

## Hard Questions *Why Do The Innocent Suffer?*

In the late 1990's Serbia carried out a ruthless campaign of so-called "ethnic cleansing" in Kosovo, killing thousands of Albanians and pushing hundreds of thousands more out into other countries. The systematic murder and torture was carried out against men, women, and children.

One woman told how soldiers had separated 10 women from their families and then raped them by the roadside. They told the women, "We're not going to shoot your families. We want them to see what we are doing."

"It was then," the woman told reporters, "that I came to know that God did not exist."

Now that wasn't the formal declaration of philosophical atheism, but a passionate cry from the heart. How could she believe in God who would allow such cruelty take place and not lift a finger to stop it.

Clifford Longley wrote, "The existence of evil, of suffering especially, is one of the most common causes of religious doubt in the modern world."

Paul Johnson is even more emphatic, "The problem of evil drives more thoughtful people away from religion than any other difficulty."

In 1946 a 26 year old Billy Graham met Charles Templeton. They ended up as room mates and traveled in the US and Europe preaching evangelistic crusades with Youth for Christ. Templeton founded a church and quickly filled the 1200 seat auditorium.

Along the way Templeton began to doubt the Bible. By 1957 he had left the ministry. He returned to Canada to eventually become executive managing editor of the Toronto Star and director of News and Affairs for the CTV network.

He authored 12 books including *Farewell to God : My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*.

One of Templeton's main reasons: The horrors of Alzheimer's disease. He writes, "How could a compassionate God allow such a ghastly illness to torture its victims and their loved ones?"

For Templeton the answer is simple: Alzheimer's would not exist if there were a loving God. And because it does exist, that's evidence that God does not.

Today both men are in their 80's. Billy Graham is suffering from Parkinson's disease and Charles Templeton is in the beginning stages of Alzheimers'.

Why do the innocent suffer? That's the great philosophical problem of the ages that atheists have been asking theists.

In a series of premises and conclusions, the argument usually runs along these lines:

1. Evil and suffering exist in the world.
2. If God were omnipotent, he would be able to prevent these things.
3. If God were good and loving he would want to prevent them.
4. If there were an omnipotent and good God, then evil would have no place in the world.
5. Therefore, there's no such thing as an omnipotent, good, God.

In his classic book, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis writes, "If God were good, he would wish to make his creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty he would be able to do as He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore either God lacks goodness or power or both."

The British philosopher John Stewart Mill, in his "Three Essays on Religion," writes: "If the law of all creation were justice, and the creator omnipotent, then in whatever amount suffering and happiness might be dispensed to the world, each person's share of them would be exactly proportioned to that person's good or evil deeds."

Where is the justice in our world? Where is the fairness? Where is God?

We're in a series we're calling *Heart, Soul, and Mind*. What we're doing is trying to honestly tackle the tough questions that often stand as obstacles to people's faith.

We're thinking about emotion, but we're also looking at facts and trying to follow the evidence where ever it leads.

The question of pain and suffering is probably the most problematic of all the "God questions" we're going to ask because it hits all of us so hard.

How can there be a loving, good God and a world of suffering at the same time?

I'd like us to begin by really trying to think through the Atheist's explanation.

There would be no evil if there was a God. Evil disproves the existence of God. The evil in our world proves that God can't exist.

Does that really hold true or is just the opposite true?

1. If God doesn't exist then (as we saw two weeks ago) absolute moral values of good and evil don't exist. If there is no God and we're chance products of naturalistic mechanisms then there is no standard of right and wrong.
2. But evil does exist. We all know that.
3. Therefore objective values exist and some things are fundamentally bad.
4. Therefore God exists!

The atheist describes events like the holocaust as being evil. But the only reason we know good and evil is because there's a God who sets the standards.

The question isn't why is there evil. The question is why is there good?

Why do we love our children, appreciate art and music, why do we get angry at injustice inflicted on innocent victims? Where does all that come from?

When we ask questions like "Why do bad things happen to good people?" we're presupposing that there's a standard of good and bad.

The atheist doesn't have an answer to the issue of evil and suffering in our world so his questions are really meaningless.

As we've stressed each week in this series, here at FCC we believe the Bible is the Word of God. Since all Scripture is inspired by God we can depend on it to teach us God's truth.

Therefore the Bible should have something to say to the question of evil and suffering.

*I. The first answer comes from the biblical explanation of the fall.*

The question you often hear is: "Why didn't God merely create a world where suffering and evil didn't exist?"

The answer is: He did. **Turn to the last vs of Genesis 1 pg 4**

**Read 1:31-2:3**

Seven times in Chapter 1 God declares that His creation is good. Adam & Eve were created innocent and without sin.

It was only after human beings choose to disobey their creator that sin and its consequences entered our world.

God choose to create people in His own image and that included a will. That will was necessary for there to be true love and worship of God on our part.

You can get a talking doll that says, "I Love You" (and 23 other realistic phrases) when you push a button, but that's not love.

Real love must involve a choice. Unfortunately Adam & Eve's choice, and all of ours after them, has been to reject God's ways and to choose our way.

That has resulted in the introduction of two kinds of evil into the world: "moral evil" and "natural evil."

Moral evil is the immorality and pain and suffering that comes because we choose to be selfish, arrogant, uncaring, hateful, and abusive. Romans 3:23 says "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

I don't have an exact figure but I'd guess that 95 percent of the world's suffering results from the sin of ourselves or others.

For example, people look at a famine and wonder where God is, but the world produces enough food for each person to have the food they need every day. It's our own irresponsibility and self-centeredness that prevents people from getting fed.

Look at your hand. You can choose to use that hand to hold a gun and shoot someone, or you can use it to feed hungry people. It's your choice. But it's unfair to shoot someone and then blame God for the existence of evil and suffering.

Think about it. Is there anyone here today who can honestly say that they never caused anyone else pain and heartache in their life? By thoughtless words or unkind actions?

We all have. Now just how is it that you want God to remove the causes of suffering? To get rid of suffering He'd have to remove all of us because we've all contributed to it.

The second kind of evil is called "natural evil" — these are things like earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes that cause suffering. According to the Bible, these are the result of sin invading the world too.

As one author explained: "When we humans told God to shove off, He partially honored our request. Nature began to revolt. The earth was cursed. Genetic breakdown and disease began. Pain and death became part of the human experience."

Genesis 3:18 says it's because of sin that nature was corrupted and "thorns and thistles" entered the world.

**Turn to Rom 8 pg 1005**

**Read vs 18-22**

Nature longs for redemption to come and for things to be set right. That's the source of disorder and chaos.

God didn't create evil and suffering and death. What He did was create the potential for evil to enter the world, because that was the only way to create the potential for genuine goodness and love. But it was human beings, in our free will, who brought that potential evil into reality.

Didn't God know all that would happen? Of course. Then why did He create the world? Philosophers and theologians have been debating that one for centuries.

I don't know all the answers, I have my ideas, but I do know this: That according to the Bible God was willing to experience the suffering that sin brings. That God in Christ became a hands on participant in that suffering.

I. *The first answer comes from the biblical explanation of the fall.*

II. *The Second answer comes from the unsearchable character of God*

**Turn to Rom 11 pg 1008 Read 33-36**

I'd be the first to say that I can't give a full and final explanation for the existence of evil. But I'd also say this, neither can anyone else. The atheist certainly can't explain why there's good, let alone evil.

To insist on answers to all the questions we could ever come up with concerning suffering and evil is to assume that God owes us an explanation for everything He has ever done or is doing.

The Bible says that God is way beyond our understanding.

*"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts."* Isaiah 55:8-9

That's why some of the most Godly individuals in the Bible struggled with the same questions we have.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote *Righteous are You, O LORD, when I plead with You; Yet let me talk with You about Your judgments. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?* Jer 12:1

The righteous man Job questioned: *Why do the wicked live and become old, Yes, become mighty in power? Their descendants are established with them in their sight, And their offspring before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, Neither is the rod of God upon them.* Job 21:7-9

The prophet Habakkuk wondered out loud: *O LORD, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" And You will not save. Why do You show me iniquity, And cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; There is strife, and contention arises. Therefore the law is powerless, And justice never goes*

*forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore perverse judgment proceeds. Hab 1:1-4*

Even these godly people who believed that God was the Sovereign Lord, still wrestled with what they saw.

In the end, here's what they held on to. God is God. He's God and we're not, so were not going to understand everything that happens.

In a debate about the existence of God held at UC Davis, Edward Tabash, a vehement atheist, issued this challenge to God. He said, "If you are listening and you're really there, show yourself right now. Do a colossal miracle. Levitate this building. Show me you're something more than ancient hearsay from the depths of antiquity to prove your existence."

Of course the building didn't rise in the air and Tabash felt that he had proved that God wasn't really there.

We hear that and we could say, "How arrogant. How foolish. As if God's going to answer the demands of some puny human shaking his fist at heaven."

He's God and by definition God acts on His terms, not ours.

Well, the same is true for all of the events in this world. John Blanchard explains, "By choosing to do certain things, God ruled out other possibilities. Having created man with free will, He would not then step in to prevent it's misuse. Not even an omnipotent God would have created human beings with genuine moral freedom and at the same time ruled out the possibility of their using that freedom."

I know in my own life that I was once running from God and was suffering the consequences. I was miserable. I used to wish I could be like my friends who didn't seem to be bothered by a conscience.

It wasn't God's job to take away all my problems and make me happy. It was God's job to use whatever means necessary to bring me back to Him.

Just read through the history of God's people Israel. Over and over again it was

suffering and pain that steered them back to love and obedience to God.

The pain in their lives didn't prove that God wasn't a loving God. It demonstrated that He was a loving God.

Joni Eareckson Tada has suffered for more than thirty years ever since she broke her neck as a teenager and was paralyzed. Listen to her words about the pain that has drawn her to God: "I'd rather be in this wheelchair knowing God than on my feet without Him."

In other words, if it took paralysis to bring her to God, it was worth it a thousand times over. And if you don't believe that, it may be because you don't really know God yet.

Not only can God use pain to bring us to Himself, God uses pain to develop our character.

Romans 5:3 says: "*And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.*"

The pain is necessary. And improvements in our character, our virtue, and our wisdom usually come through a process involving sacrifice or difficulty or trials or even pain. That's how we learn and mature and grow.

There could be no such thing as courage in a world without risk. No love without hate. No joy without sorrow.

- I. The first answer comes from the biblical explanation of the fall.*
- II. The Second answer comes from the unsearchable character of God*
- III. The third answer comes from the biblical promise for the future*

A lot of times you'll hear people say: "If God has the power to eradicate evil and suffering, why doesn't He do it?"

The assumption is because He hasn't done it He isn't going to do it.

That's a false assumption. It limits God to our timetable instead of His.



Criticizing God for not doing it yet is like reading half a novel and then criticizing the author for not tying up the loose ends of the plot.

The fact is, the Bible says that the day will come when sickness and pain will be eradicated and people will be held accountable for the evil they've committed.

Isaiah predicted: *Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever.*

So what's holding God up? Part of the answer is that some of you are. He's actually delaying the consummation of history in anticipation that some of you will still put your trust in Him and spend eternity in heaven. He's delaying everything out of His love for you.

## **II Peter 3 pg 1081**

**Read vs 3-4** Where's this Jesus who's supposed to make all things new?

**Read vs 8** God's not in a hurry. He's got His own timetable. For God a thousand years is nothing. It's like a day would seem to us. He's coming, but there's a reason why it hasn't been before now.

### **Read vs 9**

Is there a loving, compassionate God who is at work in our world? The Bible says there is. He's so loving that He sent His Son to die on a cross for our sins. He's so loving that he's delayed His coming to set up His kingdom until more people trust Him as Savior.

He's so loving that He's shared the pain of His own creation.

That loving God has made this promise. Revelation 21:4 *And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away. Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new."*

I. *The first answer comes from the biblical explanation of the fall*

- II. The Second answer comes from the unsearchable character of God*
- III. The third answer comes from the biblical promise for the future*
- IV. The fourth answer to the question of suffering comes from the benefit of pain.*

Last month there was an article on CNN's web site about a little 5 year old girl in Big Lake, Minnesota, named Gabby Gingras.

Gabby looks like any other 5 year old but she's actually one in 66 million. She's one of only 100 people in the world who have a disorder know as CIPA -- congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis.

If you're suffering chronic pain you might be thinking "That doesn't sound so bad!" But it's actually deadly.

Gabby's parents first noticed something was wrong when Gabby was 4 months old. She was biting her fingers until they bled. By the time she was 2, her teeth had to be removed so she wouldn't hurt herself.

When she was a toddler, she scratched her cornea and was given eye gel. She naturally tried to rub her eyes.

Her Dad said, "When you don't feel pain, you don't know how hard you're rubbing, and pretty soon she had damaged both eyes."

One eye was so infected it had to be removed; otherwise her other eye might have become infected too.

The BBC had an article about a British toddler named Ben Whittaker. Ben also has CIPA. He's broken bones and severely burned himself without knowing it.

Life without pain is dangerous. It can even be deadly.

People with CIPA have died because they couldn't feel the warning symptoms of diseases like appendicitis.

Dr. Paul Brant spent decades working with Leprosy patients. Leprosy doesn't eat away at a person's extremities, it destroys the body's ability to sense pain.

Leprosy patients lose fingers and toes because they don't realize they've injured themselves.

Brand was given a substantial grant to design an artificial pain system for people whose pain sensors were destroyed.

His team was comprised of doctors, electrical engineers, bioengineers, and biochemists.

What they found was that people wouldn't respond to warnings that were unpleasant or annoying. They tried buzzers, flashing lights, and bells to warn people they were acting in a dangerous manner.

They worked with hands and were trying to warn people that something was dangerously hot or that they were hurting their hand by using a tool in the wrong way.

If it didn't hurt it didn't matter how annoying the warning was. People just went ahead.

Here we are living temporary lives in a world of sin. What does pain remind us of? Pain reminds us that something is wrong!

Philip Yancey, in his book, "Where is God When It Hurts?" writes, "Sometimes murmuring, sometimes shouting, suffering is a 'rumor of transcendence' that the entire human condition is out of wack. Something is wrong with a life of wars, and violence, and insults."

"We need help. He who wants to be satisfied with this world, who wants to think the only reason for living is to enjoy a good life, must do so with cotton in his ears; the megaphone of pain is a loud one."

"Pain, God's megaphone, can drive me away from God. I can hate God for allowing such misery. Or, on the other hand, it can drive me to Him. I can believe Him when He says this world is not all there is."

Pain and suffering are real. Everybody from the Atheist to the Christian has to deal with it.

God's ultimate answer to suffering isn't an explanation; it's the incarnation. Suffering is a personal problem; it demands a personal response.

God isn't some distant, detached, and disinterested deity; He entered into our world and into our pain.

The Bible says, "God is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." Does that describe you? You have a choice: to turn bitter, or to turn to God and find the kind of peace and grace that only God can give.

*In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. I John 4:10*