

Bible Study # 5: The Problem of Evil

Today we will deal with a philosophical objection to Christianity, that being the problem of evil. The existence of evil has perplexed mankind since the beginning of time, or at least close to it. Countless books and essays have been written about it, many of them composed by the best minds that the world has known. In spite of all the attention this problem has received, no one has given it a complete and totally satisfactory answer. In addition, the best minds that have grappled with the problem are nowhere near any kind of agreement on an explanation for it.

At the same time, however, there are significant truths that we can know about the problem. This study will focus on what we can know about the issue while at the same time acknowledging there is much that we do not understand.

We will confine our study to seven questions. They are:

1. Does the existence of evil disprove the existence of God?
2. How do atheists explain evil?
3. How do the Scriptures explain the existence of evil?
4. Why does God allow suffering in our own lives?
5. Is God unjust in the way he treats us?
6. Does God use our suffering for his purposes and our good?
7. Why did God create a world that he knew would turn to evil.

We begin with the question, does the existence of evil disprove the existence of God? There are those who do say that such is the case, that the reality of evil does disprove the existence of God. These individuals usually state the argument something like this:

If God is good, he would want to eliminate evil.

If God is almighty, he is able to eliminate evil.

Evil exists.

Therefore, either God is not good, or is not almighty, or does not exist.¹

The problem of evil is not merely academic. It is very real. In 2008 prominent Bible scholar, Bart Ehrman, said:

About nine or ten years ago I came to realize that I simply no longer believed the Christian message. A large part of my movement away from the faith was driven by my concern for suffering. I simply no longer could hold to the view—which I

¹ Both Epicurus and David Hume described the problem of evil this way, or at least were said to have done so. There are numerous variations in its wording, but the above language seems to form the basic principles of the argument in most cases.

took to be essential to Christian faith—that God was active in the world, that he answered prayer, that he intervened on behalf of his faithful, that he brought salvation ...²

And Ravi Zacharias said, “Anyone who minimizes the problem of evil doesn’t understand it.”³ The issue clearly has a major impact on how many people see the world. An acquaintance of the author put it this way: “If God was real he would not have allowed my brother to die in Vietnam.” The atheist, Vexen Crabtree, stated the problem of evil as follows: “The existence of a good creator is refuted by the facts of the universe.”⁴

Before going to the assertion that the problem of evil disproves the existence of God, however, we should also ask, “How do atheists deal with the problem of evil?” The necessary answer for atheists is that evil isn’t real; evil does not exist. That is what atheists must say to be consistent with their worldview. If the world consists of nature plus nothing, which is what atheists believe, then evil cannot be real. Evil becomes nothing more than personal preferences. Prominent atheist Richard Dawkins said it this way:

In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.⁵

Dawkins also said:

We live in a world where there is no evil and no good. All we have is DNA, and we dance to its music.⁶

Dawkins is consistent in what he says, but no one can live this way. In his tweet sent out several days after the San Bernardino terrorist attack, however, Richard Dawkins decried religions that “promote violence,” while responding to the massacre in San Bernardino. But on what grounds can Dawkins object to violence? He is assuming that the kind of violence we have recently witnessed is evil. So Dawkins, himself, can’t live in the world he supposedly believes in.

Similarly C.S. Lewis said that before he converted to Christianity he believed that the existence of evil disproved the existence of God. He believed that, said Lewis, until he realized that evil couldn’t be real without the violation of a moral standard of some kind, and a moral standard

² <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/blogologue/2008/04/why-suffering-is-gods-problem.html>. It should be noted that Ehrman gave up Biblical inerrancy long before he gave up Christianity.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7-gP1gC8gM>

⁴ <http://www.vexen.co.uk/religion/theodicy.html>

⁵ Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, Science Masters Series, 1996.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7-gP1gC8gM>

couldn't be real without a moral standard-giver. Consequently, said Lewis, I realized that my argument against God actually forced me to acknowledge that he existed.⁷

The problem of evil is actually a greater problem for atheists than for Christians. The atheist is totally caught. Either he denies his worldview and recognizes evil as real, or he denies common knowledge, his conscience and his personal experience and says evil is not real. He has no other options

Going to the issue itself for Christians, is it true that the problem of evil disproves the existence of God? No, it is not. The foremost authority on this matter in our time is likely Christian philosopher, Alvin Plantinga, of Notre Dame. Some years ago *Time* magazine described Plantinga as being “widely regarded as the world’s most important living Christian philosopher.”⁸

According to Plantinga, the defect in the argument that evil disproves the existence of a loving God lies in the mistaken assumption that an almighty God can do anything. Can an almighty God create logical contradictions, for example? Can God create a world that both exists and doesn't exist at the same time? Can God create free agents who can do what they choose and can only do what God wants at the same time?

As Plantinga sees it, it may be that God can only do that which is consistent with his nature. It may be, for instance, that God cannot lie and cannot be evil since God is truth and good. It may be that he cannot be evil and good at the same time.

It may be, says Plantinga, that when God created persons—agents that are free, it may be that what happened in the world was then largely up to them. So the question is: Could God create a world with free agents where there would be no possibility of evil occurring? Plantinga says, as far as we know, it may be that such a world is a logical contradiction, which is contrary to God's nature, and is a world that could not be created.

By analogy, what if you were living in America 200 years ago in a state where slavery was legal. And what if you owned a slave whom you wished to set free, but you had found the slave to be very useful. Could you set the slave free and at the same time be assured that the now former-slave would do anything you asked? Obviously you could not. Perhaps the creation of man was like that. Perhaps God's creation of free agents required that they had the capacity to disobey him.

The overall conclusion of Plantinga is not to say what God did do, or could do, but to say that as far as our understanding goes, there is no genuine contradiction in recognizing the existence of a creator God who is also good.⁹ As mentioned above, the problem of evil is a greater problem for atheists than for Christians. It seems odd that those whose materialistic worldview denies the

⁷ Lewis develops this argument in detail in his book, *Mere Christianity*, Available from Harperone, 2001.

⁸ *Time*, April 5, 1980.

⁹ The author had the privilege of studying under Alvin Plantinga some years ago at a six week summer seminar. The one topic was the problem of evil. For that reason, the author speaks from extensive personal experience in summarizing Plantinga's views.

reality of evil—also say that the existence of evil disproves the existence of God. Obviously, you can't have it both ways.

From the Book of Genesis, we can see God created man in his imag., in perfect holiness. God told Adam and Eve they could eat the fruit of any tree—except one. All the trees God made were good. The fruit of all the trees was good. In fact, God emphasized the unqualified goodness of his creation by stating, at the end of several creation days, that what he had made was good.

The one and only question was whether or not Adam and Eve would obey God. The question is similar to one faced by David the king. He could have had any unmarried woman in Israel—anyone he took a fancy to—but no, he had to pick one who was married. The question was strictly one of obedience.

Adam and Eve knew what God had said, but they chose to disobey him. "The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die'" (Genesis 3:2-3). Unfortunately Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and mankind has continued to disobey him ever since.¹⁰

Paul summarized the tragic consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience when he said, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). Adam and Eve's disobedience had profound consequences on mankind. The nature of being human had changed. In Romans 8:7, Paul said: "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." Man was now an enemy of God and could only be restored to fellowship with him by means of a new birth of faith created by the Holy Spirit.¹¹

Genesis is emphatic in saying that everything God created was good. Genesis further clarified that evil came into the world because of man's disobedience. Some of the angels had disobeyed God too. Saint Peter said, "God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment" (II Peter 2:4). So we see that evil in our world is the result of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. They had been influenced by Satan.

But what about pain and suffering in our own lives? Why does God allow that to occur? Why doesn't He protect us from illnesses and needless pain? Why does He allow bad things to happen to good people? This question is the focus in what may be the oldest existing book in all human history, that being the Book of Job.¹²

¹⁰ See, FC, Solid Declaration, I. Original Sin.

¹¹ See John 3:1-21.

¹² We speak here of the date of writing, not the dates of the events described. Job has the most Hebrew words that appear nowhere else in available recorded literature, including the Bible, suggesting that the time of its writing is the oldest book that we have.

Job was a good man who lost almost everything.¹³ He lost his possessions. His children and heirs were all killed. His good health was replaced with boils and open sores that tormented him, and even his wife told him he should “curse God and die.”

Three of Job’s friends then come to him to offer their “help.” The three friends were convinced that Job would not be suffering as he was unless he had committed some heinous sin. They repeatedly urged him to “come clean” and repent of whatever it was that he had done. Job, however, was adamant in insisting he had not committed any awful and particular sin that would warrant the suffering he was experiencing. The reader of the book knows from the book’s early chapters that Job was correct in this viewpoint.

An important lesson in Job, therefore, is that Job was not suffering because of some particular sin on his part. It is the same lesson Jesus taught when he said: “Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:4-5). The lesson is the same for us: Our suffering is not necessarily a consequence of some particular sin on our part. But we, also, need to repent and be forgiven of any and all sins we have committed.

So if Job’s intense suffering was not the result of some sin on his part, then why did God allow him to experience such extraordinary pain and suffering? Job answered that question by concluding that God must be unjust. Job went so far as to ask God to give him a hearing as in a court of law. Job said that if God would give him such a hearing, he would then prove himself righteous and prove God wrong regarding the way he was being treated.

In doing so, Job became the precursor of all who believe that they understand matters like justice, goodness and divine power better than God does. All those who say that the existence of evil, pain and suffering disproves the existence of a loving God are actually placing themselves above God in making their judgment. They have a pride problem much more than an existence of evil problem. People don’t reject God because of evil outside of themselves. They reject God because of their own evil, pride being paramount.

As we know from the Book of Job, God did give Job a hearing. At that hearing, God’s first question for Job was this, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (Job 38:4). At that point the debate was over. Job immediately realized that for him to stand in judgment over the almighty and creator God was the height of foolishness and arrogance. Several chapters later God compared Job to the dinosaur and SuperCroc that he had made. God did so to demonstrate to Job, and to us, that we are very small in comparison to God’s other creatures and we are not in a position to pass judgment on the God who made them.

So why did God allow Job to be afflicted the way that he was? We can answer that question only in part in that we can see that God refined Job with fire; God made Job into a much better person

¹³ Job is pictured as a “good” man in a relative sense; he was “good” compared to other sinful people. He is not pictured as morally upright before God’s holy law. Romans 3:23 says: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

than he was before his suffering, possessing far more knowledge, wisdom and understanding than he had had before. (A little humility didn't hurt him either.)

The same is true for the suffering God's children experience today. Romans 8:28 says: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." That is God's promise to us, and when he says, "all things," he means just that; he means that he will see to it that everything that happens to us, including all the pain and suffering we endure, will work to our benefit.

God's message to us is the same as his message to Job, namely: "You need to trust me." "You may think that you know better. You don't. Just trust me." To all his people who suffer, through Paul he said:

But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:37-39).

And Job, as the backdrop to all his suffering and questioning, stood on this confession as stated by him:

"Oh, that my words were recorded,
that they were written on a scroll,
Oh that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead,
or engraved in rock forever!
I know that my redeemer lives,
and that in the end He will stand on the earth
And after my skin has been destroyed,
Yet in my flesh I will see God;
I myself will see Him
with my own eyes—I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me! (Job 19:23-27)

Yes, God's children experience grief, pain and suffering, but we do so trusting in Him—trusting that all our suffering will be used for that which is good, and knowing that we await the final chapter in human history which John described as follows:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain: the first things have passed away. And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21: 3-5).

Some will ask, why doesn't God do something about suffering and evil? We say, he has. He sent his Son, Jesus, to live and die on the cross for us so that our sins could be forgiven and we could spend eternity with Him in heaven.

We have, however, one final question to ask: If God knew that Adam and Eve would disobey him and bring evil into the world as they did, why did he create them? God could have chosen to simply not do it. In answer, we have to admit that we really don't understand why. His Word doesn't answer that question for us. We do know, however, as John 3:16 states, "For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." God loves us so much that He gave his Son to die on the cross for us so that we could be forgiven and could receive Him as Savior and Lord, united with Him as a bride is united to her beloved in marriage and who could live with Him, face to face in His presence, for all eternity.

When God created us, He knew we would disobey him. When God created us, He could see the future, and He could see his chosen King of Israel, David, murdering a good man and taking his wife for his own. When God created us, He could see Peter cursing and swearing that he did not know Jesus, God's own Son. When God created us, He could see His Son hanging on the cross and crying out: "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? That is to say, My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?"¹⁴ When God created us, He knew who we would be and what we would do. He knew the pain and suffering we would bring upon each other—and upon Him—and He created us anyway. Do we know why God created us in view of all this? We do not. We know that He loves us so much that He gave up His one and only Son for us on the cross. We do know that by creating us God was willing to pay a huge price. If God wanted us to know more than that, He would have told us. Jesus opened the door of Paradise for us when he said, "It is finished." What more do we need to know?

¹⁴ Matthew 27:46

