



Series: It's Hard to Believe

Date: October 8, 2023

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Title: How could a good God allow evil & suffering?

Good morning, Mercy Church! It's an honor to join you guys this morning. I pastor TJC in Lebanon, TN. I planted the church 17 years ago, and I also serve with a ministry called Knowing Jesus Ministries. We exist to resource churches to help fight for the hearts and minds of the next generation. I live in North Carolina for several years of my life at Ft Bragg, NC. I was in the 82nd Airborne Division. I'm married with 3 kids: Kaleb, Kaleigh, and Kyra.

According to a study conducted by sociologist at the University of Connecticut, people who had identified as Christians but de-converted cited the number one reason as...they could not get answers to their doubts and questions. In fact, one of those surveyed (obviously still angry) said, "Christians always use the word 'faith' as their last word when they are too stupid to answer a question." And this is a fair critique of many people's experiences. They have questions, and often, we as Christians and churches fail to provide answers. And many walk away concluding the reason for that is that there are no answers.

There are many frequent questions and objections people have that cause barriers to Christianity. Some ask, "**How can there only be one way to God?**" or "**Are science and religion compatible?**" Today I want to focus on the question that is often most personal for people: "**How could a good God allow evil & suffering?**"

Many use this question as a reason and argument against the existence of God. The argument is essentially that a God who loves us and has the power to rid the world of evil and suffering would do it, but sense it hasn't been done, that God doesn't exist. In other words, the presence of evil and suffering is a proof for some that God can't exist.

Proverbs 18:17 — "The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him."

Lots of accusations are hurled against God's existence because of things like evil and suffering. It sounds reasonable to say if God existed and loves us and has power and knows everything, then He would rid the world of suffering and evil. But since the world is full of it, God must not exist. It may seem right, until you cross-examine it.



STORY: Several years ago, I sat down with a guy who was an atheist to talk about beliefs and worldview issues. He began by peppering questions at me about things in the Bible, miracles, etc. I answered those questions, and gave what I believed to be satisfactory answers, but he would never address my answer, he would just move to a new question. I quickly realized that this was the way our conversation was going to go, so I changed directions. I went from answer questions, to asking questions. Amazingly, he wasn't quite as armed with answers to account for his worldview as he was equipped to question other people's. So I asked questions and he struggled to account for a universe that is fine-tuned, has laws of physics, laws of logics, mathematical precision, beauty, etc. He could feel he wasn't doing very good in the "debate" and so he appealed to a tragic story.

He is in the law enforcement community and he responded one evening to a call from a home. When he arrived, there was an elderly woman lying on the floor dead. She had fell and hit her head, and it was severely damaged. And the husband was wheelchair bound, and in his attempt to get to his wife, he fell over, and was unable to do anything except for lie there and watch her die. He then looked at me, with tears in his eyes, and he said, "Where was God in that situation? How could there be a God who lets such a thing happen?"

So I let the question and the moment hang in the air. I let the gravity of his story be felt. And then I said, "You seem to be really moved by what you experienced. You seem to be saying you think it was tragic, is that right?" And he looked at me with a weird face like, "Yeah, duh." And I looked him dead in his eyes and asked, "Who cares? Why does it bother you? She's just a puddle of atoms on the floor. It's no different than knocking over the jug of atoms you call Orange Juice off the counter and onto the floor." He looked at me with a look of disgust and was like, "You are a Christian, and you are asking who cares about an elderly lady who fell on the floor died with her disabled husband stuck there to watch?" I quickly interjected, "No, here's the thing: I do care, and I think it's awful. What I can't understand is how you, as someone who doesn't believe in God, who thinks we're all just matter in motion, cosmic accidents, can make sense of caring." He was like, "Are you saying I don't care?" I said, "No, I believe you do care. What I am saying is that if what you believe about the world and God is true, you have no basis for caring. Nothing bad happened when she fell and died. Nothing tragic happened when the husband sat and watched it with tears streaming down his cheeks. It wasn't "bad" or "tragic" it just was. It just happened. As the saying goes: Stuff happens." That's how it goes, right?



I could see the lightbulb come on. He finally grasped what I was saying. He understood that his own worldview did not give him a basis for saying something was evil or that suffering was bad. It is a worldview that is bankrupt in accounting for the very real human experience of pain and suffering. So I quickly transitioned to a more of a pastoral position. I wasn't there to score points or win a debate, I wanted to win his heart. I explained to him that the reason he cared was because he was made in the image of God and so is the woman he saw lying there. The reason it mattered is because we know that this is not what the world is supposed to be. The world is broken. I explained that it was one of the reasons Jesus came and died on the cross. He came to redeem the world. He came to put a broken world right. At the end of the day, he did not trust Christ. For the that occasion, the mouth of the scoffer was stopped, but he soon hardened his heart and suppressed the truth of God in unrighteousness. And still to this day he is an atheist. But on that day, he knew his argument that God could not exist if evil and suffering existed did not hold up.

Here's something everyone here needs to grasp: **If there is no God, then there are no such things as evil and suffering.** If all there is a universe of matter banging around against other pieces of matter, and none of it has purpose or design, then there is no evil or suffering. If

naturalism is true, then one group killing another group or enslaving another group, is not bad or evil, it's just the strong eating the weak. Survival of the fittest would shrug and say "Oh well." But that's not at all how we respond to pain, suffering, and evil in the world. We respond with hearts that long for a world free of those things. We long for a world made right. We respond as if something has gone tragic wrong, not as if we are just matter clashing on matter.

So follow me here: if suffering and evil are not a proof that God doesn't exist, but rather an evidence that He does, then how are we to rightly understand a world in which God permits suffering and evil? That's what we'll spend the rest of our time on today. It is vital that we grasp that just because we can't see or imagine a good reason why God might allow something to happen doesn't mean there can't be one. If you have a God great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in the world, then you have a God great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't/don't know. You can't have it both ways.

Genesis 50:15-21

vs 15 —



What sort of evil did Joseph's brother do to him? They were jealous of their father's love for him and of the dreams Joseph shared with them, so they determined to kill him. Instead of killing him, they sold him into slavery. So they betray their brother and set him on trajectory of several years of difficulties.

He would be sold to Potiphar in Egypt, but Potiphar's wife would make a charge that Joseph dishonored her by trying to forcefully sleep with her. In reality, it was the opposite. Yet Joseph is arrested.

He's in jail for several years before eventually being released because he interprets a dream for the Pharaoh. He is elevated to the place of governing over the collection of harvests and the distribution of it during the famine. So Joseph becomes prominent. He saves his brothers and family by providing for them during the famine. But now that Jacob has died, they are convinced that Joseph will get his revenge. That is why they send this message.

vs 16-18 —

The brothers remind Joseph of his father's plea for him to forgive his brothers. Then they themselves ask again for mercy and cast themselves at his feet to be his servants.

vs 19-20 —

Joseph did not see it as his place to play God over them by taking their lives. Instead, he says, "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." What the brothers did, what Potiphar's wife did, what the cup bearer did in forgetting Joseph interpreted the dream was all evil. Joseph suffered greatly. Yet, Joseph said, "God was at work for good." In the midst of the suffering, God was at work.

How? Well, through Joseph's series of hardships and trials, God was positioning him to eventually be at the right hand of Pharaoh. Why is that significant? Not for Joseph's comfort and convenience but to uphold his promises to build Abraham into a great nation. The family of Abraham, the nation of Israel, is a whopping 70 people. Not much of a nation. But this famine threatens to wipe them out. So how are they spared? Through the famine relief provided by Egypt. Who is over the famine relief in Egypt? Joseph, the brother they sold into slavery who has wound up by the providence of God in the role he is in.



This is not lost on Joseph. He now sees that what they intended for evil, God meant for good. God was at work in all these situations over the years, that Joseph did not necessarily see at the time, but understood now.

vs 21 —

This is why Joseph is in this role. He is provider and protector of his people. Ultimately, he is serving the role God has put him. A role God placed him in through a series of evil acts and the personal suffering of Joseph.

John Piper once said, **“God is always doing 10,000 things in your life, and you may be aware of three of them.”**

The point of this quote, and even the story of Joseph, is to remind us that God is at work in our lives in ways we cannot comprehend. And yes, the reality of pain and evil are real, and they hurt, but that does not mean God is not there. In fact, in His infinite wisdom, God is even at work in and through those things in the world.

Our story

Some of you may know our family’s story, with our son Kaleb, and many of you do not. [**Share Kaleb’s story**] I bring that up today to tell you that this is not just an

academic exercise or intellectual games for me. This question of evil and suffering cuts right to my heart and life. It matters to me that God has a plan He is working out in the world, and that evil and suffering do not thwart those plans but are often instruments God uses to bring them about.

It is right to see the pain and hurt and evil in the world and hate it. It is right to long for a world put right. But the reality of suffering and evil is not solved by concluding God doesn’t exist. In fact, you end of sawing off the branch you’re sitting on when you say that. If God does not exist, then neither does your idea of evil and suffering. So we need a better answer than “God doesn’t exists” to deal with the pain of suffering and evil in the world.

The confidence we have as Christians, is not only that God is at work in our suffering and evil in the world but came to earth to deliberately put himself on the hook of human suffering.

Close:

Christianity alone among the world religions claims that God became uniquely and fully human. In Jesus Christ, God came in the flesh and knows firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, mourning, torture, and imprisonment. In fact, on the cross, Jesus went beyond



even the worst human suffering and experienced cosmic rejection and pain that exceeds ours. Why did he do this? He came on a rescue mission for creation. He came to pay for our sins so that he can end evil and suffering without ending us.

If we ask the question, “Why does God allow evil and suffering to continue?” and we look at the cross of Jesus, we still won’t know the exact answer to this. However, we will know what the answer isn’t. It can’t be that He doesn’t love us. It can’t be that He is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that He was willing to take it on Himself. God takes evil in the world so serious, that He promises to one day to eradicate it from His creation and to make all things new.

Jesus came to purchase a future for us that is free from evil and suffering. That purchase came by enduring that evil and suffering first-hand at the cross. So we trust that God is far wiser than we are, and that He can redeem evil and suffering that exists in the world. And we look to the promise that is ours in Christ Jesus, that one day it will finally be no more.

PRAY