

## Common Challenges to the Christian Faith:

“Doesn’t the existence of evil and suffering disprove the Biblical God?”

---

### Evil and the Bible

- I. The Challenge Stated: (Epicurus as quoted by David Hume in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*)
  - A. “Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent.
  - B. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent.
  - C. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?”
- II. Rebuttal: (Note: I know this only touches on one aspect, but there’s much more out there...)
  - A. Epicurus and Hume both assume there is no fourth option—That God has good reason for the evils He allows, and is working toward the greatest possible good in the end.
  - B. Hume’s hidden assumptions:
    1. What is best for us is happiness now *BUT what if God is more interested in our holiness than in our short term happiness?*
    2. What is best for us is comfort now *BUT what if God is more interested in our character?*
    3. What is best for us is to be free of pain and suffering *BUT what if God uses these to bring us to Him, and grow us in faith and perseverance?*
  - C. Spiritually, and eternally, being comfortable and at peace as we are and apart from God in this life is catastrophic. If we have no motivation, we will not seek Him. Obviously there are other issues and approaches to look at here, but today we’ll have to keep our scope small...
  - D. Not only does the existence of evil and suffering in the world not disprove the existence of God, but we could not even have a standard of what evil is apart from an ultimate standard of Good (I.e. God and his nature).
- III. The Old Testament view of evil and suffering
  - A. **Genesis 1** gives an account of the creation of the world. Five times the passage repeats the refrain “And God saw that it was good” after an act of creation (vs. 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Finally in v.31 it says: “God saw **all** that he had made, and it was very good” (NIV). There was no evil in the original creation—that came later.
  - B. **Genesis 3** gives the account of the fall of man and the entrance into the world of both moral and physical evils.
    1. Cause: Adam ate the forbidden fruit, disobeying the only negative command God gave him, which carried the consequence: “...for when you eat from it you will surely die” (2:17).
    2. Effect:
      - a) Having violated their consciences Adam and Eve immediately felt shame and fear, and tried to cover themselves and hide (3:7-10). Enter the first aspect of suffering into the world...

- b) "Pain in childbearing..." (3:16)
- c) "Cursed is the ground..." (3:17-19), "bondage to decay..." (Rom. 8:19-22)
- d) Death and separation from God (3:22-24, Rom. 5:12ff.)
  - (1) Q. What would have happened if God had allowed sinful man to live indefinitely? Imagine if Hitler, Stalin or Mao had never died... What would the world be like?
- 3. *Note: God didn't make little robots that would do whatever they were programmed to do. He created free moral agents in his own image who could choose to accept or reject Him and his commands. He wants relationship. Real love can only exist where choice exists. But that ability to choose involves the ability to reject...*
- C. Carrot and Stick... **Deuteronomy 28**. Look at Israel's history to see how God had to use suffering to work with them spiritually.
  - 1. "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." (C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p.81)
  - 2. Blessings (Carrot) v. 1-14
    - a) Israel was not sufficiently motivated by the blessings—they apostatized within one generation (Judges 2:10-15)
  - 3. Curses (Stick) v.15-68
    - a) Moderate suffering wasn't enough. The cycle of Judges, and all the way through Israel's captivity in Babylon witnesses this. Ever increasing pain and distress did not bring them back. Eventually it took captivity and exile.
      - (1) Deut. 30:1-4 predicts this.
      - (2) Isaiah 1:5-6. 18-20
      - (3) 2 Chron. 36:15-23
- D. Not all suffering is punishment!
  - 1. **Job**
    - a) God himself witnessed Job's righteousness (Job 1:8, 2:3).
    - b) Job's suffering was a witness to Satan, not punishment for any sin (Job 1:9-12, 2:3-6)
    - c) God rebuked Job's friends, who had insisted Job's suffering was because of his own sin, and that of his family. (Job 42:7-8)
  - 2. Jesus' perspective
    - a) **Luke 13:1-5** — Catastrophe does not show that the sufferers were worse than anyone else, but sin does bring judgment.
    - b) **John 9:1-3** —
      - (1) Personal suffering (like birth defects) does not mean the parents or child sinned (9:2-3).
      - (2) "...This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life..." (9:3)
    - c) **John 11:1-48, 12:9-11** — Lazarus and purpose in death and suffering.
      - (1) Lessons from Lazarus...

- (a) Lazarus “evil” sickness had a good purpose—glorifying Christ and showing who He is (Jn. 11:4-5, 11:40-41).
  - (b) Allowing Lazarus’ death had good purpose—that through his resurrection many might believe (Jn. 11:14-15, 12:9-11).
  - (c) Spiritual death is a far bigger issue than physical death (Jn. 11:23-26).
  - (d) Physical death is not the end... (Jn. 11:25).
  - (e) Jesus felt our pain, and was troubled by our distress (Jn. 11:33-36). God doesn’t enjoy your suffering, but He will allow it for a greater good in you and in the world you impact.
  - (f) Our suffering can be for the benefit of others at times and not just for ourselves. (Jn. 11:40, 45)
- (2) Purpose: John 20:30-31 “...that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name.” Lazarus’ suffering (and that of others) brought opportunity for a witness to who Christ was and was to point people to saving faith. Their pain had a purpose that transcended their own lives.
- IV. Evil and Suffering have their root in the rebellion of human (and angelic) free moral agents. The original creation was “very good,” free from evil and suffering. But God uses the evil and suffering he did not create to work toward our good, our salvation, and his glory. One day the world will be restored/remade (see 2 Pet. 2:10-13) and evil permanently dealt with (Rev. 21:1-8 , 22:1-5).
- A. One takeaway: Be careful not to treat someone as if their suffering were their own fault (unless its cause is clear). Sometimes our suffering is to mold us into better people (more like Christ). Sometimes our suffering, and how God brings us through it, is a witness to those around us, both human and in the heavenly realm.