

The Question of Evil

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

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Genesis 1:27-28, 31 (NRSV)

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” . . . And it was so. ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Job 4:1-2, 7-8; 38:1-4; 40:1-2 (New Living Translation)

[After Job has lost everything his friends come to sit with him in silence for seven days. Then they make the mistake of opening their mouths.]

Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied to Job:

²“Will you be patient and let me say a word? For who could keep from speaking out?

⁷“Stop and think! Does the innocent person perish? When has the upright person been destroyed? ⁸My experience shows that those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the same.”

[After long discussions of all the possible reasons for Job’s suffering, God arrives with a word of his own.]

Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind:

²“Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? ³Brace yourself, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.

⁴“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much.”

Then the LORD said to Job, ²⁶“Do you still want to argue with the Almighty? You are God’s critic, but do you have the answers?”

Romans 8:18-25 (NRSV)

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Could there really be an all-powerful, all-good God when this world is filled with so much tragedy and suffering? Why doesn't God do something about it?!

The apparent contradiction in the coexistence of evil and a good God is the most common challenge thrown at Christians by skeptics. Historically, it has been the most persistent argument against the existence of the God revealed in Scripture and proclaimed by his followers.

This isn’t hard to understand. Look around. Pick up a newspaper. Check the internet. Turn on a TV. Wherever we turn we are bombarded by images of evil and wrong inflicted on innocent people. Where does it all come from? How could there so much be wrong in a world supposedly created and cared for by an all-powerful, all-good deity? Perhaps this deity just isn’t powerful to do something about it. Or perhaps this deity isn’t really as good as we think he is.

You get the picture. First, understand that this is only a problem for monotheistic religions. If you believe that there are many gods, then the wrongs are simply inflicted by one or another of the lesser-deities. In fact, you might live your life mostly trying to stay out of

their way, as many of the ancient peoples did. In a polytheistic religion, there is simply no single all-powerful, all-good deity whom you could accuse.

And if you are basically a pantheist (everything is divine), then the many wrongs are simply just how things are. There is no one at whom you could point your finger in blame. In fact, you might even believe that all this is just an illusion.

If you are a Gnostic, then this world was made by a second-rate sort of god who botched the job. Hardly the picture of an all-powerful, all-good god. Such a bumbling deity needs our pity, not our accusations.

The “problem of evil,” as it is often called, is a problem only for those who believe that there is only one god who made everything there is. Hence, it is a “problem” only for Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

Before we go further, let’s talk about the meaning of “evil.” Webster’s is helpful here. “Evil” is defined as “morally reprehensible” and “the fact of suffering misfortune and wrong.” These are often referred to as “moral evil” and “natural evil.” Moral evil consists of the many wrongs we humans inflict on one another. Natural evil is the suffering inflicted by natural forces such as hurricanes, earthquakes, disease, and so on. Humans have the power to lessen the damage and suffering that goes with such events, but we don’t inflict them on one another, or at least not most of the time.

Starting at the beginning

I included the passage from Genesis as a reading today because it is the place where the problem of evil first arises. God created everything there is. Everything. Before God created, there was nothing. God didn’t need any raw materials or a place to begin. God simply created.

And God pronounces his creation as good. Every last bit of it. Every corner. Just as God is good, so is his creation.

So where does evil come from? After all, surely it exists, doesn’t it? We see evidence of moral and natural evil every day. So if God created everything, didn’t God create evil as well?

Yet, God surely *can’t* be the author of evil if God is truly good and loving. Hence, Christian theologians have always been careful to say that “evil” is not created. Evil is not a “thing” like a chair or even kindness. Evil is simply nothingness. Evil is the absence of the good. Referring to “evil” is a way of referring to the absence of the good. Evil can never create anything; it can only destroy.

But could evil be destroyed? Since evil hasn’t been created, we can speak of its “destruction” in this way. Evil is destroyed when the good is enlarged. Think if it like turning on a light. The darkness is simply banished – it is simply no longer dark. Like evil, darkness isn’t really created, it is the absence of light. More light = less darkness. More good = less evil.

So, what is the origin for all the evil acts we perpetrate on one another, the moral evil that rages across the planet? The biblical answer is that they originate in our free will. The biblical claim is that God created us in his image with the free will to do what is good and to do what is not good, i.e., what is evil. You and I make a myriad of these choices every day, some big and some seemingly so small that they go unnoticed. Do we act out of the interest of others (that’s good) or our own interests (not good)? Are we generous (good) or stingy (not good). Admittedly, we usually reserve the word “evil” for the big stuff and almost always for the wrongs done by others. But if we understand that evil is the lessening of what is good, than we can begin to understand that whether we are talking about “wrongs” or “injustice” or “evil,” we are talking about those acts that diminish goodness.

But what about “natural evil” and all the suffering that goes with hurricanes and such? Here, we come to a pretty astonishing biblical claim. In the passage from Romans 8, Paul says that all creation is in bondage, awaiting its own redemption, Creation is in labor pains, waiting for the day when all will be put right. Thus, in the biblical view it isn’t just us humans who need to be transformed so that we can love God and neighbor, but all the cosmos awaits its own renewal and restoration. Profound indeed were the consequences of humanity’s rebellion against God.

But . . .

But all that said, we still rage at the suffering and injustices that surround us. There is something profoundly wrong with a world in which a child gets cancer. Philosophies and theologies don't really get us very far. We look to God and ask why. Why don't you do something about this? Why don't you save this little girl?!

Many people think that the book of Job provides answers here. Job is a good man who loses everything because of a wager between God and Satan. He wants answers as to why all the terrible things have happened to him and his family. But he gets none. When God arrives on the scene, it is simply to remind Job that God is God and Job is not. Who is he to demand answers of his creator?

In the end, the story of a Job is a story of trust and faith. Will Job trust in God even in the midst of his suffering and pain? It is the same question you and I face. Will we trust God even in the face of our own suffering, our own unanswerable questions? Will we trust God's promises that, in the end, we will enjoy a renewed and transformed world free from tragedy, illness, suffering, and even death? Will we trust that God is all-powerful and all-loving even though, at times, it doesn't seem possible to us?

The God-Who-Suffers

Like so much else in our admittedly odd proclamation to the world, all these questions come to Jesus on that cross. We easily proclaim that Jesus is God incarnate; we just wrapped up another Christmas. But how often do we stop to contemplate that this God whom we proclaim really and truly suffered, just as the rest of humanity suffered? Or that his mother suffered as she stood at the foot of the cross and watched her tortured son die a humiliating death? Or that his Father suffered as his only begotten son met the worst that fallen humanity has to offer? That the one through whom, in whom, and for whom all things were created . . . yes, that One suffered and died.

We throw our accusations at God, failing to grasp that God has already received the worst from us. Bishop N. Thomas Wright put it this way:

“The Gospels thus tell the story, unique in the world's great literature, religious theories, and philosophies: the story of the creator God taking responsibility for what's happened to creation, bearing the weight of its problems on his own shoulders. As Sydney Carter put it in one of his finest songs, 'It's God they ought to crucify, instead of you and me.' Or, as one old evangelistic tract put it, the nations of the world got together to pronounce sentence on God for all the evils in the world, only to realize with a shock that God had already served his sentence. The tidal wave of evil crashed over the head of God himself. The spear went into his side like a plane crashing into a great building. God has been there. He has taken the weight of the world's evil on his own shoulders. This is not an explanation. It is not a philosophical conclusion. It is an event in which, as we gaze on in horror, we may perhaps glimpse God's presence in the deepest darkness of our world, God's strange unlooked-for victory over the evil of our world; and then, and only then, may glimpse also God's vocation to us to work with him on the new solution to the new problem of evil.”

Jesus' own suffering shows us the incomprehensible extent of God's love for each of us. “God so loved the world that he gave his only son . . .” There is no one for whom I would allow my own son to be crucified. I am simply not capable of loving as God loves. In contrast, even in the most terrible circumstances of our lives, it is God's concrete love expressed in Jesus' suffering that grounds our own worth.

Each of us is defined by God's love for us. It is God's love and our knowing that we are loved, that not only sustains us through suffering but enables us to put it behind us, always pressing forward to the future. Just as Jesus' crucifixion is the concrete expression of God's love for us, Jesus' resurrection is the concrete affirmation, indeed fulfillment, of our own eventual freedom from evil and suffering.

The question for us is the same question that Job had to face. Will we trust this God, this strange and unexpected God-Who-Suffers, with all our questions and our hurt and our anger?

Review: Our beliefs and convictions

Certain questions get to the heart of what we really believe about our world, about God, and about ourselves. Yet, even here, we often get off on the wrong foot. What is it that we believe? Why do we believe it? What do we mean by “believe?” A simple intellectual affirmation or a deeply held conviction?

In a recent review of Dallas Willard’s new book, *Knowing Christ Today: Why we can trust spiritual knowledge*, John Ortberg points us to Michael Novak’s description of three different kinds of convictions: *public* convictions, *private* convictions, and *core* convictions.

“Public convictions are those beliefs that we try to get other people to think we believe whether or not we really do. It is what happens when politicians say, ‘This is the greatest nation on earth,’ when in reality they are not sure. Private convictions are more subtle. These are beliefs that I may *think* I hold in the abstract, but when circumstances allow them to be tested it turns out that I don’t really believe them. For instance, when I am in church listening to a sermon I may think I believe, “it is more blessed to give than to receive;” I give mental and emotional assent to it, but when I look at the way I live, it becomes clear I do not actually believe this.

Core convictions, then, are what Dallas would call our ideas about the way things really.¹ And he notes that we always live at the mercy of these ideas. I cannot violate, for example, my belief in the law of gravity. My actions are always a result of my purposes and my convictions about the way things really are. . . . Our public convictions may be bogus, our private convictions may be fickle, but our lives will always reflect our core convictions.”

Ortberg’s larger point in his essay is that churches settle for shaping members’ private convictions, rarely helping them to unearth and transform their core convictions. Hence, discipleship programs languish and even worship attendance becomes optional. Get any group of church leaders together and they’ll tell you how difficult it really is to help people become more genuine disciples of Jesus Christ. Rarely however, will those leaders diagnose the problem as well as Ortberg and Willard.

¹A related idea is that of “worldview.” Your worldview provides your answers to the most important questions about life. Everyone has a worldview, whether they give it much thought or can articulate it. Have you ever gotten in an argument that seems to go on and on until someone says, “That’s just how things are!!” Well, you’ve run right into their worldview, this set of deeply held convictions about how things really are.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by talking about Job. He has suffered terribly, losing everything – all for no apparent reason. Assume that you are one of Job’s friends. You’ve come to comfort him and the conversation inevitably turns to the explanation for Job’s sufferings. What possible explanations might you suggest? What explanations might you hear from others? What is your reaction to God’s pronouncements that the answers are unknowable and that it is foolish for us even to ask?
2. What do you think is God’s role in the world’s evil and suffering? Share some things you’ve heard people say about God when confronted by tragedy, such as “this is all part of God’s plan.” How do these statements make you feel about God? What would you say to them?
3. How can God be all-powerful and all-loving and yet there be such pain in this world? Could it be that he is not as powerful as we think, as some people suggest? Or might God not be as loving as we think, as others suggest? How do we hold together our proclamation that God truly *is* good, that he *is* all-powerful and all-loving? What would you say to those who reply that given the world’s suffering, this is so much sentimental nonsense? How is the cross a response to such charges?
4. Finally, you might reflect on how hard it is for us to simply trust God with what we don’t understand? Why is it so difficult? How can we become more trusting of God?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 1:1-2:3 God creates the world and creates it good.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Job 3 Job curses the day he is born and expresses some of our own feelings in the face of suffering and evil.</p>
<p>Wednesday, John 15:1-17 On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus speaks to his disciples about true love (see v. 13).</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Peter 3:8-22, 4:12-19 The early Christians were well-acquainted with suffering, even suffering for doing good.</p>
<p>Friday, Micah 4:1-5; Revelation 21:1-8, 22:1-5 The full consummation of God's restoration project are imaginatively depicted in these passages.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

