

“How could a loving God allow suffering and evil?”

THE OBJECTION

Every day we hear of and sometimes witness atrocities that are inflicted on innocent people. Crime is rampant in most of our cities and even in smaller towns and villages. Governments sometimes kill their own people simply because they desire greater freedom and resist tyranny. People cheat one another in business and even in simple, everyday buying and selling. This kind of evil might be labeled as “personal” evil because it is committed by people against other people.

There is also a great deal of “impersonal” evil, such as disasters which happen in nature. These are beyond anyone’s control, yet they bring widespread suffering and death. The tsunamis which struck Southeast Asia in December 2004 and March 2011 are examples of this kind of “evil,” as well as the numerous hurricanes, tornadoes, and earthquakes which happen without any apparent cause or reason.

In the midst of all of this human suffering, Christians believe, as the Bible declares, that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). This means that everything God does is a manifestation of His own loving and compassionate nature. *How do we reconcile this idea of God with the reality of evil in the world? Why would a God of love allow evil people to harm those who are innocent? Why would He permit (some would say “cause”) natural disasters to strike, taking the lives of even innocent children? It is certainly true that some of the evil in the world is self-caused; that is, people can bring suffering on themselves (as well as on others) by their own foolish choices. For example, someone who gets drunk and is injured while driving an automobile can hardly be said*

to be the “victim” of evil outside his or her own doing. However, this still fails to account for the vast amount of suffering that occurs among those who have apparently done nothing to deserve it, such as someone who might be killed or injured by the drunken driver.

This question is sometimes called “the believer’s dilemma” because it is one which concerns only those who believe in a loving God. Atheists and skeptics simply take suffering as evidence of what they already believe—either that there is no God or that the Bible is wrong in its depiction of Him. It is a dilemma faced not only by Christians, but by Jews and Muslims as well, since they likewise claim to believe in a God who is loving and merciful.

Various attempts have been made to resolve this dilemma. One notable example is Harold S. Kushner’s book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.¹ This book by Kushner, a conservative Jewish rabbi, wrestles with the question of why evil occurs even in the lives of those who have done nothing to deserve it. The book examines three biblical statements about God’s nature: “God is love,” “God is all-powerful,” and “God is all-knowing.” It concludes that, in light of the experiences of human beings, all three of these statements cannot possibly be true. The options are that God does not truly love us, that He loves us but does not know all that we are experiencing, or that He loves us and knows everything but is powerless to change our circumstances. Kushner concluded that God is all-knowing and

¹Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981).

all-loving, but not all-powerful. He indicated that God would help us if He could, but that some things are simply beyond His control.

Such a “solution” is entirely unsatisfactory to the person who takes seriously the Bible’s revelations about God and His nature. The most basic assumption about God in the Scriptures is that He exists and that He brought everything else into existence. How, then, could He not be powerful enough to change our circumstances? Likewise, if God is not all-powerful, we cannot take seriously the accounts of miraculous occurrences in the Scriptures. In fact, we are left with very little that we can trust at all.

It is better to face the dilemma than to try to erase it. The Old Testament Book of Job is the primary biblical example of an attempt to come to terms with this problem. In it, a man (Job), who is described as the best man in the world at that time (Job 1:1, 8), lost everything that he had—his family, his wealth, his health, and his respect in the community in which he lived. In chapter after chapter of dialogue between Job and his three friends, the book examines all of the usual “easy answers” to the problem of evil, especially the claim that all suffering is in some way a result of evil behavior. None of these “answers” fits Job. The book ends with Job’s being doubly blessed by God, but still not knowing why everything had happened to him. It is an honest attempt to wrestle with the problem that is faced by people around the world every day.

What do we say to those who raise this objection against our faith?

CONSIDERATIONS IN ANSWERING THIS OBJECTION

1. We must acknowledge with all humility and truthfulness that we do not know all of the answers to this question. If the Bible never gives us a clear answer to it, we should not try to invent one. We must also remember that some people ask this question as the result of experiences of deep personal loss. For example, Harold Kushner began his study of the problem of evil because his three-year-old son developed a degenerative disease that would eventually take his life. When people have faced such tragedy, no “easy” answer will satisfy them—and we should not try to give such answers. We must acknowledge the reality of their pain and speak of this problem with

sensitivity and compassion. We do not have all of the answers, and we should frankly acknowledge that fact. Easy answers and an arrogant attitude will only turn sufferers away. Humility and compassion will attract them.

2. Likewise, we should point out to questioners that God did not invent evil. Rather, evil and sin entered the world as the result of Adam and Eve’s sin, and even the creation itself has been corrupted so that “evil” exists within nature (Genesis 3:17–19; Romans 8:18–25). This accounts for the “impersonal” evil that is so often experienced, as well as for “personal” evil. Had humans not sinned, things would have remained in the perfect state in which God created them. However, even though God did not “create” evil and does not always will for it to happen, He does *allow* it—and so the dilemma remains. Why does He not prevent it? We can give no answer other than that God allows the repercussions of what humans have chosen through sin. This sometimes affects the innocent as well as the guilty.

3. The existence of evil is a necessary corollary to free moral choice. In other words, humans could not choose good if evil did not exist, and so we would not be truly free moral beings. According to Genesis 1–3, it was not God’s will for people to experience evil; rather, this came about as a result of their determination to know “good and evil” (Genesis 3:1–7). Also, without evil, how would we know to appreciate that which is good? Part of the problem with the first man and woman is that they did not appreciate the goodness in which they were privileged to live (Genesis 1:31), partly because they had nothing with which to compare it.

4. The evil consequences of disobedience to God have a “parental” effect. They allow us to understand by experience that disobedience to God is not in our best interest and that obedience to God’s commands is for our good. For example, someone who lies or steals and gets caught should learn why God has commanded us to do neither of these things. The hope, then, is that the person’s life will be better as a result, even though the immediate consequences are painful. This does not account for the existence of everything that we might label as “evil,” but it does explain some of it.

5. In the ordinary realm of experience, suffering and pain are important signals to us that

something is wrong and needs correction. Our sensitivity to pain, for instance, tells us that something is amiss so that we can correct it (such as pulling our hand away from a hot stove). Pain causes us to seek medical treatment, so that many illnesses that might kill us if left untreated can be diagnosed and cured. While pain is never enjoyable, it is sometimes helpful.

6. While we often ask why there is evil in the world and sometimes blame God for its presence, we seldom ask, “Why is there so much *goodness* in the world?” How do we account for a mother’s love for her child, for the willingness of people to help one another when nothing compels them to do so, or for the beauty that we see all around us in creation? We seem ready to blame God for suffering, but we fail to praise Him for the good that we experience. We imply that God owes it to us to furnish the good, rather than seeing this as an act of His grace. Once we correct this tendency, it is much easier to have a balanced view of the good and the evil that we experience in life. In the words of Job, “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21).

7. God can work through our suffering to bring about good. The apostle Paul was a man who knew a great deal about suffering. He wrote that “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Romans 5:3, 4; ESV). Peter, in writing to believers who were suffering for their faith, used the image of gold that is purified by fire:

So that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:7).

Like gold refined by fire, people who have endured great suffering in their lives are often much stronger in character than those who have not. This does not lessen the severity of their suffering, but it does show that even suffering can have a positive effect. In a similar way, the pains of childbirth eventually give way to the joy of the birth of the child. Once again, good results from suffering.

The gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ enables us to put the problem of suffering in its true

perspective. God Himself has provided the ultimate solution to the problem of evil through the cross of His Son, Jesus Christ. In this sense, God has shared our suffering with us because of the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. What Jesus suffered on the cross, the Father suffered in heaven. In this way God has provided a way for us to escape this world of sin and death and to dwell in His presence forever. One of the greatest joys of heaven (in addition to being in the presence of the God who created us) will be the absence of suffering and evil (Revelation 21:1–4, 8, 27; 22:14, 15). God is not unaware of our suffering, nor has He failed to love us. Neither is He powerless to do anything about our problems. Eventually, everything will be resolved in a perfect manner for those who put their trust in God’s Son.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

There is no question that the problem of the existence of suffering and evil leads many to turn away from the Christian faith. In their minds, they cannot reconcile the truth that God exists and loves His creatures with the reality of suffering and evil in the world. Such a rejection of faith leaves the objector with the same problem of suffering and evil—but without a resolution to it. Here, then, is the choice: We can either experience suffering and evil in this world with the hope of better things to come because of salvation through Christ, or we can experience suffering and evil with no hope at all.

Each of us must choose. ■ Tommy South

EVIL IN THE WORLD

“Even in evil, that dark cloud that hangs over creation, we discern rays of light and hope, and gradually come to see, in suffering and temptation, proofs and instruments of the sublimest purposes of wisdom and love.”

William Ellery Channing

“Many have puzzled themselves about the origin of evil. I am content to observe that there is evil, and that there is a way to escape from it, and with this I begin and end.”

John Newton