

HOW COULD A GOOD GOD ALLOW SUFFERING AND EVIL? A BIBLICAL APPROACH TO THE LOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS OF EVIL

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. What is evil?

1.1.1. Moral evil is sin.

1.1.2. Natural evil is what causes suffering and unpleasantness. It is the result of moral evil.

1.2. What are some examples of evil that are (almost) universally outrageous?

1.2.1. Examples of moral evil

1.2.2. Examples of natural evil

1.3. What is the problem of evil?

There is not just one problem of evil. They may be reduced to two major categories:

1.3.1. The logical-intellectual-philosophical problem of evil is the logical tension in the following three statements: (1) God is all-powerful and all-wise, (2) God is all-good, and (3) evil exists.

Premise 1: If God were all-powerful, he would be able to prevent evil.

Premise 2: If God were all-good, he would desire to prevent evil.

Conclusion: So, if God were both all-powerful and all-good, there would be no evil.

Premise 3: But there is evil.

Conclusion: Therefore, there is no all-powerful, all-good God.¹

1.3.2. The emotional-religious-existential problem of evil is the religious and emotional tension people experience when they or those close to them suffer.

¹ Frame, *Apologetics*, 150.

1.4. Why must Christians address the logical and emotional problems of evil?

- 1.4.1. Many non-Christians struggle with accepting Christianity because of the logical problem of evil.
- 1.4.2. Many Christians who have never been troubled by the logical problem of evil suddenly wrestle with it when non-Christians confront them with it.
- 1.4.3. Many Christians who are suffering wrestle with the emotional problem of evil, often asking, “Why, God?”
- 1.4.4. Christians must be able serve those in the above categories.

1.5. What are some challenges to solving the logical and emotional problems of evil?

2. WHAT ARE SOME UNBIBLICAL/INADEQUATE SOLUTIONS TO THE LOGICAL-INTELLECTUAL-PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL?²

2.1. Evil is not real.

2.2. God is not all-powerful.

2.3. This is the best possible world, and evil is necessary for its perfection.

2.4. Evil is a result of peoples’ free will, so God is not accountable for evil.

The will of humans is free only in the sense that they are free to act according to their nature. Humans are not *absolutely* free; that would mean that God is *absolutely* contingent.

2.5. Evil is necessary for people to mature (i.e., build character).

2.6. God is the indirect (not direct) cause of evil, so He is not accountable for evil.

2.7. God is above the law, so He can do what seems evil to other people.

2.8. Non-Christians have no right to question whether God is both all-powerful and all-good.

² This section essentially paraphrases Frame, *Apologetics*, 155–70.

3. WHAT DOES A BIBLICAL APPROACH TO THE LOGICAL-INTELLECTUAL-PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL INCLUDE?

**3.1. Bad things do not happen to good people;
good and bad things happen to bad people.**

3.2. The problem of evil is an argument *for* God, not *against* Him.

3.3. God is not obligated to explain the problem of evil to anyone.

3.4. God (not our sense of justice) is the standard for what He does.

3.5. God ordains and causes evil, but He cannot be blamed for it.

3.6. The logical problem of evil (including providence) involves mystery, requiring that Christians maintain doctrinal tensions in biblical proportion.

DOCTRINE	TENSION	EXPLANATIONS TO RESOLVE THE TENSION
God's Tri-Unity	A. There is one God.	Arians (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses) deny A.
	B. Three persons are called God.	Tritheists deny B.
	C. Those three persons are distinct.	Modalists and Sabellians deny C.
Christ's person	A. Christ is fully God.	Ebionites and Arians deny A.
	B. Christ is fully human.	Gnostics/Docetists and Appollinarians deny B.
	C. Christ is one person.	Nestorians deny C.
The problem of evil	A. God is all-good.	Some Calvinists (e.g., Gordon Clark) qualify A.
	B. God is all-powerful and all-wise.	Finitists (e.g., Edgar S. Brightman) deny B, and open theists qualify B.
	C. Evil exists.	Pantheists (e.g., Benedict Spinoza) and adherents of Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science deny C.
Providence	A. God is absolutely sovereign. (He ordains and causes all things.)	Arminians qualify A, making God absolutely contingent or dependent on humans, and they qualify B, making the "free will" of humans absolute. (Compatibilists affirm both A and B and let the tension stand.)
	B. Humans are morally responsible.	
	C. God is holy, all-good, and never blameworthy.	Some claim that C invalidates A. (Calvinists rightly qualify that God ordains evil but that He is not guilty of sin; He stands behind good and evil asymmetrically.)

3.7. God uses evil for a greater good.

3.8. There was no problem of evil before the fall, nor will there be one in the eternal state.

3.9. God uses natural evil to illustrate how bad moral evil really is, and the right response is repentance.

3.10. The most significant problem of evil is the cross.

4. WHAT DOES A BIBLICAL APPROACH TO THE EMOTIONAL-RELIGIOUS-EXISTENTIAL PROBLEM OF EVIL INCLUDE?

4.1. People who are suffering typically are wrestling *primarily* with the emotional problem of evil (not the logical one).

4.2. Understand how people initially react to suffering.

We must remember that grief normally passes through predictable stages. For example, when someone is suddenly bereaved, it is not uncommon to find such stages of grief as the following, drawn from a useful little book by Granger Westberg: [numbering added]

1. “we are in a state of shock”;
2. “we express emotion”;
3. “we feel depressed and very lonely”;
4. “we may experience physical symptoms of distress”;
5. “we may become panicky”;
6. “we feel a sense of guilt about the loss”;
7. “we are filled with anger and resentment”;
8. “we resist returning to our usual activities”;
9. “gradually hope comes through”;
10. “we struggle to affirm reality.”³

Feinberg shares five of his initial reactions: (1) hopelessness, (2) helplessness, (3) abandonment, (4) anger, and (5) confusion.⁴

³ Carson, *How Long*, 222.

⁴ Feinberg, “A Journey in Suffering,” in *Suffering and the Goodness of God*, 216–20.

4.3. You shouldn't say certain things to people who are suffering.

The first eight are from Feinberg, who shares what is inappropriate to say.⁵

1. Don't say, "There must be some great sin you've committed; otherwise this wouldn't be happening to you."
2. "Another mistake is to focus on the loss of things rather than the loss of people."
3. "Sometimes people try to comfort us by convincing us that what has happened spares us from other problems." "Insensitive speculations about the future" are not helpful.
4. Don't say, "Well, everyone's going to die from something. You just know in advance what it is in your wife's case." That's comfort?
5. "As we fumble for something to say that will comfort our friend or loved one, somehow it seems appropriate to say, 'I know how you must feel at a time like this.' Through my experiences, I have learned how unhelpful this comment can be. One problem is that it isn't true, and the sufferer knows it. Hence, it sounds phony when you say it. . . . What helps is not knowing you feel like I do but knowing that you care!"
6. "My friend replied that I was too focused on various models of God and that I needed to recognize that God is bigger than all those conceptions [of God]." This "treats what is fundamentally an emotional problem as if it were an intellectual problem."
7. Don't say, "When things like this happen, aren't you glad you're a Calvinist? Isn't it great to know that God is ultimately in control of it all, and he's already planned the way out of your problem?" "I am a Calvinist, and I found that comment distressing, not helpful."
8. Don't say, "You aren't spiritually mature until you're happy about this." Feinberg heard an interview on Moody radio of a couple that had just lost their daughter in an auto-accident: "They concluded that even though the loss of their daughter was hard, it was all for the best. I heard that and felt more guilt. It seemed the height of Christian maturity to take life's harshest blows and say that it was good that this had happened. If that was what it meant to be victorious in the midst of affliction, I knew I was far from that. I couldn't rejoice over the evil that had befallen and would befall my family. But I thought I was supposed to, so my sense of inadequacy increased."

In addition to Feinberg:

9. Don't glibly quote Romans 8:28. Not helpful!
10. "Many verbal expressions of encouragement should not be based on the assumption that they must answer an implicit 'Why?' Not everyone asks that question."⁶

⁵ Feinberg, "A Journey in Suffering," in *Suffering and the Goodness of God*, 220–25.

⁶ Carson, *How Long*, 223.

11. “When verbalized answers to anguished cries of ‘Why?’ are required, what and how much we provide will depend largely on what might be called our spiritual diagnosis, that is, our assessment of the needs and capacity of the individual. Some crying ‘Why?’ are not really asking questions; they are simply seeking comfort. Others are asking questions, but cannot at that moment bear more than the briefest reply.”⁷
12. Don’t tell someone that their suffering persists because they are lacking faith in God. That is not always the case, and you simply cannot know that!

4.4. You should do certain things to people who are suffering.

Twelve suggestions: The first seven of these are from Feinberg.⁸

1. “You do have to learn to live with this, but that doesn’t mean you have to like it!”
2. Feinberg’s Dad counseled him, “John, God never promised to give you tomorrow’s grace for today. He only promised today’s grace for today, and that’s all you need!” “I began to readjust my focus from the future to the present.”
3. “Another major factor in helping me to cope, though I didn’t realize it at the time, was seeing that God and others really do care.” “By our words and deeds, we must show those who are hurting that we really care. And, by all means, we must show it by not avoiding those who suffer but by being there, even if only to listen. It is human nature to stay away for fear that we may say the wrong thing. Be there anyway, even if you say nothing. Your presence and willingness to listen say enough. When we keep our distance from those who suffer, we confirm their worst fears that no one cares and no one will help. Show them that someone cares, not only when the initial shock comes but also in the weeks, months, and years that follow. There is a sense in which one never completely recovers from tragedy and always needs the love and concern of others.”
4. “Friends who knew about our situation could point to specific reasons for hope.”
5. “Something else that helped in my situation was focusing on the fact that in spite of what happened, God is good.”
6. “I was reminded of an unpopular but very important biblical truth: things like this happen because we live in a fallen world.”
7. Feinberg had physical problems of his own, which only added to the problem. He wasn’t being productive. “My sense of self-worth is tied in large part to my work and productivity. When I could do little to function, my sense of hopelessness increased. In the midst of this dilemma, the Lord gave me some opportunities to do things that helped other people. This was just what I needed at the time. It gave me a chance to get my focus off of our problems and on someone else’s needs. Even more, it showed

⁷ Carson, *How Long*, 223.

⁸ Feinberg, “A Journey in Suffering,” in *Suffering and the Goodness of God*, 224–31.

me that I still could be useful. . . . There is therapeutic value in getting your eyes off your problems and in seeing again that you can help others.”

Here are additional things to say or do to those who are suffering:

8. When appropriate, remind them that “there is no *necessary* connection between a specific sin and a particular spell of suffering (e.g., the man born blind [John 9]).”⁹
9. When appropriate, remind them that God is with Christians and genuinely sympathizes with them in their suffering.
10. When appropriate, remind them that “suffering is often associated with guilt feelings. . . . Jesus died to take our guilt. . . . Expose false guilt as nothing less than the devil’s lie.”¹⁰
11. “Above all, we must help people to know God better.”¹¹ When appropriate, remind them that suffering Christians must trust God and His word.
12. “We must pray for those who suffer. . . . If God is the God of comfort, he, finally, must provide it—often through human agents, sometimes not, but he must do it.”¹²

5. CONCLUSION

1. When serving someone who has raised the problem of evil with you in some form, tenderly probe to see *which* problem of evil they are primarily concerned about: the logical one or the emotional one? The way you serve them will differ drastically depending on which one they mean.
2. Once you’ve located which problem of evil they mean, you still need biblical wisdom to serve them. There is almost always something behind their questions.
3. Bottom line: We must learn to live with mystery, tension, irony, and paradox because it’s part of the gospel itself. How should Christians apply the gospel to the intellectual and emotional problems of evil?

The Bible is really all about the problem of evil. It shows how evil came into the world (Gen. 3), and it tells us how God sent his Son to deal with it, to “destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). The death of Jesus atoned for the sins of his people, and sin is the root of all evil. So through him all the heavens and the earth will be renewed.

In dealing with the emotional problem of evil, therefore, Jesus is our greatest source of comfort (2 Cor. 1:3-4), our only *ultimate* source of comfort. Without him, evil reigns. But because he has risen from the dead, he has gained the victory over evil, and will

⁹ Carson, *How Long*, 44.

¹⁰ Carson, *How Long*, 224.

¹¹ Carson, *How Long*, 224.

¹² Carson, *How Long*, 225.

come again in triumph. Paul says we should comfort one another with these words (1 Thess. 4:18).

As for the intellectual problem of evil, we must point out that the intellect itself is God's creation, and it must operate according to God's rules. That is, God himself has the right to govern our epistemology. So if we come up with an argument that questions or denies God's existence, we subvert the intellect itself. God often asserts his *authority* when people charge him with evil: see Job 38–42; Matt. 20:13–15; Rom. 9:14–24.

So our intellect, too, is fallen and needs the redemption of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). We need a new heart and a new mind, to see things as they really are. Remarkably, in the new Heavens and new Earth, nobody will raise the problem of evil. They will find it obvious that God is just and true, and they will praise him that his righteous acts have been revealed (Rev. 15:3–4). Why are people no longer troubled by the problem of evil? Perhaps God gives them more information. But he also gives them new hearts and minds. So the gospel provides the best answers to both forms of the problem of evil.¹³

4. The right response is to affirm what God says in the Bible—even if we can't exhaustively explain every facet of it—and trust Him. [Jon Bloom's testimony](#) is a good illustration of what that might be like when you're suffering.

6. RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- Asterisks (*) indicate the most highly recommended resources.
- Both authors and titles are hyperlinked for more information.
- The level of difficulty of each resource is ranked: 1 = introductory; 2 = intermediate; 3 = advanced.

6.1. Books

[Bridges, Jerry](#). *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008. [1. Concise, readable, accurate.]

* [Carson, D. A.](#) *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*. 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006. [1. Outstanding, clear, practical, pastoral. The entire book rewards thoughtful reading, especially chapters 11–13. Chapter 11 condenses and updates the major argument of his Ph.D. dissertation completed at Cambridge University in 1975 and reprinted as *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (2d ed.; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).]

[Erickson, Millard J.](#) "Evil and God's World: A Special Problem." Pages 436–56 in *Christian Theology*. 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998. [2]

[Feinberg, John S.](#) *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*. Edited by John S. Feinberg. Foundations of Evangelical Theology. Wheaton: Crossway, 2001. [2. See esp. chaps. 13–16. Superb defense of compatibilism. Integrates some of Feinberg's previous

¹³ [Frame, Interview](#).

- articles: “God Ordains All Things,” in *Predestination and Free Will* (ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger; Downers Grove: IVP, 1986), 19–43; and “God, Freedom, and Evil in Calvinist Thinking,” in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will* (ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce Ware; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 2:459–83.]
- . *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil*. 3d ed. Wheaton: Crossway, 2004. [3. Large (544 pp.). Revision and expansion of his Ph.D. dissertation (University of Chicago, 1978). Defends seven theses (pp. 19–20). Chapter 14 condenses his *Where Is God?*]
- . *Where Is God? A Personal Story of Finding God in Grief and Suffering*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004. [1. Moving, practical, theologically informed.]
- Ferguson, Sinclair B. *Deserted by God? Hope for All Who Do Not Sense the Lord’s Sustaining Presence During Life’s Most Troublesome Times*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996. [1]
- Flavel, John. *The Mystery of Providence*. 1678. Repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995. [2. Rich. Written by a meticulous Puritan with a writing style that may challenge modern readers.]
- * Frame, John M. “Apologetics as Defense: The Problem of Evil.” Pages 149–90 in *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994. [1. Superb approach, organization, and logic.]
- . “Interview with John Frame on the Problem of Evil.” Interviewed by Andy Naselli. Posted August 20, 2008.
- . “The Problem of Evil.” Pages 160–82 in *The Doctrine of God*. A Theology of Lordship 2. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002. [2. Reorganized and updated version of the previous entry.]
- Grudem, Wayne. “God’s Providence.” Pages 315–54 in *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994. [1. Outstanding introductory discussion. Clear and well organized.]
- Keller, Timothy. “How Could a Good God Allow Suffering?” Pages 22–34, 249–51 in *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Dutton, 2008. [1. Winsome, disarming, engaging. Target audience = non-Christians.]
- McCartney, Dan G. *Why Does It Have to Hurt? The Meaning of Christian Suffering*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998. [1]
- * Morgan, Christopher W. and Robert A. Peterson, eds. *Suffering and the Goodness of God*. Theology in Community 1. Wheaton: Crossway, 2008. [2. Coming Oct. 31, 2008. More info is available [here](#). Outstanding collection of essays. Frame’s essay condenses his chapter in *The Doctrine of God*, and Feinberg’s chapter condenses and updates *Where Is God?*]
- * Piper, John. “Resources on Suffering.” [1–2. Collected sermons, articles, books, interviews, and blog posts. Passionate theology that does not duck or punt on hard questions. Probably the single most useful online resource for suffering.]

- * Piper, John and Justin Taylor, eds. *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2006. [2. Available for free as a PDF. Based on Desiring God's 2005 National Conference, for which audio and video are available [here](#). See especially chapters 1, 3, 4, and the two appendixes by John Piper.]
- Reymond, Robert L. "Why God Is Not the Author or Chargeable Cause of Sin" and "A Biblical Theodicy." Pages 372–78 in *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*. 2d ed. Nashville: Nelson, 1998. [2. Occurs within a chapter concerned primarily with refuting open theism.]
- Schreiner, Thomas R., ed. "Suffering and the Sovereignty of God." *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4:2 (2000). [2. Includes a pastoral Q&A forum. Note Mark Dever's reflections on Job in response to the question, "In what way is our suffering an opportunity to display the goodness of God?" (pp. 108–10).]
- Tada, Joni Eareckson and Steven Estes. *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997. [1. Practical and painfully honest treatment of the emotional problem of evil.]
- Talbert, Layton. *Beyond Suffering: Discovering the Message of Job*. Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2007. [1. Cf. my review in *Trinity Journal* (2007).]
- . *Not by Chance: Learning to Trust a Sovereign God*. Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2001. [1. Cf. my review on [Amazon.com](#) (2002).]

6.2. MP3s

- * Carson, D. A. "On Being Prepared for Suffering and Evil." Parts 1 and 2. [1]
- Dever, Mark. "Losing Everything?" Parts 1, 2, 3, 4. [1. An exposition of Job.]
- Keller, Timothy. "Suffering: If God is good, why is there so much evil in the world?" [1. Corresponds to chapter 2 in *The Reason for God*.]
- Mahaney, C. J. "Suffering and Sovereignty." Parts 1, 2, 3, 4, and PDF outline. [1]
- Piper, John. "Holding on to Your Faith in the Midst of Suffering: Job." Parts 1, 2, 3, 4, Q&A. [1]
- . "Treasuring Christ and the Call to Suffer." Parts 1, 2, 3, 4, Q&A. [1]
- * ———. "The Triumph of the Gospel in the New Heavens and the New Earth." May 24, 2007; June 16, 2008. [1]
- Powlison, David. "Enduring Hardship with the Psalmist." WorshipGod Conference 2008. [1]