

# How does the evil and suffering in the world align with the idea of a loving God?



## Introduction

---

The most ancient and persistent objection to God's existence is the problem of evil. How can a loving, powerful God allow so much evil and suffering in the world? Believers and nonbelievers alike must wrestle with this difficult question. Nonbelievers struggle with the atheist conclusion that morality is an illusory and ungrounded evolutionary artifact, in which case there may be no basis to complain about the unfairness of suffering, and believers battle with the apparent contradiction between God's goodness and the suffering in the world.

The problem of evil has no simple answer, but many philosophers, theologians and others have developed helpful insights. This issue is addressed in chapter 2 of *The Language of God*, "The War of the Worldviews". This response combines Dr. Francis Collins's thoughts with insights offered by Timothy Keller in his book, *The Reason for God*.

## Freedom in the Universe

---

As we grapple with the question of evil, we must first recognize that humans cause much of it. Humans, not God, murder, torture, defame, persecute and rape. Because humans have free will, they can do terrible and immoral things. But free will is essential if humans are to relate meaningfully to God. For humans to truly love God, they must be free to choose or reject that love. For God to stop all evil in the world, our freedom would have to be removed, and with it our capacity to truly love God. God cannot give us free will while at the same time restraining us from evil acts.<sup>1</sup>

It is more difficult, however, to understand why a loving God would allow suffering from natural disasters or diseases. The Rev. John Polkinghorne refers to these as a consequence of physical evil.<sup>2</sup> These cause incredible destruction and pain, but are not linked to human agency. As Dr. Francis Collins writes, “Science reveals that the universe, our own planet, and life itself are engaged in an evolutionary process.”<sup>3</sup> The mechanisms that God used to create humans — like the misspelling of a gene during cell replication — can also produce pain and suffering — if that misspelling leads to cancer. Likewise, the same forces that produced a life-sustaining planet including the laws of physics, chemistry, weather and tectonics, can also produce natural disasters. As with the free will of humans, God cannot constantly intervene in these areas without disrupting the inherent freedom of his creation and disrupting his consistent sustaining of all the matter and energy in the universe. Without this consistency, science would be impossible, and moral choices would be subverted. If God blocked the consequences of human moral choices, like committing murder, and natural events, like tsunamis, every time they led to evil results, then moral responsibility would disappear and the natural world would become incoherent.

Although evil challenges the existence of a good and loving creator, complaints about the unfairness of evil can also be interpreted as support for God existence. If there are no external standards of morality, what is the basis for moral claims? Why can we say that torturing children is wrong?

## A God Who is Great but Mysterious

---

One response to the problem of evil that is necessary but ambivalent is to acknowledge that God’s ways are not our ways. God is greater than we are, with purposes that may differ greatly from ours. Even though we may not be able to see any reasons for our suffering, it is always possible that a God of such wisdom and creative power might have reasons for the existence of evil that are simply beyond human understanding.

A provocative Biblical story of suffering is the tragic tale of [Job](#), a righteous man greatly blessed by

God and successful in all that he did. Satan challenges God with the claim that Job only worships God because he is so blessed. So God allows Satan to torment Job to prove Job's faithfulness. Job tragically loses his property, his children and finally his health. Long after one would expect, Job finally cries out to God to explain his suffering, a call that goes unanswered. Instead, God simply reminds Job of God's divine majesty and power. Job withdraws his complaint, returns to trust in God, and his bountiful life is fully restored. Job's story offers no answer to why he suffered so much, beyond the apparent discussion God was having with Satan about Job's faith. The story does offer a powerful example of someone who remains faithful and acknowledges the limits of his own understanding:

"Then Job answered the Lord and said, "I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me. I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes." <sup>4</sup>

Through his suffering, Job came to know the reality of God in a new and more personal way.

The Biblical story of [Joseph](#) also reveals that suffering can lead to good. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, wrongfully accused of sexual assault and thrown into prison. God uses these events to make Joseph a great leader in Egypt. As a result of his leadership, Egypt and the surrounding countries are saved from starvation in a terrible famine. Joseph makes this point to his brothers: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20). Joseph's story illustrates how God can use suffering for good purposes.

C.S. Lewis wrote: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."<sup>5</sup> Keller describes a man from his church who lost his eyesight when he was shot in a drug deal that went bad. The blindness humbled the man and led to spiritual transformation.<sup>6</sup> Reflecting on the experience, the man said, "It was a terrible price to pay, and yet I must say it was worth it. I finally have what makes life worthwhile."<sup>7</sup>

Our tragedies are often terrible: losing a child, watching an elderly parent suffer, being betrayed by those we trust. But if we are open, we can often see ways that our pain is being at least partially redeemed by God working purposefully through these experiences. As Keller suggests, God can no doubt see ways to bring some good out of our pain.<sup>8</sup>

## Suffering is Also a Problem for Atheists

---

Evil also poses problems for the nonbeliever. Claims that torture is wrong even though the victims of torture might be terrorists with useful information appeal to some external standard. But what is this standard? Such claims need to be grounded in something if they are to be asserted with such confidence. So, while some naturalistic philosophers have developed ethical systems without God, many other naturalists acknowledge this doesn't work and that such ethical systems are entirely arbitrary.<sup>9</sup> If God does not exist and there is no grounding for how things ought to be, then moral — as opposed to emotional — outrage at horrendous evil has no basis. The fact that we cannot escape our sense of horror and outrage at evil actually points us to God's existence.

## The Christian Consolation: A God Who Suffers

---

Christians have a powerful consolation in the face of evil: the God they worship became human and suffered like us in the historical person of Jesus. Jesus lived a human life and experienced a physical death. But this physical suffering was only a part of his full suffering. The greatest agony for Jesus was the temporary loss of relationship with God. He went from experiencing the closest possible relationship with God to a state of total separation on the cross. This is became evident when he cried out his final words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>10</sup> ([Matthew 27:46](#), [Mark 15:34](#)). Jesus underwent this suffering out of love for humanity and obedience to God, knowing that his terrible death could restore our relationship to God. Keller attests to the significance of this:

"Christianity alone among the world religions claims that God became uniquely and fully human in Jesus Christ and therefore knows firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, bereavement, torture, and imprisonment. On the cross, he went beyond even the worst human suffering and experienced cosmic rejection and pain that exceeds ours as infinitely as his knowledge and power exceeds ours. In his death, God suffers in love, identifying with the abandoned and godforsaken."<sup>11</sup>

We cannot fully explain evil, but we can say that it is not an indicator that God does not love us. In Jesus, God has suffered, and we can rest assured that that God shares our pain and knows our sufferings.<sup>12</sup>

## The Christian Hope: Final Restoration

---

Christianity does not only offer consolation but also offers hope. Christians believe that God

defeated death by raising Jesus from the dead. Christ's resurrection points to our ultimate hope of final restoration when we are finally united with God for eternity.

This hope ultimately illuminates our sufferings and the seemingly meaningless agonies of our temporal existence. One day all wrong will be set right by the all-powerful God who made us and loves us. As C.S. Lewis writes, "Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory."<sup>13</sup> This transformation is the ultimate answer to the problem of evil.

Fyodor Dostoevsky writes in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

"I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood that they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened." <sup>14</sup>

### **Consulted Experts:**

*The BioLogos Foundation is grateful for the assistance of [Denis Alexander](#) in drafting this response.*

## Notes

---

1. Francis Collins, *The Language of God* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006), 43.
2. John C. Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 83, noted in Francis Collins, *The Language of God* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006), 44.
3. Francis Collins, *The Language of God* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006), 45.
4. Job 42:1-17 (NASB).
5. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 93, quoted in Francis Collins, *The Language of God* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006), 46.
6. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2008), 25.
7. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2008), 25.
8. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2008), 25.
9. Daniel Dennet. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. (New York: Viking Press, 2006).

10. Keller, *The Reason for God*, 29-30.
11. Keller, *The Reason for God*, 29-30.
12. Keller, *The Reason for God*, 29-30.
13. C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 69, quoted in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 34.
14. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Chapter 34. Quoted in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2008), 33.

## Further Reading

---

### Books

---

- Adams, Marilyn. *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Alexander, Denis. "Evolution, Natural Evil and the Theodicy Question." In *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* Oxford: Monarch, 2008.
- Keller, Timothy. "How Could a Good God Allow Suffering?" In *The Reason for God*. New York, NY: Dutton, 2006.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Problem of Pain*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.
- Plantinga, Alvin. "God, Evil, and the Metaphysics of Freedom." In *The Nature of Necessity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.
- Wykstra, Stephen. "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of Appearance." In *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, 138-160. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.