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MINISTRIES

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Answering Atheists: Making Sense of Evil and Suffering

It is often said, “God cannot exist because there is too much evil and suffering in the world.”

This is a powerful objection to the existence of God, because the problem of evil and suffering is not merely an academic or theoretical question. It’s a reality that affects all of us in a deeply personal way.

Perhaps no experience is more painful or devastating than losing a loved one to death. And yet, this is a difficult road most of us find ourselves having to navigate at times in our lives. When we lose someone we love, like a child or friend or our spouse, and we’re faced with that paralyzing grief, it’s hard not to be angry with God or to question whether he even exists.

Another type of suffering we experience is sickness and disease. Even if we have not had to deal with it ourselves, we likely know people who live with chronic pain. Often we’re moved ask, “Why must this person live in pain? Why doesn’t God just heal them?”

Additionally, when we’ve all witnessed the suffering of others due to injustice and oppression: abortion, sex trafficking, racism, rape, child abuse. As we observe the suffering in the world due to the sheer evil residing in the hearts of mankind, we’re often left in a state of complete bewilderment.

Many of us have friends or acquaintances that have said they cannot believe in God because of the evil and suffering in the world. Maybe you’ve felt that way yourself. The pain we’ve seen and experienced, even as believers, may make us struggle to believe that God is involved or even cares. How can a God who supposedly loves people allow such evil and suffering to continue?

This is an important question we wrestle with. Thankfully, the Bible is not silent on this issue. In this teaching, we will answer four questions relating to the problem of evil and suffering:

- 1) Does the reality of evil and suffering disprove God’s existence?
- 2) Why do bad things happen to good people?
- 3) What are God’s solutions to evil and suffering?
- 4) How are we to respond to the evil and suffering in our world?

The answers given in this teaching are by no means a full treatment of the issue. Believers have been struggling with this for thousands of years. Entire books have been written on the topic.

However, having a basic understanding of how to answer these questions *will* help us to reconcile the reality of evil and suffering with the goodness of God.

Does the reality of evil and suffering disprove God's existence?

A common objection you'll hear from atheists might go something like this: "There cannot be a God because there's too much evil and suffering in the world."

Emotionally, this is a powerful objection. From an emotional standpoint, it's difficult to believe that a loving, all-powerful God allows a child to die of cancer or a young woman to be raped and murdered.

However, ironically, the reality of evil and suffering makes more sense with a theistic worldview than with an atheistic worldview. That is to say, theism—biblical Christianity in particular—gives us the best philosophical framework for understanding why evil and suffering exist and how we can address them.

So, how does the reality of evil and suffering make more sense with a theistic worldview? Because the entire concept of "evil" doesn't even mean anything if there is no God. If atheism is true, there can be no good and evil.

On the atheistic view, humans have no objective moral worth. We're just animals. What we call "morality" is merely an evolutionary adaptation that developed as an aid to survival. Moreover, all life in our universe as we know it will ultimately end in nothingness anyway, so nothing really matters in the grand scheme of things—least of all the subjective notions of "right" and "wrong" that have emerged among us highly evolved apes.

But all of us, even atheists, acknowledge that good and evil aren't just personal preferences. The entire objection against God's existence on the basis of evil rests on the assumption that some things are evil.

But if some things are evil, that would mean that some things are good. So good and evil exist.

But the fact that good and evil exist means that there is a transcendent moral law by which good and evil can be identified. Otherwise "good" and "evil" would not be objectively real. Objective morality, by definition, transcends the individual. Like logic or mathematics, morality doesn't exist in the physical realm; therefore it transcends our physical world. Thus, the fact that good and evil exists entails a transcendent moral law.

But the existence of a transcendent moral law entails the existence of a transcendent moral lawgiver. Since morality by its nature contains an obligatory character—that is, moral duties—it presupposes the existence of a moral lawgiver—that is, a transcendent personal being with the authority to issue commands.

Listen to how professor of philosophy, Peter Kreeft, puts it:

What are moral laws? Unlike the laws of physics or the laws of mathematics, which tell us what is, the laws of morality tell us what ought to be. But like physical laws, they direct and order something. And that something is right human behavior. But since morality doesn't exist

physically—there are no moral or immoral atoms, or cells or genes—its cause has to be something that exists apart from the physical world. That thing must therefore be above nature—or super-natural. The very existence of morality proves the existence of something beyond nature and beyond man. Just as a design suggests a designer, moral commands suggest a moral commander.

-Peter Kreeft, “Where Do Good and Evil Come From?” www.prageru.com

So again, the objection to God’s existence on the basis of evil is ironic because you have to assume God’s existence in order to even make the objection. Without God, the most that we can say when terrible acts are committed, such as the Holocaust or sex-slavery, is that we personally don’t like it, but we cannot call them evil in any meaningful way. Why? Because we cannot judge something to be evil without an objective standard, and the only way that standard can exist is if God exists.

Thus, without God, the very objection on the basis of evil and suffering is meaningless. Only if God exists can we discuss the problem of evil and suffering in any meaningful way.

For a fuller treatment of this argument for God’s existence on the basis of objective morality, see our teaching, [Answering Atheists: The Moral Argument](#).

Why do bad things happen to good people?

You might say something like, “Okay, so even if the reality of evil and suffering is not incompatible with the *existence* of God, surely God cannot be *all good* and still permit the evil and suffering in our world!”

This objection can be answered in a couple of ways. The first answer is that God gave humans the ability to choose whether to do good or evil. God’s desire is that humans would choose to do good. As Moses said:

Deuteronomy 30:19

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live.

The problem is that we humans often choose to go against God’s will by doing evil. Instead of choosing life, we choose death. Instead of choosing love and blessings, we choose to do things that hurt others and ourselves.

In fact, we wrestle with this question of evil and suffering to begin with because of Adam’s choice to pursue what was contrary to God’s will. The apostle Paul says that sin entered the world through one man, and with sin came death, sorrow, and suffering (Romans 5:12). This is the world we’ve inherited because of the choice Adam made.

But it wasn’t just Adam who made that choice to eat from the tree of knowledge—we all have. The Bible says that we have all sinned (Romans 3:23). Every time we lie to someone, steal from them, betray them, we are taking a bite of that forbidden fruit just as Adam did. We have all chosen death over life.

We must come to grips with the fact that much of the human suffering in our world is the result of human choices to do evil. But the fact that humans choose to do evil does not prove that God isn’t good.

Someone might say, “That’s fine, but what about the senseless suffering that doesn’t appear to be the direct result of human choices?”

Well, another way we can make sense of God’s goodness in light of suffering is by considering another one of his attributes: his omniscience. God is *all-knowing* and sees the end from the beginning. But we, as finite creatures, have limited knowledge of the universe and God’s plans. Therefore, we cannot judge God as having no good reason for allowing suffering. We simply don’t have all the information.

To put it another way, the burden of proof is on the person making the objection to show that evil and suffering are logically incompatible with an all good God. The atheist must prove that it is *impossible* for God to have good reasons for allowing evil and suffering to continue. But as long as it’s *possible* that God has good reasons for allowing evil and suffering, the objection breaks down. Since we are not omniscient, we simply aren’t in a position to be able to prove that it’s impossible for God to have good reasons.

Philosopher, Dr. William Lane Craig, puts it this way:

Evils which appear pointless to us within our limited framework may be seen to have been justly permitted within God’s wider framework. To borrow an illustration from a developing field of science, Chaos Theory, scientists have discovered that certain macroscopic systems, for example, weather systems or insect populations, are extraordinarily sensitive to the tiniest perturbations. A butterfly fluttering on a branch in West Africa may set in motion forces which would eventually issue in a hurricane over the Atlantic Ocean. Yet it is impossible in principle for anyone observing that butterfly palpitating on a branch to predict such an outcome. The brutal murder of an innocent man or a child’s dying of leukemia could produce a sort of ripple effect through history such that God’s morally sufficient reason for permitting it might not emerge until centuries later and perhaps in another land.

-William Lane Craig, “The Problem of Evil.” www.reasonablefaith.org

Again, due to our limited knowledge, we simply cannot judge whether or not God has good reasons for allowing evil and suffering.

This is where biblical theism has the advantage over atheism, especially emotionally. If atheism is true, there really is no hope of a greater meaning to the suffering we endure. But as followers of Yeshua, we can have faith that God *does* have good reasons for it. We can trust that his ways are righteous even if we don’t see it from our limited perspectives. And this isn’t blind faith, by the way—many of us have experienced this in our own lives! We remember certain difficulties we’ve had to endure, and while they didn’t make sense to us at the time, looking back we can now see God’s good purpose in allowing them.

A good example of this in Scripture is Jacob’s son, Joseph. The story begins with God giving Joseph all of these amazing dreams and promises. The story then goes on to describe how he was betrayed by his brothers, who threw him into a well and then sold him into slavery. Later on he was falsely accused and imprisoned. You could probably imagine how Joseph felt as he went through these various hardships: “God, I thought you gave me all of these amazing promises! I thought you had this great plan for my life! Why would you let this happen to me?”

Little did Joseph know at the time that God was putting him in the position to fulfill the very promises he gave him. Had Joseph not gone through the series of painful events that led to his being a prisoner in

a foreign land, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to meet the Pharaoh. He would have never been made second in command over all of Egypt so that Israel could be saved from famine. Based on Scripture, we can trust that God has good reasons for allowing suffering even when it doesn't make sense from our finite perspectives.

What are God's solutions to evil and suffering?

While the problem of evil and suffering is perhaps the biggest obstacle to belief in God, the God of the Bible offers the only real solutions. Atheism offers us nothing—it just identifies the problem and leaves us hanging!

We will unpack four answers in regard to this question. The first answer is that one day it will end. Scripture teaches that, in the future, Yeshua's kingdom will come to earth in fullness, and this event will bring about a complete end to evil and suffering forever:

Revelation 21:2-4

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

This passage from Revelation is a prophecy that takes place after Yeshua returns, after the millennial reign, when a New Jerusalem is ushered into our reality. The Lord promises that one day there won't be any more death, pain, or mourning. God will set all things right.

If you remove God from the equation, and therefore remove Yeshua's coming kingdom, suffering is never resolved. There's never any justice. Innocent people suffer and evil prevails and that's it—that's what atheism gives us.

But with God, we have hope. In fact, the reality of Yeshua's coming kingdom is such a wonderful promise that Paul compares the sufferings of this life to a "light momentary affliction" in light of the everlasting joy that awaits us (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Someone might ask, "Why can't God just abolish all suffering now? Why do we have to wait for this future kingdom to come?" The answer to that question lies with the Bible's second answer to the problem of evil and suffering.

But before we get to that, it's important to address a popular false doctrine that has spread through much of the Church. This false doctrine is the idea taught by "prosperity preachers" that the point of this life is to have health, wealth, and prosperity. In other words, God's job is to make sure that his little human creatures have nice, comfortable lives, and that God will magically make all their problems go away!

If the Bible actually taught this idea, then we would have to agree with the atheist that suffering is pointless. But that isn't what the Bible teaches. The goal of this life is not to attain health, wealth, and prosperity, but to fear God and keep his commandments (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). To that end, suffering is not pointless but is in fact an opportunity to fulfill the purpose of this life.

And that brings us to the second answer to the problem of evil and suffering: Redemption and Sanctification. God works all things together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). We often grow spiritually through suffering; we learn obedience and gain wisdom.

As James puts it, our suffering produces steadfastness, which results in our becoming “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4). The psalmist said, “**Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word**” (Psalm 119:67). If it weren’t for the suffering we’ve had to endure in life, many of us simply wouldn’t be who we are today.

According to Scripture, the only way to fulfill our purpose, reach spiritual maturity, and have true fulfillment is by knowing God and bringing him glory in our lives—and that often comes through suffering.

Now we come to our third answer to the problem of evil and suffering: God.

God understands our suffering. He’s involved. He responds. God gives our suffering meaning.

In the Bible, Job was a man who went through unfathomable suffering, and we see that he—a mere man—was important enough to God that God drew near to him in his affliction. God answered Job.

And yes, God gave a word of reproof to Job and his friends, but it’s enough that he even answered at all. Think about it: he’s the sovereign Creator and King of the Universe. He doesn’t owe us anything, but he still chooses to respond to us in our affliction rather than letting us wallow in our misery.

In addition to responding to us in our afflictions, God understands our deepest pain and sorrows. For instance, our Messiah, Yeshua, was deeply affected by the pain of loss. The Scriptures record that he wept over the death of His friend Lazarus:

John 11:33-36

When Jesus [Yeshua] saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus [Yeshua] wept. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”

“**Yeshua wept.**” What a profound statement! These two simple words speak volumes to the character and love of our Messiah. When Yeshua saw the pain of all those affected by the death of Lazarus, he was moved to the point of tears.

What’s amazing about this is that Yeshua already knew that Lazarus would soon be raised from the dead (John 11:11, 41-44). Knowing this, why was he deeply moved and troubled? Because, as the passage says, he “**saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping.**” Yeshua took on our sorrow as his own: “**Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows**” (Isaiah 53:4).

Death is not the end for those who know Yeshua. Like Lazarus, those who have fallen asleep will rise again. A day will come when God will set everything right and wipe the tears from our eyes, and in that day, death will be no more.

But in the meantime, we can take comfort in the fact that God understands our pain. In our moments of immense grief and heartache, God is weeping with us. Scripture says that the Lord is near to the

brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18). He has a special place in his heart for hurting people.

Therefore, far from being pointless, suffering is an opportunity to worship God and experience his loving presence in a deep and profound way. Charles Spurgeon puts it well:

Have you never known what it is, in times of peace and quietness, to feel as if you missed the grandeur of the presence of God? I have looked back to times of trial with a kind of longing, not to have them return, but to feel the strength of God as I have felt it then, to feel the power of faith, as I have felt it then, to hang upon God's powerful arm as I hung upon it then, and to see God at work as I saw him then.

-Charles H. Spurgeon, *Commentary on James 1:4*

How are we to respond to the evil and suffering in our world?

The Bible's fourth answer to evil and suffering is us! Scripture teaches us that God desires to work through his people to relieve the suffering of the world. How do we do that?

Well, first, we must stop causing it. We must love our neighbor as ourselves. We must stop lying, stealing, and taking advantage of people. We must lay our lives down for others, even our enemies. We are never going to resolve the problem of evil and suffering by continuing to contribute to it through our own choices.

Second, we are to stand up against injustice. We are to actively visit and care for the sick, the poor, and the oppressed. We are not only to pray for people but also invest in their lives. Like Yeshua, we are to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). In Isaiah 58, we are commanded to free the oppressed, share our food with the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, clothe the naked, and meet the needs of the afflicted. THEN healing and restoration will break forth into the world.

Third, we must pray for physical, emotional, and spiritual healing. As Yeshua's disciples, we've been given authority to cast out demons and bring healing to the sick (Mark 16:17-18). We are to expect these manifestations of God's power as we walk in faith. We eagerly await the time when Yeshua's kingdom will arrive in fullness and suffering will end, but that doesn't mean we sit on our hands. As disciples of Yeshua, we have an active role in bringing about the Kingdom on this earth in our present day.

In conclusion, the pain we see and experience is not incompatible with an all-loving God. In fact, as we've learned, biblical Christianity gives us the best philosophical framework for understanding why evil and suffering exist and how we can address them.

We know that evil and death have been conquered at the cross and that one day suffering will be completely abolished.

We know that God is near to the brokenhearted. In the very depths of our despair, he holds us and weeps with us.

Ultimately, we know that suffering has a redemptive side. God uses our suffering for our sanctification—that we may become “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4).

Finally, we know that God's desire is to use us to bring life and healing to a hurting world. And since

true fulfillment in this life comes only from knowing God, growing in our relationship with him, and doing his will, we can rejoice in the midst of trials.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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