

Chapter 16

SORROW, SUFFERING, AND SOVEREIGNTY:

Pain, Providence, and the Problem of Evil

(By Rick Holland)

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If there were one word in the Bible I could change, I know what it would be. Two verses into his epistle James writes: “Consider it all joy, my brethren, *when* you encounter various trials.” How hopeful it would be had he used the word *if* instead of *when*. However, James’s inspired quill is unmistakable; trials are inevitable. It is not *if* they will come, but *when*. No, I don’t really wish it were a different word (then the blessings of the following verses would be forfeited), but I confess to a hard swallow when I think about this divine guarantee.

Sorrow, suffering, and difficulty are a part of life—everyone’s life. Though there is a broad spectrum of the quantity and intensity of difficulty in people’s lives, no exemptions are issued for facing the problem of pain, evil, and suffering. Our experience with evil is general and specific, communal and individual, global and personal. The question is not, “Will I experience suffering?,” but rather, “How will I respond when it comes?”

There are two ways to approach “the problem of evil” as theologians and philosophers call it. It can be wrestled with philosophically or emotionally, however, both approaches inevitably end up addressing it theologically. The philosophical (or logical) approach involves *theodicy*. Theodicy is a defense of God’s stated character in the Bible against the charge that He should not permit bad things to happen. The emotional (or individual) approach is personal. It is simply the effort to formulate a reasonable response to undesirable things when they do happen. Thousands of years of theologizing and study have not yielded an answer to the philosophical

approach that is fully satisfying. And thousands of years of suffering have not diminished the pain we experience when suffering happens to us personally.

The Philosophical Problem of Evil

If millennia of history's foremost thinkers have not conclusively answered this problem, I am under no illusion that these few pages can. But understanding the formulation of the philosophical/logical problem of evil provides helpful perspective. Again, this is called *theodicy*. In this category the God of the Bible is on trial, and the charge against God is formulated like this: There are three theological propositions that the Bible puts forth, but logically, (it is argued) only two of them can be simultaneously true. Here are the propositions:

- 1) God is good (meaning He desires the good and happiness of His creatures).
- 2) God is sovereign (meaning He has power to do as He wills).
- 3) Evil exists (including natural disasters, personal tragedies, death, and sin).

So logically, if God is good and evil exists, then He must not be sovereign—i.e., He is not powerful enough to prevent evil. Or, if God is sovereign and evil exists, then He must not be good—i.e., He has no moral inclination to prevent evil. Or lastly, if God is good and He is sovereign, then evil does not exist—i.e., evil is merely illusory. This last option is not a real one or we would not have the problem at all!

C.S. Lewis simplifies the problem: “If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if He were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But His creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both. This is the problem of pain in its simplest form.”¹

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1962), 26.

Admittedly, if this were the only way to formulate the problem, the only possible solutions would seem to invalidate the Bible's depiction of God and evil. However, this classic presentation of the problem of evil is incomplete. Yes, God is good. Yes, God is sovereign. Yes, evil exists. But there are other factors to consider.

When Abraham was pleading with God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah, he footnoted his arguments with this theological insight: "... Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Gen. 18:25) In other words, Abraham asserted that God's actions are fundamentally righteous in all His dealings. Moses confessed the same when he sang: "The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He" (Deut. 32:4). Beyond God's goodness and sovereignty, His judgment to do what is right must be added to the equation. God Himself is the standard for all His actions. And the exercise of His sovereignty is always just (i.e., right and righteous).

Another divine attribute should be considered as well—God's wisdom. God has morally sufficient reasons for the existence of evil that flow from His infinite wisdom. All things take place either by God's prescription or permission, and in perfect accordance with His sovereign purposes and unfathomable judgments (Rom. 11:33–36). Divine reasons, then, exist for the evils of our world on both a massive scale (e.g., the events of 9/11/01, the Holocaust, and natural disasters) and on a personal level (e.g., sickness, pain, loss, and death). Sometimes the reasons for these evils are provided. For example, the greatest catastrophe in history, the worldwide flood, was preceded by a clear explanation of why it would happen (Gen. 6:5). But sometimes God's reasons are hidden, unavailable to the sufferers. Though the reader of the book of Job is privy to the goings on in Heaven that precipitated Job's suffering (Job 1:6–12), Job was painfully uninformed (Job 31). Abraham was tested by the divine command to sacrifice his son Isaac. He

too was unaware of God's purposes in this, his darkest hour (Gen. 22). Why does God inform some people of the reasons for their sufferings and not others?—because God's purposes concerning evil are always governed by His wisdom. And His wisdom sometimes works beyond the veil of our experience for reasons only He understands.

This raises an obvious question: Does God really send evil upon His creatures? To answer, we must first understand that this is actually two questions. The first question asks, “Does God send evil things in our world and lives?” The second question is: “Does God commit evil in sending bad things into our world and lives?” Both questions are answered by defining what “evil” is.

Lamentations 3:37–39 says: “Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth? Why should any living mortal, or any man, offer complaint in view of his sins?” The word “ill” (*rāâ* in Hebrew) in verse 38 has an interesting range of meaning. It is translated with various terms that indicate its range: “calamity,” “evil,” “misery,” “trouble,” “disaster.” The full force of this term is felt when we observe that it is used with God as its Sender (cf. Job 2:10; Amos 3:6; Isa. 45:7). Since God cannot sin (Ps. 5:4; 11:7; 145:17; Isa. 5:16; Hab. 1:13; Heb. 7:26; Jam. 1:13; 1 Pet. 1:14–16), these God ordained “evils” cannot be understood as immoral or sinful when He sends them. Painful? Yes. Sinful? No.

The apostle Paul provides the most concise synthesis of this idea in Romans 8:28: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” Notice that “all things” are under the comprehensive direction of God's causation for His own purposes. This text does not say that He authors/causes sin, but that He causes all things—including sin—to work out for the good of those who love

Him, and are called according to His purpose. The unveiled surprise of this verse is that perceived evils are a divine glove in which God's hand shapes good—but for Christians! Unbelievers have no reason to hope in the midst of difficulty except for the immediate suffering to end. Believers, however, have the assurance that God is causing their suffering to work for their good in time, His glory in eternity, and their increased enjoyment of Heaven (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:16–18).

Knowing these theological truths may provide understanding and comfort for some. But for most, the problem of pain is more difficult to handle emotionally, when we find ourselves in the middle of trouble and suffering.

The Emotional Problem of Pain

What about our personal pain and hardship? How can we respond?

What hope can be offered to my friends who walked into their baby's room to find him lying lifeless from SIDS? to a 28-year-old friend who was informed he has terminal brain cancer? to a young man in my ministry whose entire family—parents and two sisters, were killed in a car crash? to loving parents who received a phone call letting them know that their son had committed suicide? to my Mom who called to tell me that she did not think I would make it to her bedside before she lost her final fight with cancer? What hope can be provided for these real people and their real heartaches?

Whether or not we have a philosophical answer to the problem of evil or not, we will all generate an emotional one when trouble finds us. When tragedy, suffering, and injustice are on God's agenda for His children, how can we respond?

A helpful protocol is to ask and answer three questions: *What do I feel? What do I think? What do I believe?*

When trials come our way, the first question to answer is *What do I feel?* Shattered feelings are the soul's reflex to tragedy. And it is easier to tame wild animals than wounded feelings. When any kind of suffering visits us, we can expect our feelings to spike, sometimes in a predictable manner, other times in surprising ways. But identifying what we are feeling is the first step in generating a godly response. *Do I feel angry, fearful, threatened, sad, abandoned, alone, defensive, combative, embarrassed, jealous, or mistreated?* These are the initial questions to consider. It is remarkable how often we have these feelings without ever identifying and isolating them in our hearts.

The second question to answer is *What do I think?* This is where our theology is tested in real life. Our thinking is like a boat with two possible rudders: feelings or beliefs. If left to feelings alone, thinking can become dangerous and erratic. Emotions that spring from difficult circumstances are almost always self-centered, self-protective, and self-interested. To be sure, God designed us with emotions that function protectively, but emotions rarely prompt God-focused thinking, at least at first. While feelings are hardwired to think of self, theology is inherently God-focused. For Christians, how we think must be governed first and foremost by what we know to be true, not by how we feel. Emotions should be the caboose on a train of thinking that is powered by true thoughts about God and His Word.

The third and most important question to answer when trouble comes is *What do I believe?* Realities known to be true by faith can easily evaporate into doubt when the heat of emotion is applied. We don't always *feel* like our biblical convictions are true when sorrow and suffering come. Emotions like fear, anxiety, and hurt can swallow perspective in one gulp. But confidence in theological realities is the only sure anchor in the tempests of trials. Truth can alter the course of our thinking and calm the storm of our emotions—but what truth?

Most of our emotional responses to evil, pain, and suffering fall into two general categories: fear and anger. These two responses are directly tied to theological doubts and their solutions are grounded in theological certainties. Fear has to do with loss, anger with trust.

Whenever there is the threat of loss, fearful anxiety can grip the heart. We fear the loss of anything that we believe will bring us happiness, comfort, joy, or pleasure. The prospect of losing our loved ones, our health, our money, our possessions, or anything we hold dear can stir up feelings of fear and anxiety. But all of these fears can be traced to a theological absence in our own hearts—the absence of confidence in God’s sufficiency. In Romans 8:31–39 Paul describes the kind of reasoning that should accompany trouble. His reference point is Christ. After a long list of sources of sorrowful possibilities (esp. vv. 38–39), the persecuted Apostle makes an impressive theological assessment. These bad things—including tribulation, or distress, persecution, famine, supernatural powers, the past, the future, even death—have no power to “separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 39; c.f., Matt. 28:18; Acts 18:10). Paul pits these evils against separation from God’s love expressed in the gospel. All of these evils are fear-inducing threats, but none as threatening as being forsaken by God. Comforting perspective is gained by reminding ourselves of the gospel—that no threat can undo what God has done for us in Christ. After all, “if God is for us, who is against us?” (v. 31) Reorienting ourselves to the gospel forces us to make helpful comparisons, as we realize that the trials of this life are outweighed by the glories promised in the next. “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). The Apostle compares the worst possible threats to the horror of being separated from God. His argument is compelling. Since nothing can take away his greatest

treasure—Christ—any other loss is manageable. This ability to compare the certainty of gospel security to the uncertainty of personal hardship was Paul’s emotional and rational anchor.

Appropriate comparing should also bring solace to the angry heart. Difficulties can both whisper and scream the question, “Why?” Asking why something bad has happened is an admission that the event is contrary to our expectations. The default of our emotional expectations is that we don’t deserve pain and suffering. Anger reveals a wrong worldview about what we deserve. “For man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward.”(Job 5:7; c.f. 14:1). Why do bad things happen? The better question is why does so little happen to us? The expectations we have for our lives rarely match what we truly deserve. The greatest threat is eternity in Hell. Since Hell’s threat has been eliminated for believers by the gospel, any other painful event or circumstance can be relegated to the temporal. Again, Paul’s example points toward the ability to compare. “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor 4:17–18).

Puritan preacher Horatius Bonar isolated the real issue when he wrote: “Man’s dislike at God’s sovereignty arises from his suspicion of God’s heart.” He adds, “We are not always comfortable with the idea of being wholly at the disposal of God.” To be angry at (or about) the events of life is to mistrust a loving God. How can we be suspicious of His heart when we remember His love for us in the gospel? But does God remember us? Is He beyond the reach of pain?

The Cross is the Solution and Only Hope for Evil and Pain

God has not distanced Himself from the problem of evil. On the contrary, He met it straight on. During Jesus' trial before the Roman procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate declared that he had the power and authority to determine Jesus' fate. The response of his Galilean prisoner must have been surprising. Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11). Instead of pleading for His life, the Savior consented to His execution with a footnote. Jesus repudiated Pilate's misapprehension of his own authority and alerted him to the fact that God was the source of his governing power. God is the Conferrer of power and prerogative, not Rome or any other human authority.

The impending crucifixion of the Son of God constituted the greatest evil and injustice ever committed. But there was more going on than met the eye. What Jesus revealed to Pilate was that all the perpetrators, conspirators, and evildoers ultimately act under the authority of God. So what was God doing in this horrific event? John Piper answers, "At the all-important pivot of human history, the worst sin ever committed served to show the greatest glory of Christ and obtain the sin-conquering gift of God's grace. God did not just overcome evil at the cross. He made evil commit suicide in doing its worst evil."² Any form of evil, every pain, all sorrow, every degree of suffering, each injustice, all sickness, every disease, and any "bad thing" including death lost its sting at the cross (cf. 1 Cor. 15:54–57). God's sacrifice of His Son Jesus demonstrates His mysterious wisdom (Isa. 53:10). The Father's unfathomable loss and the Son's incomprehensible suffering were the crux of God's predetermined plan for His own everlasting glory and our eternal good. "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" (Rom 8:32) The only appropriate

² John Piper, *Spectacular Sins* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2008), 12.

response is to exclaim with Paul, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (Rom 11:33)

For the believer Heaven is the time and place where we will enjoy the absence of all evil and suffering and the presence of unmitigated joy. The problem of evil is the cry of the soul for that experience. It is placing upon this world expectations that can only be met in Heaven. Considering our unworthiness in light of the infinite tributaries of God’s goodness, sovereignty, wisdom, grace and mercy can reset the troubled heart with the power of perspective.

The realities of Heaven and Hell bring evil and suffering into sharp focus. “For Christians, this present life is the closest they will come to Hell. For unbelievers, it is the closest they will come to Heaven.”³ God uses the troubles of our lives, culminating in the inevitability of our own deaths, to pry our grips off this world and refocus our hearts on what lies ahead with Him. As Maurice Roberts writes, “...the degree of a Christian’s peace of mind depends upon his spiritual ability to interpose the thought of God between himself and his anxiety.”⁴ If a believer can keep his mind on God, no evil in this world can steal his peace. And that will be enough till Heaven.

³ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale, 2004), 28.

⁴ Maurice Roberts, *The Thought of God* (Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth, 1994), 7.