

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND SUFFERING:
A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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Introduction

The problem of suffering and evil is an issue that has confronted every human being regardless of their geographical locale, IQ, ethnicity, social status, or faith (including atheism). Some reject Christianity wholesale because of this problem. Believers have faced great heartache because of the things that God allows. For these and other reasons, every Christian should be equipped to share the truth (and silence!) of Scripture on this painfully relevant topic. This paper identifies the problem of evil, provides solutions to that problem, and makes an appeal for a healthy posture towards God despite the evil and suffering so prevalent in our world.

The Problem of Evil and Suffering

Theological Problem

The “problem” of evil and suffering is called just that because, for many, it seems incongruent for evil to exist in a world supposedly governed by an all-powerful and all-loving God. Bart Ehrman is so critical of the apparent problem that he calls it *God’s problem* and left the faith finding no satisfactory explanation in Scripture!¹ There are other ways to respond.

¹ Bart Ehrman. *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer our Most Important Question – Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 1, 276.

Evil Exists

There are three basic views on the existence of evil.² Pantheism upholds the existence of god(s) but denies the reality of evil. Atheism affirms the existence of evil but denies the existence of God. The third view is theism, which affirms both God and evil. Norman Geisler responds to pantheism by pointing out the undeniable – if evil is not real, why does it hurt so badly?³ The Bible does not hesitate to assume the reality of evil.

God Exists

Scripture affirms the existence of God just as strongly as it asserts the existence of evil. The coexistence of evil and a god is not inherently problematic. The problem enters based on the Bible's assertions concerning the God who is. The Bible claims that God is perfectly good in all His attributes and actions (Deut 32:4). If this were the sum total of our theology, we might have more teammates such as Harold Kushner who affirms the existence of God but denies His ability to stop the evil that is in the world.⁴ But the Bible doesn't grant that liberty. Scripture not only speaks of God's goodness and love, but it is also equally emphatic regarding God's sovereignty and powerful (e.g. Dan 4:34-35 cf. Jer 32:17).

² Norman Geisler. *If God, Why Evil?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2011), 11.

³ Geisler, *If God, Why Evil?*, 12

⁴ Harold S. Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (U.S.A.: Anchor, 2004), 152ff.

The Nature of Evil

Augustine is the first theologian recognized for holding the view that evil is the absence of good.⁵ This time-honored view is helpful but could unintentionally give the impression that evil is not real. Evil is real, but it is not some *thing* that God created. Geisler says, “evil is a real lack, privation, or corruption of a good thing.”⁶ To be more pointed, evil is a lack/corruption of the good that is supposed to be present. Just as rust in a car frame or moth holes in a sweater, evil is a lack/corruption of good in the world that God originally created as good.⁷

Understanding evil as the absence of good could also give the impression that evil is passive. Evil beings are not passive in their expression of evil. They manifest a deviation from/refusal to submit to God’s standard. Satan’s aggressively opposes the will of God (e.g. Matt 4:1-11; Rev 20:7-10). Thus, we understand evil to be the absence/corruption of good in the world that God originally created as good, and that evil belligerently defies the will of God.⁸

The Common Critique

As stated above, Biblical Theism argues that God is perfectly good and all powerful (premise “A”). The Bible also affirms the reality of evil (premise “B”). Many see these premises as being logically fallacious. David Hume spoke bluntly: “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not

⁵ Randy Alcorn. *If God is Good* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2009), 25.

⁶ Geisler, *If God, Why Evil?*, 19.

⁷ Geisler, *If God, Why Evil?*, 20.

⁸ Sometimes theologians distinguish moral and natural evil. Moral evil is that which comes from the hands of moral beings whereas natural evil is the suffering that comes from natural disasters, etc. The two are not unrelated though the distinction can be helpful.

able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?”⁹ Hume’s critique has been the mantra of skeptics ever since.¹⁰ The real question is whether the Biblical theist contradicts himself in his premises.

Neither inconsistent nor irrational

Hume’s philosophy manifests itself in two closely related assertions. The first is that premises “A” and “B” are logically *inconsistent*. The second is that they are *irrational*. As to the first assertion...there are three types of logical inconsistencies: explicit, formal, and implicit. An explicit inconsistency occurs when one premise is a denial of another. Premise “A” and “B” do not explicitly deny one another. A formal inconsistency occurs when an explicitly inconsistent set can be deduced by using only the laws of logic.¹¹ Premises “A” and “B” do not exhibit a formal inconsistency. An implicit inconsistency occurs when using the laws of logic and necessary truth, the two propositions become inconsistent. For example, Martin Luther was born before John Calvin. John Calvin was born before Ulrich Zwingli. Therefore, Zwingli was born before Martin Luther. The necessary truth is that Martin Luther cannot be born before Zwingli *and* after Zwingli. Atheistic skeptics charge Biblical theists with committing an implicit

⁹ David Hume as quoted by Ed Miller. *Questions that Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy, Shorter Edition* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1993), 296. Hume borrowed this idea from Epicurus as quoted by Lactantius in, *The Wrath of God*. See Lactantius, *The Minor Works*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. Mary Francis McDonald, vol. 54, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 92–93.

¹⁰ E.g. Ehrman, *God’s Problem*, 3.

¹¹ Douglas K. Blount, “A Biblical Theology of Suffering, Disability and the Church (lecture, 2016 BE547OL, Dallas, TX, Spring 2016). Blount’s argument is a reflection of Alvin Plantinga’s work, *God Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

inconsistency. The necessary truth implied is that an all-powerful and perfectly good God would not allow evil (or would have no good reason for doing so).¹²

The atheist is at a disadvantage in this argument because the only way to prove their point is to have full knowledge of every possible reason God might have for allowing evil and be able to prove that none of those reasons are good enough.¹³ This is obviously impossible as the atheistic skeptic is a finite human being. In order to demonstrate that premises “A” and “B” are implicitly inconsistent, the objector would have to possess infinite knowledge, equal to that of God Himself. On the other hand, if the theist can set forth one possible reason as to why God would have allowed evil, in doing so he would show that premises “A” and “B” are consistent.¹⁴ This would also indicate that the objection of the atheist is in error.¹⁵

As seen above, it is logically *consistent* for the theist to believe both premises (“A” and “B”), but what of the charge of *irrationality*? Atheistic philosophers often assert that it is *irrational* to believe premises “A” and “B” given the amount of evil that is in the world. This argument is based on the alleged improbability that God exists given “A” and “B” and the amount of evil in the world. This allegation is not sustainable as (1) it is impossible to quantify evil, and (2) it ignores significant evidence (i.e. necessary truth) to the contrary. This argument assumes that there are no possible reasons why God might allow evil, which reason(s) would

¹² Blount, *BE547OL*, Spring 2016.

¹³ Blount, *BE547OL*, Spring 2016.

¹⁴ Alvin Plantinga. *God Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 25.

¹⁵ Blount, *BE547OL*, Spring 2016.

then invalidate the atheistic charge of improbability.¹⁶ Thus the charge of irrationality is answered much the same as the charge of inconsistency – by articulating a plausible reason God might have for allowing evil.

Theodicies and Defense

Demonstrating a plausible reason that God might allow evil to exist (thereby vindicating His character) is called a Theodicy.¹⁷ Some prefer the term defense over the term theodicy as a theodicy attempts to articulate *the* reason why God allowed evil whereas a defense articulates *a* possible reason God allowed evil.¹⁸ A defense is less dogmatic, seeking to honor the fact that God has not told us *the* reason. Plantiga's view is known as the free-will defense and is very convincing.

In some ways, Plantiga's free-will defense is very similar to Augustine's theodicy. Augustine's theodicy states that God permitted evil because the best possible world is one that contains free moral agents notwithstanding the moral evil that exists as a result of that freedom.¹⁹ It will be shown that Plantiga's view is comparable to Augustine's with the notable exception that Plantiga claims the argument as a defense (*a* reason) whereas Augustine's argument is presented as a theodicy (*the* reason).

¹⁶ Blount, *BE547OL*, Spring 2016.

¹⁷ J. Davies, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), s.v. Theodicy, 808.

¹⁸ Alvin Plantiga. *God Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 28.

¹⁹ Plantiga, *God Freedom and Evil*, 27.

Plantiga's free-will defense begins by identifying certain foundational givens upon which the argument is built. One given is that people are free with respect to an action (free to perform or refrain from performing).²⁰ The second given is that an action is morally significant if it would be wrong for the person to perform it and right to refrain from performing it.²¹ With these concepts understood, the free will defense claims: "A world containing creatures who are significantly free is more valuable...than a world containing no free creatures at all...To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so."²² Plantiga's protégé Doug Blount calls this *created* moral goodness, reminding us that moral goodness exists eternally among the God-head.²³ But in order to have *created* moral goodness, there must be free moral agents among God's creation.

The free-will defense still begs a question: Why did God *desire* created moral goodness? This too is hidden from finite man. Nevertheless, it's worthy of thought! On rare occasions, I have discovered things that are so wonderful that I was compelled to share them with others. For example, I walk to the mailbox and discover the tax-refund to be more than double of what we originally anticipated. No doubt I would run into the house and call for my wife to share the excitement with her. There is nothing greater to experience than the knowledge of God. No one would argue that God created to meet a need that He had. Rather, God created so that He might be glorified (Rev 4:11). I believe God wanted to share the excitement of the Supreme Good –

²⁰ Plantiga, *God Freedom and Evil*, 29.

²¹ Plantiga, *God Freedom and Evil*, 30.

²² Plantiga, *God Freedom and Evil*, 30.

²³ Blount, *BE547OL*, Spring 2016.

Himself. He desired creatures that would be able to perceive Him and respond to Him in true worship (akin to Plantinga's articulation of free response).²⁴ When God created mankind in His image and likeness, He created mankind with personality so that man as a person might have fellowship with God.²⁵ From my finite vantage point, the only way God could create such a world is the way in which He did so. Under the above paradigm, consider the options. (1) Refrain from the possibility of evil and therefore refrain from creating. (2) Create men and angels without true freedom (thereby nullify the purpose for creating). (3) Create men and angels with true freedom, knowing full well the evil that will result. Obviously, God chose option #3, and in His estimation it was worth it. As part of our defense, we must also consider that God paid the highest price. Not only did the Second Person of the Godhead take upon humanity in order to die for our sins. He took upon humanity *forever*. Following the resurrection and ascension, Paul called Jesus the *Man* Christ Jesus (2 Tim 2:6, emphasis mine). When John saw the glorified Christ He appeared as a Lamb who had been slain (Rev 5:6), implying that He still bears the marks of the crucifixion in His glorified state. The Son of God took upon humanity from the incarnation onward into eternity. God paid the highest price!

When the book of Job comes to a resolution, it is significant to note that Job never learns the reason for his suffering. I take that as one of the lessons of the book. Though God has His reasons, they are known only to Him. God doesn't tell us why. Therefore the only thing we can say dogmatically is that we don't know. What we *do* know is that God exists and He is perfectly good (premise "A"). We know that God is the all-powerful Sovereign God (premise "B").

²⁴ This is one of the major principles derived from the book of Job. God is worthy of worship because of who God is (not because of what He does or does not allow).

²⁵ J. Dwight Pentecost. *Designed to Be Like Him* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 26.

Concerning these and other Biblical givens, D.A. Carson said: “If you flee this framework because of what is still not known, you will not ‘solve’ the problem of suffering, and you will sacrifice much of the comfort the gospel gives.²⁶ Instead of dwelling on the unanswered questions, the believer must find rest in what is certain. It is also certain that one day all suffering will end (for believers) and all evil confined to the lake of fire (Rev 22:1-5; 20:11-15).

God’s Relation to Evil

Evil by definition stands in opposition to good. God stands in opposition to that which is evil. The fact that God capitalizes on evil does not change its moral properties. When the Bible talks about evil, it insists upon the evil of evil.²⁷ Evil cannot come from God, nor is evil eternal and equal in power to God. When God created the heavens and the earth, He declared it to be “very good,” which implies a perfect creation entirely absent of evil (Gen 1:31). Nevertheless evil does in fact exist. Since evil exists in God’s universe it must do so with His permission. In that sense (not in the causal sense), God is responsible for evil. It would not be here without His permission.

Although God is responsible for allowing evil, it is clear that He did not cause evil. Evil cannot be sourced in Him. “...God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.”²⁸ The Song of Moses sings of His moral excellence: “...all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and

²⁶ D.A. Carson. *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 37.

²⁷ Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 42.

²⁸ *NASB: 1995 Update* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), 1 Jn 1:5.

without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.”²⁹ To speak of someone’s throne is to speak about their reign. The Psalmist said that righteousness and justice are the foundation of God’s throne (Ps 97:2). The implication is that God’s reign will necessarily be consistent with His perfect character.

A common mistake is to assume that, since God created all things and evil is something, God must have created evil.³⁰ God certainly created all things. But, in spite of the fact that evil is real, it is not a thing. As stated earlier, evil is the lack/corruption of good. The repeated phrase of God’s approval in the Creation account (“God saw that it was good”) implies that God created a universe with no suffering or evil. God didn’t create evil; evil stemmed from the desire of a creature to be like God (Isa 14:13-14).³¹

Since God is God, nothing can happen apart from His approval. God in His Sovereignty chose to create a universe in which moral evil was not only possible, but certain.³² God had full knowledge of where this freedom would go, and He still chose to create. That is why the Lord Jesus is called the Lamb of God who was slain from the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8). In choosing to endow His creatures with real freedom, God chose to create in a way that would also eventuate in evil.

²⁹ *NASB: 1995 Update* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Dt 32:4.

³⁰ Geisler, *If God, Why Evil?*, 18.

³¹ Stephen J. Bramer, ed. Larry J. Waters & Roy B. Zuck. *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 88.

³² Not because God would cause Lucifer to rebel but because He knew Lucifer would rebel.

The book of Job calls attention to God's Sovereignty over suffering. For example, who caused Job's suffering? On one level, his suffering was caused by ungodly men (1:15, 17) and natural disasters (1:16, 19).³³ On another level, it was Satan (1:12; 2:6).³⁴ Yet ultimately it was God who allowed these things to happen (42:11).³⁵

One of the greatest comforts found in the book of Job is that Satan had to ask permission from God before he could inflict harm upon Job (1:12; 2:6). The same is true of Peter as Satan had to obtain permission before he could "sift" Peter (Luke 22:31-32). Therefore, we conclude that God controls evil. If He did not, then evil would be uncontrolled.³⁶ God controls evil by restraining it according to His purposes (e.g. Abimelech in Gen 20:6; the mystery of lawlessness in 2 Thess 2:7). He controls evil by overthrowing the attempts of evil men (E.g. Haman killed on the gallows where he intended to kill Mordecai [Esther 7:10]; Daniel's enemies were thrown into the lion's den where they intended to kill Daniel [Dan 6:24]).

Another expression of God's sovereignty over evil is the fact that He capitalizes on evil and sometimes uses it to further His work. The classic example is that of Joseph. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery where he went from Potiphar's house, to prison, and finally into power. When his brothers feared Joseph's revenge he said, "As for you, you meant evil against me, *but* God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result..."³⁷ Joseph recognized

³³ Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Estes. *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 80.

³⁴ Eareckson Tada & Estes, *When God Weeps*, 80.

³⁵ Eareckson Tada & Estes, *When God Weeps*, 80.

³⁶ Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Estes. *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 84.

³⁷ *NASB: 1995 Update* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ge 50:20.

that God had accomplished His perfect plan not just in spite of, but by means of his brother's evil intentions. It is worth noting that God was progressively training Joseph for his administrative role in Egypt. He began as a faithful son serving his father's interests. He was faithful in Potiphar's house and was entrusted with many responsibilities. The same was true during his stay in prison. Therefore, we see that God not only moved Joseph into position, but he prepared him along the way.

At Pentecost Peter assigned guilt to the Jewish leaders for Christ's crucifixion, at the same time recognizing God's sovereignty working in the midst of their rejection of Jesus. Peter said that Jesus was delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God but was nailed to the cross by the hands of godless men (Acts 2:23). God capitalized on the evil intentions of the Jews to accomplish redemption.

Finally, we see God's sovereignty over evil by the fact that God judges evil and will one day bring it to an end. For example, God judged the world in Noah's day because of their evil (Gen 6:5-6). The judgments on Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Canaanites develop the same theme (Gen 11; 19; Gen 15:16). In the eschaton, God will judge the nations during the Great Tribulation (Isa 13; Rev 19:11-21). God will bring evil to an end by confining the wicked in the lake of fire forever (Rev 20:11-14).

Principles from Biblical Theology

Prolegomena: Job

The term *prolegomena* literally means first words. The prolegomena of a book often gives the reader the necessary prerequisites to understand the rest of the book. While there is no scholarly consensus as to the dating of Job, some take it to be the oldest book in the Bible.³⁸ If that could be proven, it would mean that the first book that God gave to man was one that dealt with the age-old problem of evil and suffering. The first words on suffering might just be Job's!

Both the prologue and epilogue of Job show that Job and his friends had accepted a faulty premise that was too limited to account for all of life.³⁹ That premise is that personal sin is always the cause of personal suffering. Therefore, Job was written (1) to show that personal sin is not always the cause of personal suffering, (2) to expose the human limitations in understanding the issue of divine justice, and (3) to demonstrate that God is Himself free and beyond human comprehension.⁴⁰

Job informs us that personal sin is not always the cause of suffering. In fact, the Elihu discourse introduces eight other reasons why people suffer.⁴¹ Interestingly, study has shown that every reason for suffering found in the entire Bible can be placed in the categories articulated by

³⁸ Gleason Archer. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1964), 442.

³⁹ Daniel J. Estes. *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 23. Dr. Ronald B. Allen points out the fact that Qoheleth and Job deal with the anomalies whereas Proverbs deals with what should have been the norm under the Mosaic Covenant.

⁴⁰ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 23.

⁴¹ Larry J. Waters, "A Biblical Theology of Suffering, Disability and the Church (lecture, 2016 BE547OL, Dallas, TX, Spring 2016).

Elihu!⁴² According to Elihu, suffering can be the result of personal sin, but it can also be preventative, disciplinary, educational, doxological (through our faithfulness in the midst of suffering), give one greater insight into the nature and character of God, encourage us to realign our priorities, deepen our relationship with God and others, and magnify the character of God.⁴³

In the case of Job and his friends, God wanted them to know that there were many reasons one might suffer. In making this known, it was not then left to Job to discern which of those reasons related to him. Rather, Job was challenged to refrain from drawing conclusions. This lesson was driven home by God's emphasis on human limitations in chapters 38 through 41.

The book of Job answers the question posed by the problem of evil by surfacing the fact that mankind cannot fully comprehend the ways of God.⁴⁴ God humbled Job by asking a series of questions that Job could not answer. In essence God was saying, "Job, you live with a lot of unanswered questions and you'll have to live with the question of suffering unanswered as well." These questions not only reminded Job of his finiteness and God's transcendence, they also informed Job of God's love and care for him and the wisdom with which He runs His world. Regarding God's love and care for Job, the fact that God spoke to him indicated God had not abandoned him.⁴⁵ As to God's wisdom, by observing the natural world it becomes obvious that there are many aspects of God's activity that exceed human comprehension for despite the enigmas in the world, it still has order and structure functioning under God's design.⁴⁶

⁴² Waters, *BE547OL*, 2016.

⁴³ Waters, *BE547OL*, 2016.

⁴⁴ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 27.

⁴⁵ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 113.

⁴⁶ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 114-15.

Another major lesson from the book of Job is that God is free to bless according to His terms...but He is also free to allow undeserved suffering. The possibility of undeserved suffering opens up the possibility for undeserved blessing as a strict system of retribution has no room for grace.⁴⁷

God's questions had the desired impact on Job. In response to God's questions, Job admitted that he had spoken beyond his understanding and realized that God can indeed be trusted. He was humbled before the Almighty.

A Healthy Posture

Suffering will be a part of the human experience until God makes all things new (Rev 21 & 22). Nevertheless, scripture is filled with principles that enable the believer to live with a heart that is both contented now and excited for the future.

Realistic Expectations

When our hopes are not realized, we have the added pain of disappointment (Prov 13:12). For this reason, it is important that we embrace the reality that suffering is the new normal until the new heavens and earth. Daniel Thompson calls this *living between the trees*.⁴⁸ The tree of life was present in the Garden of Eden and will be present once again in the future. *Under* the tree, suffering is non-existent. It is perfectly normal while living *between* the trees.

⁴⁷ Waters, *BE547OL*, 2016. See also, Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 24.

⁴⁸ Daniel Thompson, ed. Larry J. Waters & Roy B. Zuck. *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 27.

God is God

As we suffer, we cannot lose sight of the fact that God is God and He is still on His throne. Job teaches us that nothing can touch us without His permission (1:12; 2:6). Sometimes God delivers from suffering and other times He sustains the believer through their suffering (cf. Heb 11:35).⁴⁹ Daniel's friends teach us that God can overthrow the plots of evil men, but even if He chooses not to, He is worthy of our trust (Dan 3:17-18). The story of Lazarus teaches us that the things we suffer are not a reflection of His love. In spite of Lazarus' death, John emphatically declares, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus."⁵⁰ God is God, and God is good!

Calling a Spade

On occasion I will hear a sermon emphasizing God's sovereignty and suffering that (perhaps unintentionally) communicates that God must be okay with evil because it accomplishes His purposes. One of the proof texts is Psalm 76:10, "For the wrath of man shall praise you."⁵¹ Even if the wrath of man praises God, it is not because the wrath of man is good; James reminds us that the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God (Jam 1:20).⁵² The wrath of man praises God because God is able to accomplish His purposes in spite of evil. Trusting God and His sovereignty in the midst of suffering does not mean that suffering and evil are inherently good. A spade is a spade; evil is evil.

⁴⁹ Randy Alcorn. *If God is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2009), 404.

⁵⁰ *NASB: 1995 Update* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Jn 11:5.

⁵¹ *NASB: 1995 Update* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ps 76:10.

⁵² Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 43.

The Kindness of God

Though not everything *is* good, God causes everything to work together *for* the good that He has planned for His children (Rom 8:28-30, emphasis mine). Therefore, in the kindness of God, we know that He will redeem our suffering. Sometimes this is apparent to the believer (E.g. Joseph). On other occasions, we may not be aware of what God is doing (E.g. Job). In all circumstances we can have confidence that God is at work to accomplish His purposes in our life.

Weeping with Others

Media seeks to distance us from suffering by glamorizing the young, healthy, athletic and beautiful. Paul told the Romans to weep with those who weep (Rom 12:15). In order to serve others, we must be willing to enter into their joys and sorrows alike. We should not avoid those who are suffering. We should seek them out and take it as an opportunity to be Christ-like by extending grace to those who could never repay us (Luke 14:13-14; 2 Sam 9).

For the Glory of God

John's gospel gives us three stories of suffering in which God had explicitly allowed suffering for His glory. The first is the man born blind (John 9). In light of the clarity of Job's message, it's interesting that the people in Jesus' day still assumed that suffering was connected

to personal sin (John 9:2). Jesus corrected His disciples by pointing out that the man had been born blind in order that the works of God might be displayed in him (9:3).⁵³

The second account is the death and resurrection of Lazarus (John 11). When Jesus was ‘informed’ of Lazarus’ death, He said that the sickness was not to end in death but for the glory of God (11:4). It is clear that God intended to glorify both Himself and His Son through the sickness, death, and resurrection of Lazarus.

The Call to Suffer

The third story of suffering resulting in God’s glory is found near the end of John’s gospel. Prior to the ascension of Christ, Jesus told Peter that he would die a martyr’s death thereby glorifying God (John 20:18-19). God uses suffering to glorify Himself, and He calls us to this very thing! In the context of informing Peter of his future suffering, He commanded Peter to follow Him (20:19). The call to follow Christ is a call to suffer.⁵⁴ From the fall in the Garden until now, believers have faced the enmity that comes from those who do not believe (Gen 3:15). Therefore, Paul says we have been destined to suffer (1 Thess 3:3). Peter says that fiery trials are nothing strange; they are common to the people of God (1 Pet 4:12). Believing in Christ and suffering with Him is a package deal (Phil 1:29-30).

⁵³ John 9:3 uses a *iva* clause translated, “that the works...might be displayed,” in the NASB 95. While the *iva* clause can be used in a number of ways, the most likely in this text is purpose, result, or purpose-result. It is interesting to note that the *iva* clause is used in 9:2 by the disciples when they asked whose sin resulted in the man being born blind. Wallace classifies the *iva* clause in 9:2 as a result clause, indicating a verbal action that was not intended [Daniel Wallace. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 473.]. It is possible that Jesus is contrasting a result that was not intended by someone who sinned (9:2) with a purpose-result that God very much intended in His sovereignty (9:3).

⁵⁴ Mark L. Bailey, “The Gospels (lecture, 2009 BE105OL, Dallas, TX, Fall 2009).

The Comfort of Hope

A theme among Biblical texts dealing with suffering is that suffering is temporal (E.g. 1 Pet 5:10; Jam 5:7-8; Rev 22:20). Eschatological hope produces perseverance in the believer (1 Thess 1:3).⁵⁵ It is necessary for the believer to lift their eyes above the here and now and focus on the hereafter. In doing so, they will be sustained in the present. This is behind the Psalmists plea for justice. They knew that God would one day crush the head of the serpent and restore His Kingdom on earth. This is why the martyred saints under the throne ask, “How Long, O Lord?” as they await their vindication (Rev 6:10). And, this is why the disciples were taught to pray, “Thy Kingdom Come,” for only in the coming of Christ and His Kingdom will evil and suffering end.⁵⁶

A Quiet Heart

Because of the truths that sustain us (the Sovereignty and goodness of God, the fact that He redeems our suffering, that our suffering is temporary, etc.), we can have hearts that are both contented now and excited about the future. I’ll never forget the mixed emotions I felt as the Dean of Students came into the chapel of Clear Creek Baptist Bible College on September 11th, 2001 to announce the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. On one hand, I was jolted with anxiety. On the other hand, I had a deep sense of peace as the Dean of Students went on to read from Habakkuk 3:17ff. “Though the fig tree should not blossom and

⁵⁵ Daniel Wallace. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 104-5. Wallace notes that the genitive substance produces the noun to which it is related. In this case, eschatological hope produces perseverance.

⁵⁶ I am telescoping in this statement. The Millennial Kingdom will be incredibly different than what we experience now, but suffering and death will still occur though as an anomaly. The Eternal State, however, is another story!

there be no fruit on the vines, the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food...Yet I will exult in the Lord...”⁵⁷ Habakkuk was a faithful prophet who would suffer – undeservedly – with his people. This suffering would come at the hands of evil men. Nevertheless, God would hold those men accountable for their sin and in use their evil to accomplish His good. Habakkuk’s song was given to the choir director in order to be used in corporate worship as a pedagogical tool. We should sing his song as well.

Conclusion

No human being has ever been immune to suffering – not even the Lord Jesus. The problem of evil and suffering has been a hurdle for unbelievers and a heartache for believers. This paper has shown that there are solutions to the problem of evil, though the believer must live with a certain level of mystery. While doing so, there are many Biblical principles that sustain us as we await the time when suffering and sorrow will end. Even so, Come Lord Jesus!

⁵⁷ *NASB: 1995 Update* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Hab 3:17-18.

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