

Question 4

How can a good God allow suffering?

What is the problem of evil? The problem of evil has traditionally been stated in this way: the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with belief in a perfectly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God.

The argument goes like this:

Premise 1) If God were all-powerful, he could prevent evil and suffering.

Premise 2) If God were all-good, he would want to prevent evil and suffering.

Conclusion) If God were both all-powerful and all-good, there would be no evil and suffering.

Premise 3) But evil and suffering do exist.

Conclusion) Therefore, there is no all-powerful, all-good God (ie. the God of the Bible cannot exist).

This is the logical version of the problem of evil. But there is another aspect to the problem. Most people don't first have an intellectual problem with regard to suffering and evil. Most people first have an emotional problem.

We all suffer, and some of us pass through immense hurt and pain. Out of our scars and suffering we ask "Why?" We observe senseless evil, and as we become aware of so much suffering all around us, we cry out for an explanation. What most people seek is not a solely logical response made up of premises and conclusions but a response that reaches as deep—hopefully deeper—than the cry of our hearts and the confusion of our minds for an answer that doesn't sound hollow.

If there is no God, what happens to the problem of evil?

It doesn't go away. Premise 3 (above) still applies. Suffering and evil do exist, and we still experience pain and grief as a result. But now we are left to ask, "If there is no God, then what is the standard for good and evil? What answer do I have for my gut response that 'this just isn't the way it's supposed to be?' If I say there really is no such thing as evil and suffering, then how can I use its existence as evidence against God?"

Atheistic naturalism is devoid of meaning when it comes to the existence of good or evil. Eastern pantheism ultimately denies any real distinction between good and evil, and asserts that evil is an inherent and innate aspect of life. So the problem of evil is actually more of a problem when you deny that the God of the Bible exists.

It is possible that God has a good reason for permitting evil and suffering?

It sounds hollow to say that the answer to the problem of evil is that “God has a reason and purpose for everything.” This doesn’t satisfy the emotional problem we have with suffering. But it does, in fact, help address the logical problem. As William Lane Craig points out, “We are not in a good position to assess with confidence the probability that God has no morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evils that occur.”

If the all-knowing, all-wise God of the Bible exists, then there is no logical reason for us to think that God must tell us, or that we could even understand, his reason for allowing evil and suffering. The Old Testament book of Job is instructive here. In Job, we find out that God invites us to wrestle with him concerning evil and suffering. But we also find that at the end of Job’s questioning, there was not an answer from God but an encounter with a God who sits above our wisdom and knowledge.

If we can’t know the reason, how does this help us?

The story of Joseph shows us God can ‘turn the tables on evil’ and bring great good out of the evil actions of human beings. The point isn’t that we will now know all the specific reasons for our suffering—but we may see glimpses of how God brings good out of some of our pain and suffering

If we can see glimpses of reasons for some suffering, then it is reasonable to think that God might have good reasons for all suffering. Ultimately, the whole biblical story is God’s answer to the problem of evil. The entire story told in the Old Testament narrates God’s covenant commitment to rid the world of the curse of evil and sin and to restore blessing and peace. The New Testament explains how Jesus is the “answer” for how God will deal with evil once and for all

The Gospel as God’s “Answer” to the Problem of Evil

The “Gospel Answer” Part One—A God who enters into Suffering.

Out of the greatest evil and the moment of most intense suffering comes the defeat of evil and the undoing of human suffering. The worst day in human history was also the best day.

Here’s how philosopher Alvin Plantinga puts it:

As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of his creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God’s capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son’s humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious that we can imagine. So we don’t know why God permits evil; we do know, however, that he was prepared to suffer on our behalf, to accept suffering of which we can form no conception.

Thus, in light of the cross, whatever reason God allows evil and suffering, it cannot be because he doesn’t love us or that he is unacquainted with suffering.

The “Gospel Answer” Part Two—A God who will one day end all evil and suffering.

The narrative of Scripture is unique among all belief systems in telling us that evil and suffering are not inherent aspects of existence but are alien intruders. This makes sense of our gut response to suffering and death. We feel like they don’t belong. We imagine a world without evil, and we long for that world.

This is because there was and, one day, will be such a world. It’s the world Jesus showed us in his miracles. The world we all want is the world that Jesus will recreate when he comes again. Only the biblical storyline satisfies our deep longing for a continuity of all that is good in this world without all that is evil.

