

Theodicy

Is God responsible for the evil in our world? Atheists say with great certainty, “Yes,” and they use that claim to justify their refusal to believe in God, who is supposed to be good. Christian philosopher/theologians and apologists respond to this issue by stating that God allows evil to achieve some greater good. But atheists reject that too. I suspect that most Christians don’t think about it much, which is too bad because the issue is important for a proper Christian worldview and values. What do the Scriptures say? Let’s look at the Book of Job. And also at 1 Peter. In both, I’ll regard the suffering that we experience as the evil in the world.

I. Job. The story in this book opens with Satan, in heaven, daring to challenge God. And God not only allows it, but involves Himself in the issue that Satan raised. The issue that Satan alleged is this: “You put a hedge around Job, and that’s the only reason he worships You. If you take that hedge away, Job will curse You. Job only serves You for what he gets from You, not because of Who You are.” The “hedge” is God’s protection from the chaos that surrounds. The default state of the world we inhabit is chaos. It’s Satan’s domain. It’s lies, murders, violence and hatreds. It’s natural disasters, diseases, wars, famines, and . . . hey, just look at this world we live in! It’s all the product of Satan’s wicked rule. The “hedge” protects Job from the ravages of Satan’s chaos, it’s a gift of God. Job’s prosperity was due to God’s hedge, which isolated him from the world of chaos.

God selectively removes the hedge, that is, it’s a partial removal. So God permits the surrounding, default chaos to engulf Job. Let’s understand this: God caused the hedge to be removed. But God didn’t cause the suffering, Satan did. Yet God allowed it. Why? To test Job, to test God, to test Satan, and so that a vastly greater good results at the end. When the test of suffering is over, Job ends up with a far better knowledge of who God is. God is glorified. And, although not in the text, from elsewhere in the canon we know that Satan is eventually judged for his wickedness. As it turns out, Satan lied to God. And Job, although thoroughly confused by what was happening because he didn’t have the necessary revelation, really did serve God for who He is. And God’s investment in Job was justified. God did not will the evil that befell Job, but He permitted it for reasons of His own that infinitely outweighed the evil.

Can we acknowledge that it’s God’s sustaining of the cosmos, similar to the hedge around Job, that keeps the world from destructing. God controls his creation, including such monstrosities as Leviathan and Behemoth. He is a good God, and He rules in totally wise and just sovereignty. As far as Job is concerned (and us as well), let’s get this: God, in His sovereignty and goodness, can deprive us of a lesser good in order that a greater good results. The lesser good in Job’s case was health and prosperity. The greater good was a deep, intimate knowledge of God and the relationship that came from that. The greater good, we have to understand, could not have occurred without the suffering, because it was Job’s virtuous faith in spite of the severe hardship that justified the greater good, and it was his faithfulness that justified the suffering.

Let’s also note two further things: (1) Job’s suffering had to be public. It had to actually occur in real time and space. Although God, of course, knew the outcome, it nevertheless had to become reality. And (2) There is no greater good for anyone than to know and be in relationship with the Creator God. Knowing and personally experiencing God outweighs any suffering in this life, if such suffering is necessary to attain it. Suffering – or other such trials – is a way to encounter the living God. Job’s (and ours) ultimate existence in union with God transcends any suffering in this current life.

This story isn’t in Scripture to justify the concept that the end justifies the means. No way! Rather, it’s that Job is the end, himself. We human creatures are God’s beloved, His image and likeness. And so we’re precious to Him, so precious that God does all that’s necessary in His goodness and wisdom, according to His holiness and justice, to achieve for us an infinite good, viz, communion with God.

II. 1 Peter. Everyone knows that this 1st Letter by Peter is about suffering. We’ve looked at this Letter in a previous Sunday School lesson not long ago, and Pastor has recently preached on it, verse-by-verse. So we want here only to look at the highlights to try to understand something about God and evil. And us.

The letter ends with Peter stating that his letter’s contents are the “true grace of God.” It’s what gets us into salvation *and* instructs us how to live out this present life in the way that pleases God. That’s a necessary concept: God’s grace *includes* how we live. It’s not just the provision of forgiveness of sins and escape from God’s wrath, as we suppose. And how we live includes our response to the trials and persecutions that result in suffering.

Peter has the Book of Job in mind as he writes, because 5:8 alludes to it. So Peter understands that our suffering in this existence is for a greater blessing in the existence to come. He states that explicitly (see 1:7, for example). He also

understands that Christ had to suffer first, so that at His Return, He'll be glorious (1:11). That's the pattern. We follow that pattern just as Jesus did (4:1). Suffering first, then glory.

And there's something deeper here. It's this: We must suffer unjustly (due to persecution, for example), because we who follow Jesus re-live His life. We're united to Jesus, we're *in Christ*, we identify with Jesus, so we also suffer unjustly as He did. "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (2:21). We don't retaliate, complain or be bitter, but we rejoice at having the privilege to demonstrate our faith in Christ (4:13a). Christ reprised the story of the Nation of Israel during His earthly existence, a story of suffering (but with future glory promised), and we reprise the life of Christ (or the Nation of Israel) by our suffering, to be followed – as with Jesus, as with Israel – by glory. It's what Christ-likeness necessarily involves. Jesus submitted to it, in obedience to the Father's will. So do we.

But now, Why was (is) suffering necessary? First, Job's 3 friends were correct in asserting that suffering is a punishment for sin. God's "very good" creation was given over to decay, futility and violence because of human disobedience. The people of the Gentile nations were given over to be ruled by wicked supernatural beings because of continued rebellion at the Tower of Babel episode. God permitted Satan to usurp the privilege of rule *as a judgment* upon sinful humanity. Jesus was God's "suffering Servant" because He had to bear all human sin and rebellion and atone for it. Jesus' sufferings were due to His taking on Himself all sin and suffering God's wrath, substituting Himself, an infinite Person, for the eternal suffering we justly deserve. But Job's 3 friends were in grievous error regarding Job's suffering because there are other reasons for suffering, and they missed that. Now let's consider a few other reasons (not in any order).

Suffering is often due to persecution. Our loyalty to Jesus *in spite of* suffering exalts Jesus. The suffering of faithful believers because of allegiance to Him says, "I love Jesus" as no other acts of obedience can possibly do. It says that Jesus is worth more than anything else, even my own self. That's biblical worship. Suffering for Jesus is a privilege. That sounds strange to us, but God blesses those who willingly suffer loss for Jesus (Luke 6:22, for example). God's ways are not our ways, nor His thoughts (and His values) ours. In God's perfect wisdom, an existence saturated with evil, with its concomitant suffering, must precede the good and glorious existence that God wills for His creation and His beloved creatures. Suffering because of persecution also, by the way, exalts the Holy Spirit who enables such loyalty.

Suffering unjustly demands that justice be done. The injustice violates God's created order and His character. So vindication is needed. Our faith in God is really trust that He will, in His time and His way, right the wrong. Suffering may also result from our obedience to God's Word, and that obedience—as evidenced by suffering—exalts God (see Hebrews 5:8). Our suffering persecution makes *real* our union with Christ, for we participate with Him in suffering (see 2 Corinthians 1:5, 7 and Philippians 3:10).

Suffering reveals character as nothing else can. Jesus is lovely beyond description because He willingly suffered horribly for the sake of others. His suffering showed the extent of His love, of the goodness of His Person. Same with us! Suffering breaks a proud spirit. It keeps us humble and trusting in God. Suffering also reveals the genuine-ness of our faith. Do we really desire the better existence that's to come? Or are we so smug and pleased with our present lives that what God has put on offer is irrelevant, and we'll make compromises to maintain it and so to avoid suffering? It's categorically true that if anyone who has faith in Jesus isn't in some way suffering loss, that person has compromised.

Suffering is (and must be) limited to this existence only. However painful it may be, it ceases at death. And then we go on to our reward, an eternity of blessing greater than anything imaginable. We need a fresh vision of how glorious and thrilling it will be to encounter the risen and exalted Son and hear His, "Welcome, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Lord." Our faith in God is really trust that this promise is so true and certain that we're willing to suffer any loss or make any sacrifice on the basis of it. It's this humble trust in the goodness and truthfulness of God that defeats proud Satan and all evil. Jesus gained that victory at the cross and resurrection, but we join Him in that victory by trusting God's promises.

I write the above not because God needs our justification for what He does, but because it has these deep implications for us that we need to recognize. Reflect on this: If God is willing to visit suffering on us, His treasured elect, knowing how great an ultimate destiny awaits us in the future, in order to turn our minds and hearts further toward Him, how much more compelling is it for us, who don't have to suffer as Job or the early Christians did, to commit to God with love and zeal and faithfulness and loyalty and service? Theodicy isn't an apology for God; it's motivation for us to desire more than anything to transcend our ordinary lives so as to fulfill the very purpose for which God placed us here, as revealed elsewhere in and throughout the canon.