

If God is Good, Why is There Evil and Suffering in the World?

Judges 6:13

We're going to start a new series today. It's a series on tackling some of the most important questions people ask. I'm calling this series, "Big Questions: About God, the Bible and Life."

People have so many questions about life, about God, about relationships. Even for us Christians, although we have the Bible, which is supposed to answer our questions, still we wonder about many things. We wonder, "If God is good, why is there evil and suffering in the world? Can we really trust the Bible? Is there heaven and hell? Why do bad things happen to good people? These are just some questions that people frequently ask.

Today, I'll begin with "If God is good, why is there evil and suffering in the world?" A few days ago, we heard some devastating news. There were this terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka which killed more than 200 people and injured hundreds more. Closer to home, there was this shooting in a synagogue in California. There were also earthquakes in the Philippines and in Mexico. We heard of people we know who passed away recently like Tita Diday of Tita Nelly and, of course, Ron, the husband of An, who died just yesterday morning.

Admittedly, these are unwelcome things. These are things we don't want to happen in our lives and in this world. They cause so much grief and suffering. So again, "If God is good, why is there evil and suffering in the world?"

That's a big, big question. It really is. As a matter of fact, in the few minutes we have together today we're really going to be discussing something that's been part of the debate of philosophy and theology for about 3000 years. So, I thought, how do you get started on a topic that big? And I thought I would just start with you.

I'd like to give you a test that would just get you thinking about the differences between good and bad, and wickedness and righteousness. I'm going to put some pictures up on the screen. When you see the picture say either good or bad.

Beach – good

Snowstorm – bad

Hospital - good

War – bad

Athlete/Healthy Body – good

Sickness – bad

Billy Graham - good

Osama bin Laden – bad

Rolly Estabillo – bad

Now, I know who my friends are. My point is, by showing you these pictures, we know what evil and suffering looks and feels like when confronted with it.

One thing is true: Evil and suffering are present everywhere. Where there is evil, there is suffering. In fact, you cannot deny the reality of evil. It lurks in every corner.

Vincent Bugliosi, spent 8 years as a prosecutor for the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office where he won 105 out of 106 felony jury trials. In his book, entitled "The Five Reasons that O.J. Simpson Got Away With Murder", he writes these words:

"When tragedies like the murders of Nicole [Brown-Simpson] and Ron [Goldman] occur they get one to thinking about the notion of God. Nicole was only thirty-five, Ron was just twenty-five, both outgoing, friendly, well liked young people who had a zest for life.

Their lives were brutally extinguished by a cold-blooded murderer. How does God, if there is a God, permit such a horrendous and terrible act to occur along with the countless other unspeakable atrocities committed by man against his fellow man throughout history? And how could God - all-good and all-just, according to Christian theology, permit the person who murdered Ron and Nicole to go free...When Judge Ito's clerk, Deidre Roberson, read the jury's not-guilty verdict Nicole's mother whispered, 'God, where are you?'"

That mother was asking a question that a lot of people ask every day. A man named Gideon asked this very question thousands of years ago when facing the famine, terrorist attacks, and killing of his own people. He said, "Pardon me, my lord...but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian." (Judges 6: 13, NIV)

George Barna was once commissioned to inquire of people what one question they would ask of God if they had the opportunity. By an overwhelming majority, the most urgent question was this - "Why is there so much suffering in the world?"

The problem arises because of what we, as Christians, believe about God and about evil. We believe in four things:

God exists

God is all-good

God is all-powerful

Evil exists

Here is where the problem comes--how can the last statement be reconciled with the other three? If God exists and if he is a really good God, why would he allow evil to exist?

Similarly, if evil exists then maybe he is not a good God because he is not concerned about people who are suffering. Another set of question is, if God exists and he is all-powerful why doesn't he stop evil in this world? On the other hand, if evil exists then maybe he is not really all-powerful because he is powerless to stop it.

It is the last statement that was the premise of a book written several years back by Rabbi Harold Kushner. The book is "When Bad Things Happen to Good People". Do you remember that? It even became a bestseller. Kushner's answer was: evil exists because God is powerless to stop it although he is a good God. That's not biblical, of course. Again, as Christians we believe the Bible says that God exists, he is all-good and all-powerful. So now, how do you square an all-good, all powerful God with the evil and suffering in the world?

I know that for many of you today, this is not just an academic question or just a theological issue. For you, this is where the rubber of reality has hit the road of your life. You've gone through pain. You've gone through the loss of a child. You've had suffering or you are going through illness. You either know of someone or you are related to someone, who has either been murdered or committed suicide and you are searching for answers. You yourself may be asking the question that Gideon asked, "If the Lord is with me, why has all this happened to me?"

I want to confess that I can't stand up here today and give you the perfect answer from God on this issue, because the perfect answer really doesn't exist. But I can give us some biblical answers to these hard questions that can help us not only understand the problem of evil, but even experience victory when it comes our way.

There is one thing I can say dogmatically about evil and it is this –

I. **God is not the author of evil and suffering.**

So often you hear the question, "Why didn't God create a world where there was no evil and suffering in the first place?" The answer to that is - He did.

Genesis 1:31 (NIV) says, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."

So, the question is - if God is not the author of evil and suffering and if what He created is good, then where did all of this evil and suffering come from in the first place?

In the beginning, the Bible says, there was no evil, no pain, no sorrow, no suffering, and no death and yet today the world is soaked with all of these things. What brought these things about? The Bible very plainly states that everything went south the moment that Adam and Eve used their God-given free will to choose to disobey Him.

“Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.” Genesis 3:1-6)

In this one incident, in the very beginning, we see where all the problems of life can be traced. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned a sin nature has been passed on to every man and every woman who has ever been born. That is why you have to teach kids to be good because doing bad is natural to them. You have to teach kids to be sharing their toys, because being selfish is natural to them. We all have that sinful nature that causes us to do evil and experience suffering.

Sin not only corrupted the heart of the human race, it corrupted the physical world that we live in. Let's look at Genesis 3:17-18. It says, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field."

Paradise was lost. Before they sinned, Adam and Eve just picked the fruit of the trees or plants to eat. It seemed like food was abundant and it was there for their picking. After they sinned, they had to work the ground to be able to eat. And the ground was uncooperative.

Though it may sound simplistic and even a cop-out to some, the root problem of all evil and suffering is the sin of the human race. Someone has estimated that 95% of the suffering in this world is the result of sin in our own lives and in other people.

I am not trying to make light of the problem, but I can kind of illustrate it this way with something I read:

In the beginning God populated the earth with broccoli, cauliflower, spinach, green, yellow and red vegetables of all kinds so Man and Woman would live long and healthy lives. Then using God's great gifts, Satan created Ben and Jerry's and Krispy Kreme Donuts and Satan said, "Do you want chocolate with that?"

And Man said, "Yes!" and Woman said, "And another one with sprinkles!" and they gained ten pounds.

Then God created the helpful yogurt that woman might keep the figure that man found so fair. Satan brought forth white flour from the wheat and sugar from the cane and combined them. Woman went from a size 2 to a size 12, so God said, "Try my fresh green salad."

And Satan presented thousand island dressing and garlic toast on the side and Man and Woman unfastened their belts as they continued to eat all that the Devil laid before them.

God then said, "I have sent you heart healthy vegetables and olive oil in which to cook them" and Satan brought forth deep fried fish and chicken fried steak so big it needed its own platter. Man gained more weight and his cholesterol went through the roof.

God then brought running shoes so that His children might lose those extra pounds and Satan gave cable t.v. with a remote control, so Man would not have to toil changing the channels. Man and Woman laughed and cried before the flickering light and gained more pounds.

Then God brought forth the potato, naturally low in fat and brimming with nutrition and Satan peeled off the healthful skin, sliced the starchy center into chips and deep fried them and Man gained still more pounds.

God then gave lean beef, so that Man might consume few calories and still satisfy his appetite and Satan created McDonalds and its 99c double cheese-burger. Satan then said, "You want fries with that?"

Man replied, "Yes and super-size them!" Satan said, "It is good."

Man went into cardiac arrest. God sighed and created quadruple by-pass surgery and Satan created HMOs.

Funny? Yes, but it makes the point. God is not the author of evil and suffering but that raises a bigger question.

II. Why Do Evil and Suffering Exist?

There are three types of evil that exists in the world that we see every day. There is moral evil which is evil committed by wicked people that cause such things as: war, crime, cruelty, discrimination, racism, suicide bombings and injustice.

There is natural evil that involves such things as: hurricanes, tsunamis, flood, earthquakes, and so forth.

Then there is social evil which are things such as poverty, hunger, and homelessness.

The question that literally roars in the minds of those who suffer from these things is, "Why?" Why did my little girl die of cancer? Why did my son die in that automobile accident? Why did I get cancer at such an early age? Why did God allow me to be molested as a child?

Don't feel bad if you find yourself asking those questions, because those questions are as old as the human race. Everybody knows about Job and how Job suffered and Job screamed out the same question.

"Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb? Why were there knees to receive me and breasts that I might be nursed? For now I would be lying down in peace; I would be asleep and at rest with kings and counselors of the earth, who built for themselves places now lying in ruins, with rulers who had gold, who filled their houses with silver. Or why was I not hidden in the ground like a stillborn child, like an infant who never saw the light of day?" (Job 3:11-16, NIV)

It is interesting that every time tragedy strikes, we call God like congress would call someone to appear in a hearing and demand that He explain Himself and He had better have a good reason for doing what He did. I hate to tell you this and you are not going to like it, but it is true: because God is God, He doesn't need to explain His actions to anyone and He doesn't owe anyone an explanation.

For thirty-seven chapters of the Book of Job, except for talking to Satan himself, God is totally silent. He never tries to defend any of his actions. Then Job demands an explanation as to why he has suffered. And God asks Job one question that ends every other question. **"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding."** (Job 38:4, NKJV)

What He said to Job in effect was this. "You wouldn't even be here trying to ask me a question if I hadn't decided to create you to begin with."

Yet, even though God does not owe us an explanation, I will try to give you at least a partial explanation. It comes down simply to the free will of human beings.

You know, one of the things that make men and women morally responsible is freedom. We have a choice about what we do. When God created every one of us, He created us with the capacity to either choose to love Him or choose not to; to choose to follow Him or choose not to; to choose to believe in Him or choose not to; but with that freedom of choice comes the possibility of evil. Because the opposite of good is evil. If you choose God, you choose good. If you don't choose God, you choose evil. Being free then means you have not only the ability to choose good, but also the ability to choose evil. Because of our free will then that doesn't make God responsible for evil; it makes us responsible. We do the choosing. He created the fact of freedom. We perform the acts of freedom. He made evil possible. We make evil actual.

The only way that God could create a world with free will is to also create a world with a potential for evil and suffering. God loves us so much and wants us to love Him so much, that rather than make us into robots who say "I love you, God, I will follow you God", He made us into real people with real choices that can either be choices for good or choices for bad.

All of this leads still to another question.

III. What Purpose Do Evil and Suffering Serve?

There are some people who say because of evil, the concept of God doesn't make any sense. You cannot reconcile a good God with bad evil. If you think about it, really the opposite of that is true. It is not because of evil that God doesn't make any sense. It is because of God that we can make sense of evil. How do we do that? By remembering this truth: "God is so good and God is so great, He can take the negative of evil and turn it into the positive of good." God is the only one who can give a purpose and a meaning to evil and suffering.

How does God do this? By keeping a promise He made in Romans 8:28.

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who

have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

God has promised that He can take the worst circumstances that come into our lives and cause good to come out of it if we are committed to His will and His purpose.

Take for example the problem of pain. There is good in pain, because pain can give us warning of an even greater evil. Pain teaches us not to touch a hot pan. Our built-in nerve endings detect pain so we won't continue to hold a hot pan if we pick it up. Many times it is a small pain that can lead you to go to the doctor to discover a bigger problem that would have killed you had it not been discovered.

God also uses pain and suffering to sharpen our character, to help us become more like Christ. Romans 5:3 says, *“We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance.” (Romans 5:3, NLT)*

We all know this is true. Virtues like character, perseverance and determination are only formed and strengthened through adversity, never in prosperity. I've told you before that God's purpose for those of us who follow Him is not to make us happy: it is to make us more like Jesus Christ.

Then, God uses evil and suffering not to drive people away from Him, but to draw people to Him. *“For God can use sorrow in our lives to help us turn away from sin and seek salvation. We will never regret that kind of sorrow.” (II Corinthians 7:10, NLT)*

All of us have known people who in times of health and happiness didn't give a rip about God, but when tragedy came into their life or sickness or sorrow, God used that to break them so that they would come to Him.

If you still don't believe God can take a negative and turn it into a positive, then let me give you what I call "Exhibit A."

The reason I know that God can take the absolutely worst thing that ever happens in your life and bring out of it some of the best things that can ever happen in your life is because God took the absolutely worse thing that ever happened in the history of the world and created the very best thing that ever happened in the history of the world. What do I mean? I mean the death of His own Son, Jesus Christ.

God took the worst thing that has ever happened in history which was the death of the innocent Son of God on the cross, and turned it into the best thing which could ever happen which is the opportunity for salvation and the chance to receive eternal life. God took the very worst thing and brought out of it, the very best thing. I ask you, "How can you not say in your individual life God can't take whatever circumstances you go through and create something good from them?" If He can do that with the death of His own Son, can He not do that with any evil or suffering that comes into your life? All which leads to the greatest question which is -

IV. When I Experience Evil and Suffering How Should I Respond?

There is only one way you can respond to evil and suffering so that you not only cope with it, but you overcome it. I promise you upfront it is not easy, but it is the only thing that works - **TRUST**. I told you before that every time sorrow, pain, suffering or death comes your way, God is asking you this question, "Do you trust Me or not?" As parents we have had to do things with our children like taking them to the dentist or to a doctor when they saw no good from it at all but they had to trust we were doing what was best for them. Just so, there are times we have to trust the Father in Heaven the same way. Just because you can't see a purpose in suffering doesn't mean there isn't one.

If God is good and if God is powerful and if God is sovereign and if God always does what is right and if God loves me supremely I have to believe He can take the greatest evil that can ever come into my life and use it for my ultimate good and for His glory. Remember He has already shown He can through the cross of Jesus Christ.

To trust God is to worship him despite the suffering we're going through. We just wait for him and ask him to refresh us, to renew our spirits. Trusting even when we don't understand.