

SESSION

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WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN?

Opening prayer

O merciful Father, who has taught us in your holy Word that you do not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men: Look with pity upon the sorrows of your servants for whom our prayers are offered. Remember them, O Lord, in mercy, nourish their souls with patience, comfort them with a sense of your goodness, lift up your countenance upon them, and give them peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

(The Book of Common Prayer, p. 831)

Basically every meaningful conversation about religion addresses the question “Why?”

- ❖ Why does evil exist?
- ❖ Why is there so much suffering and pain?
- ❖ Why do bad things happen to good people?

It is a question that all of us have asked at one time or another

- ❖ After an inexplicable accident
- ❖ A devastating diagnosis
- ❖ An untimely death
- ❖ A natural disaster

In these kinds of circumstances it is understandable, it is natural, it is human, to ask “Why?”

And that “Why?” is a fundamental question of faith; in fact it is one of the greatest struggles of our faith. We are forced to ask “Why?” because what we see in the world comes into conflict with what we believe about God.

- ❖ Traditionally, people have believed that God is:
 - Omnipotent: all-powerful
 - Omniscient: all-knowing
 - Omnibenevolent: all-loving; all-good
- ❖ But if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, then why do bad things happen to good people? Wouldn't an all-loving, all-good God want to remove all suffering and pain? And if God wants to remove all suffering and pain, wouldn't an all-powerful God be able to do so?

We are not, of course, the first people to ask these kinds of questions. This has always been a fundamental question of faith. In fact, there is even a name for this kind of questioning: theodicy. Theodicy is the branch of theology and philosophy that attempts to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering with what we know and believe about God. Theodicy is church-speak for asking the question “Why?”

Over the centuries, Christians have come up with lots of answers to that question, some far less satisfactory than others.

Explanations include:

- ❖ People deserve what they get and get what they deserve. God causes people to suffer because of something they did, because of some sin they committed
 - Bible verses
 - Tell the innocent how fortunate they are, for they shall eat the fruit of their labors. Woe to the guilty! How unfortunate they are, for what their hands have done shall be done to them. (Isaiah 3:10-11)
 - No harm happens to the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble. (Proverbs 12:21)
 - Example: We've all heard instances of this, right? Some people believe that something bad happens in response to some wrong they've committed. They believe that an illness is punishment for not having gone to church enough, or served the poor enough. This cause-and-effect understanding surfaces in nearly all of us, as we experience some nagging doubt when something bad happens: “What did I do wrong?”

— Benefits

- ◇ The world is orderly and comprehensible. There is a logical relationship between what we do and what happens to us.
- ◇ We can then maintain an image of God as all-loving, all-powerful, and totally in control. This view justifies God.
- ◇ A lot of us secretly like this explanation, in part because it helps us believe that “bad” people will get their just desserts!

— Problems

- ◇ This answer is not terribly comforting to a grieving person. It teaches people to blame themselves and creates guilt.
 - ◇ This answer is also at odds with our experience: we see people who do bad and aren’t punished and people who are seemingly good and are.
- ❖ A variation of the “people get what they deserve” theory is to extend the timeline: People may not get what they deserve in this world, but they “get it in the end!” The scales of justice are balanced in the afterlife.

— Bible verses

[Jesus said] ‘There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ” (Luke 16:19-31)

- Example: Those who continue to do bad and yet prosper in this world will get their punishment when they meet God. And good people who suffer will eventually receive their reward.
- Benefits
 - ◇ All the same benefits as the first explanation, just a longer timeline.
- Problems
 - ◇ When we push punishment into the realm of eternity, God’s goodness comes back into question. Is eternal punishment really a “just” response to wrongs done in this world?
- ❖ Evil/Sin is a privation (or lack) of good (Saint Augustine, and to a certain extent, Saint Thomas Aquinas explored this concept); evil is not a thing in itself; it is actually just a lack of the good. God is all-good, and evil is the absence of good. Human beings (and all things) were created good, but any choice away from God/the good is evil.
- Bible verses

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (Genesis 1:31)

No one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. (James 1:13)
- Example: Hungry children around the world exist because of the absence of enough good—that is what we call “evil.”
- Benefits
 - ◇ Reconciles beliefs about supremely good God with existence of evil.
 - ◇ Evil is simply a gap between what is and what ought to be (most of us know and understand that things are not “as they ought to be” in the world, and evil is our experience of that reality).
- Problems
 - ◇ Does “absence of good” really explain the horrors of the Holocaust?
 - ◇ Evil in other parts of scripture is portrayed as an active force, rather than an absence.
 - ◇ Could you really say this to someone suffering?

- ❖ God has a reason for suffering; it teaches us or other people things. In fact, some would go so far as to say that suffering is part of what purifies us and forms us into the people that we are called to be. Saint Irenaeus believed this and called it “soul-making”—suffering, evil, and our response to evil is part of what forms and shapes our souls.

- Bible verses

For the LORD reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.
(Proverbs 3:12)

See, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tested you in the furnace of adversity. (Isaiah 48:10)

- Examples: The person who suffers from a degenerative disease, but believes that it makes him/her (or the people around him/her) into a better person. The person who, after the loss of a limb, turns around his/her life and does amazing things for others.

- Benefits

- ◇ It gives suffering higher purpose. It sanctifies suffering and makes it holy. It makes the times when we suffer bearable because it means that some good might come from our pain.
- ◇ We experience this as true. Sometimes personal suffering gives us a deeper capacity for compassion.

- Problems

- ◇ This condones individual pain as part of a higher purpose; it justifies those who cause suffering and evil. If a human purposely inflicts pain on someone in order to “make them better” or “teach them,” we put them in jail (spousal/child abuse). Why do we think it would be okay for God to do that?
- ◇ It also may not be a good answer for someone who is suffering. Rather than allowing them to suffer, it makes them feel like they have to see their suffering as “good.”

- ❖ The free will defense (developed by American philosopher Alvin Plantinga) proposes that human free choice is what causes suffering in the world. Human freedom is the greatest good. God’s gift of freedom means that sometimes people choose erroneously, misusing that freedom to commit evil acts. Still, it is better to have freedom than a world of robots that would be “forced” to choose good all the time.

— Bible verses

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live. (Deuteronomy 30:11-19)

— **Example: It all goes back to the garden, where Adam and Eve were given free will and allowed the choice—to eat or not.**

— Benefits

- ◇ Explains the evil that we see and the reality that people often choose against the good, causing bad things to happen to themselves and others.
- ◇ We don't have to blame God for the bad things that happen.

— Problems

- ◇ Does human choice explain all the evil in the world? What about diseases or natural disasters?
 - ◇ Couldn't God have created people who would always choose good?
- ❖ What we mistakenly see as "evil" is just beyond our limited, human understanding. The larger/wider tapestry of God's plan in the world is beyond the scope of our understanding. Thus, what we see as evil is really just our myopic view of the wider working of God. Think about seeing a tapestry from the front versus from the back.

— Bible verses

But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.” (Genesis 50:19-20)

— Examples:

- ◇ Picture a man holding down a person while other men cut the person open with a knife; all the while the person is screaming in pain, crying out for them to stop. On the surface it seems like a horrible, cruel thing these men are doing to the person. But if we add the information that the person is bleeding to death, that there is no time for anesthetic, and that the men using the knife are doctors trying to save the person’s life, then the problem of evil disappears. The evil doesn’t disappear; it is still there (just ask the person being cut open!), but the problem of evil is no longer present, because the intention is good.
- ◇ The ancient theologian Origen understood the betrayal of Judas in this way. Judas’ betrayal of Jesus was a necessary part in the “tapestry” of God’s salvation.

— Benefits

- ◇ It allows for our suffering to be redeemed, if it’s ultimately working toward a greater good.
- ◇ It underscores the connectedness of humanity and time and place, taking the “long view.”

— Problems

- ◇ It is offensive to someone who is suffering to hear, “This looks like good if you see it from the other side!”
- ◇ Are we really willing to say that great evils like genocide are “good” when seen from another angle?

❖ God does not cause our suffering. It happens for some reason other than the will of God.

— Bible verses (and example): The book of Job

- ◇ The biblical book of Job is a long poem that essentially explores the nature of evil and suffering. The book begins with a conversation in the heavens, when Satan tells God that the only reason that Job is faithful is because his life is

going well. Satan then uses his powers to test Job. The suffering that comes to Job as he loses his wealth and his children and even his own health is not caused by God; it is caused by Satan, the adversary.

— Benefits

- ◇ We don't have to blame God or ourselves for the suffering in the world.
- ◇ We can then stop asking "Why" and start figuring out what to do in this new situation.

❖ Problems

- ◇ Does this mean that God is not omnipotent? How do we understand the power of God? Can God do anything? Is God capable of doing the impossible? That is, is anything impossible for God? Are there such things as mutually exclusive possibilities with God? (i.e. that God create a rock so heavy that God cannot move it?) Author C.S. Lewis says, "It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of his creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because God's power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God." (*Problem of Pain*, p. 25)
- ◇ If God doesn't cause suffering, does God allow it? And is that, in the end, any different?

We have a lot of possible answers to the question of "Why?" Some are more satisfying than others; all have their benefits and problems. It is perhaps unsatisfying, but true, that the question of "Why?" does not have an easy or obvious answer. It is one of those questions that we will wrestle with in this life, and in the age to come, can ask God face-to-face.

But, as Rabbi Irving Greenburg writes, "Why?" is not the only, or perhaps the best, question to ask in the face of unspeakable suffering.

"It's hard to speak of a loving God, it's hard to speak of even being in the image of God, infinitely valuable and unique, in a world in which babies were burned alive by the Nazis and no one lifted a finger, in which people were gassed en masse. For example, there was a department of the SS that was in charge of bringing down the price of that gassing to make human life even cheaper. How do you speak, then, of a God who treasures humans or, in Christian terms, of a God who loved the world so much he would sacrifice his own son, and yet, here it is that, to save a half a penny's worth of gas, people were burned alive? The answer is, it's very hard, and for many Jews, it has been a crisis of faith. In the presence of burning children, how could one talk of a loving God? I once wrote that no theological statement should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning

children. What could you say about God when a child is burning alive? My answer is there's nothing to say. If there's anything you can do, jump into that pit and pull the child out. And if you can heal that child, if you can pour oil on their burns, then you are making a statement about God... But you have to live in the contradiction... I would constantly torment myself, "Where was God? Where was God?" Then one day it hit me very powerfully that, if I was suffering this way and I hadn't been in the Holocaust, how much more in a certain sense was God suffering? If a human felt this pain, what did an infinite consciousness feel? I think that was a turning point in my personal religious development, because I suddenly felt a certain sense, if I can say so, of compassion or maybe even pity for God, and an overwhelming sense, suddenly, that this God had not stopped the Holocaust maybe because this God was suffering and wanted me to stop the Holocaust. As a Jew, I always hesitate to use language of God suffering, because it seems to be a Christian patent. But it's not so. I came to see this has been a central belief of the Jewish people—that God shares our pain. Indeed, Christianity was never more Jewish than when it expressed it in those terms—that God suffers with humans. I said to myself I'd asked the wrong question when I asked where was God? The answer was obvious: where else would God be, but suffering with God's people?" ("Easing the Divine Suffering" by Rabbi Irving Greenberg in *The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World* edited by Bob Abernathy)

Rabbi Greenberg reminds us of an incredibly important point—asking “Why?” is important. But trying to answer the question of “Why?” especially in the face of one who is suffering, is at best hubristic and at worst incredibly damaging. It is our right, perhaps our need, to ask the question “Why?” when it is we who are suffering. But we must be very careful about proposing our own answers in the face of other people’s suffering. For both ourselves and for others, we might need to learn to ask some different questions.

Moving from “Why?” to “Where? Where is God when suffering happens?”

❖ Bible verses

Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace to be heated up seven times more than was customary, and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. Because the king's command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was

astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counsellors, “Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?” They answered the king, “True, O king.” He replied, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god.” (Daniel 3:19-25)

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

- ❖ To the question “Where is God?” Christians proclaim Emmanuel, “God is with us.” When we say that, we aren’t just talking about a baby being born in a manger. We are talking about God, our God, being born as a vulnerable, naked, helpless human baby who comes into this scary, broken, tragic world that we live in.
- ❖ As Christians we proclaim that our God became human, lived, suffered, and died an untimely death, so that we would never again have to go through the brokenness and grief and suffering and death of this world alone.
- ❖ Where is God when bad things happen?
 - God is with each person who dies, for God has died before.
 - God is with each family who grieves, for God knows the grief and loss of a child.
 - God is with each of us who grieves and questions and yearns and longs for a world where this is not possible, for God grieves and questions and yearns and longs for that world as well.

It is understandable, normal, excusable, perhaps even required that humans ask the question of “Why?” We join the ranks of centuries of faithful people when we do so, when we wrestle with God and engage deeply in this fundamental question of our faith. But it is inexcusable if we let our questions stop there. If we ask “Why?” we must also be prepared to ask “Where?”

- ❖ Where is God, in the midst of suffering and pain?

And then, perhaps we can ask the further questions, those which demand something, not of God, but of us: “What?” and “How?”

- ❖ What am I being called to do in response to the evil of this world?
- ❖ How can I respond to the suffering that I encounter?

Closing prayer

Gracious God, the comfort of all who sorrow, the strength of all who suffer: Let the cry of those in misery and need come to you, that they may find your mercy present with them in all their afflictions; and give us, we pray, the strength to serve them for the sake of him who suffered for us, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 279)

Small groups

- ❖ Which of the answers to “Why does evil and suffering exist?” do you find most compelling? Why?
- ❖ At a time when you were struggling, did you ever have someone give you an “answer” that was unsatisfying or hurtful? What was that experience like?
- ❖ All of the different “answers” for the presence of suffering and evil are supported by Bible verses. What might the presence of so many different answers in the Scriptures say to us? Does it surprise you to see so many different ways of understanding this in the Bible?
- ❖ How might what you’ve heard inform the way that you interact with people who are suffering? What are some ways that we can be with people who are in pain without diminishing or explaining away their experience?
- ❖ Have you ever had an experience of God’s presence with you in a time of suffering or pain (your own or someone else’s)? How did that experience inform your understanding of suffering?

Resources for further study

- ❖ *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold Kushner. Anchor, 2004.
- ❖ *Where is God When it Hurts?* by Philip Yancey. Zondervan, 2002.
- ❖ *The Problem of Pain* by C.S. Lewis. HarperOne, 2009.