirmation, indeed fulfillment, of our own eventual freedom from evil and suffering.

The question for us is this. Will we trust this God, this strange and unexpected God-Who-Suffers, with all our questions and our hurt and our anger? Will we?

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by looking at the bulleted list of “explanations” of suffering on page two. How many have you heard used? What were the circumstances? How did the explanation strike you at the time? How many have you used yourself? What do you think of the idea that nuance is demanded? Does that seem like a cop-out?
2. The idea that suffering or at least the potential for it, existed in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve rebelled will challenge many (most!) Christians. What was your first reaction to it? How does the illustration of Adam falling out of a tree help? Does this notion really help us to understand that creation, though good, is also a bit dangerous? Does this reflection help you to avoid the conclusion that all suffering is directly or indirectly derived from sin?
3. What do you think is God’s role in the world’s evil and suffering? Share some things you’ve heard people say about God when confronted by tragedy, such as “this is all part of God’s plan.” How do these statements make you feel about God? What would you say to them?
4. Finally, you might reflect on how hard it is for us to simply trust God with what we don’t understand? Why is it so difficult? How can we become more trusting of God?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7-8</b> God suffers with his people. (This is what implied by the Hebrew verbs applied to God).</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Hosea 4:1-3</b> The moral order affects the cosmic order.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Ecclesiastes 9:11</b> There is randomness in God's created order.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, John 15:1-17</b> On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus speaks to his disciples about true love (see v. 13).</p>
<p><b>Friday, 1 Peter 3:8-22, 4:12-19</b> The early Christians were well-acquainted with suffering, even suffering for doing good.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

