

## TCC Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> November 2014 – #3 If there's a good God then why so much suffering? – 7 of the best series

**Title: “#3 – If there's a good God then why so much suffering?”**

**Purpose:** To refute the notion that Christianity and the presence of evil are essentially irreconcilable.

### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the most emotionally charged and powerful questions that we can really attempt to tackle. For many of us here this is probably not going to be a somewhat abstract and disconnected sort of question.

The reality is that no words that I say this morning are – at least at an emotional level going to make things thoroughly OKAY.

It is one thing to talk in the area of CLARITY, perhaps clearing up unnecessary confusions – BUT – it will be impossible for me to give the sort of level of immediate COMFORT which will make you go out the doors of this church saying that all is well with the world...

...BECAUSE patently ALL IS \*NOT\* WELL WITH THE WORLD.  
This world, even on a very brief inspection, is very broken.

And, for a great many, that means just one thing – and that is that:

“God has got a lot of explaining to do”.

So I am not going to come to you with **A MAGIC WAND AND WAVE IT OVER THE SPOT** of your very real hurting and pain and it will go away **JUST LIKE THAT!!** (as Tommy Cooper used to say).

**I think it is fair to say that – WHEN or IF people come up with:**

- “quick” **OR** “slick” answers
- **ALTERNATIVELY** “light” **OR** “trite” answers

**THEN - I suggest that:**

- **EITHER** they have not really done much looking into this age-old question
- **OR** they simply have never had much experience of suffering themselves **OR** amongst those who are near and dear to them.

Bible people ask questions

It's worth pointing out that this question: is one non-Christians ask, one that Christians ask AND ALSO even in the Scriptures we find people having some of these very similar types of questions.

Q. So how do they deal with them?

Well they present them **humbly and honestly** to God looking to Him to bring some kind of resolution and clarification.

**Jeremiah** is one such – he says:

(Jeremiah 12 Verse 1) “You are always righteous, O Lord, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?”

OR **the Psalm writer** – take Psalm 73:

(Psalm 73 verses 1-3) “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”

He goes on Verses 16&17 “When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.”

He finishes off with a clearer sight of himself Verses 21&22 “When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.”

### Structure

Now given our topic is a large one – Q. How can we sensibly approach it?

Well, I think there is a **helpful principle**, that has **guided my thinking over the years**, which runs something like this:

When you are trying to fathom your way through “**CONTINENTS OF CONFUSION**” you are usually better off starting out from “**ISLANDS OF CLARITY**”.

Put simply, when it comes to those really **BIG** seemingly insoluble problems – you are best off starting with smaller pieces and then working upwards.

With this in view I want to try and break down our subject and come at it in **4 PASSES OR 4 SEPARATE & PROGRESSIVE STEPS**, as follows:

- FIRST STEPS
- FALSE STEPS
- FORMAL STEPS
- FINAL STEPS - so

## #1 – FIRST STEPS

Now our question this morning, if you’ve ever taken any time to look at it or one similar, is sometimes simply called “**THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**”.

I want kick off by simply outlining this “Problem of Evil”, in the traditional forms that it has taken over the centuries **and there are essentially 4 different forms** the question has taken.

### #1 - The MORAL or LOGICAL Problem of Evil

The first form is called **the MORAL or the LOGICAL Problem** and takes us all the way back to **300BC** and a man named **Epicurus** who posed this **riddle** or **paradox**:

Is God <b>willing</b> to prevent evil, but <b>not able</b> ?	→ Then he is <b>not omnipotent</b> .
Is he <b>able</b> , but <b>not willing</b> ?	→ Then he is <b>malevolent</b> .
Is he <b>both able and willing</b> ?	→ Then from <b>where does evil come?</b>
Is he <b>neither able nor willing</b> ?	→ Then, if so, <b>why call him God?</b>

And this riddle of Epicurus has been one that has been wrestled with and refined over time.

Let me give you a **more recent version**:

1. Evil and suffering exist in the world.
2. If God were all-powerful, he could prevent evil and suffering.
3. If he were all-loving, he would want to prevent these.
4. If there were an all-powerful, all-loving God, **SURELY** there would be no evil OR suffering in the world.
5. Evil and suffering exists in the world so **THEREFORE** God is **powerless, loveless OR non-existent**.

Now you've heard the expression: **"being caught on the horns of a dilemma"**, where you have to make a choice between two similarly unfavourable options, that case where it's: **"HEADS – I win & TAILS – You lose!!"**.

Here, with this age-old riddle, we have before us that which is presented as a **TRILEMMA** – that is a position where you have a choice \*not\* between two but **three options, only two of which are allowable and possible at the same time**.

So we have, as our 3 choices:

- The reality of God's **OMNIPOTENCE** (i.e. that God is all-powerful)
- The reality of God's **OMNIBENEVOLENCE** (i.e. that God is all-good, all-loving)
- The reality of the world's **EVIL**

So you can't keep all three.

### #2 - The METAPHYSICAL or ORIGINS Problem of Evil

Is God the cause of evil, or, is evil itself uncreated and eternal?

Maybe evil is not real; it is simply an illusion.

This metaphysical problem deals with the **origin** and **reality of evil** in God's universe.

### #3 - The PHYSICAL or ACTS OF GOD Problem of Evil

The third form of the problem of evil is called the physical problem of evil.

Here we are talking about natural disasters and truly innocent human suffering.

How could God allow evil to occur that is not directly caused by any abuse of God-given human free will?

#### #4 - The EMOTIONAL/PERSONAL Problem

This fourth and final form of the problem of evil is not really a philosophical/theological issue at all.

It is the **personal problem of evil** and this is \*not\* a theoretical question about the existence of evil RATHER it is a personal struggle with a traumatic experience in one's own life or in someone else's life.

So, examples of this might be the sudden death of a loved one, a large-scale tragedy like the 2004 Asian Tsunami etc.

And in this situation what people are looking for is not so much philosophical answers, rather what is needed is something a lot more functional which will help them see their way through, something which will help to illumine what may be a rather dark present perspective.

#### A distinction – intellectual/emotional problems

And I think it is worth saying that this distinction is important to notice.

The first 3 takes on the problem of evil are essential INTELLECTUAL in nature – but the last one is primarily EMOTIONAL and it is worth us reflecting for ourselves which of the two camps our main obstacles lie in.

## #2 – FALSE STEPS

Here are three temptations that we can fall into in our keenness to find some kind of answer:

### 1. Atheism as providing the answer

FIRSTLY – to think that, in some way, turning to ATHEISM, must somehow provide the answer.

Let me ask you first what appears to be a fairly straightforward question:

Q. What would you say is the opposite of LOVE? (I would expect here people to say: HATE)

Q. Do you not think that actually there could be something crueller than that, something worse than HATE? What about INDIFFERENCE, sheer APATHY towards something.

Richard Dawkins – Darwinian and dogmatic atheist, in his book "River out of Eden, A Darwinian view of life", had this to say:

"Nature is not cruel, only **pitilessly indifferent**. We cannot accept that things might be neither good nor evil, neither cruel nor kind, but **simply indifferent to all suffering**, lacking in all purpose."

So Atheism has an even more threadbare answer to give when it comes to the all-too-real "Problem of evil". The best that they can say to someone going through horrendous suffering and pain is to say "Well you better just get over it – because the notion of something being cruel or kind, good or evil is just a "category mistake" because reality is totally indifferent towards it.

### 2. Atheism as providing the answer

SECONDLY – that the absence of morality in our world, the fact that things are patently not the way they ought to be and so the reality of a wonderfully good and moral God in the sky – is just fanciful thinking.

But actually this kind of thinking is more of an “own goal” than you might at first realise.

Let me try and explain:

- **Bertrand Russell**, the British philosopher said that mankind was simply “a curious accident in a backwater.”
- **Oxford Chemistry professor and atheist Peter Atkins** put it like this mankind is “just a bit of slime on a planet.”

So taking that on a step further – if that is the case:

Q. why would we be bothered by the systematic slaughter of 6 million Jews?

After all, we are not bothered when we see slime trodden on or shovelled down the drain.

The **British scientist-turned-preacher Rodney Holder** narrows the problem even further – he writes:

“If we are nothing but atoms and molecules organized in a particular way through the chance processes of evolution, then love, beauty, good and evil, free will, reason itself — indeed all that makes us human and raises us above the rest of the created order — lose their objectivity. Why should I love my neighbour, or go out of my way to help him? Rather, why should I not get everything I can for myself, trampling on whoever gets in my way?”

**John Blanchard** puts it very simply: “How can we jump from **atoms** to **ethics** and from **molecules** to **morality**?”

**CS Lewis** – puts it like this:

“My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of ‘just’ and ‘unjust’?... What was I comparing the universe with when I called it unjust?... Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too – for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies... Consequently, atheism turns out to be too simple”

### 3. To look at evil & suffering and to think there is nothing beneath OR behind them

THIRDLY then – when we are tempted to think that when we look at SUFFERING & EVIL that there is nothing beneath OR behind them.

In Luke’s gospel and chapter 13, the aspect of the PHYSICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL comes up – let me read a couple of verses:

\*\*\***READ Luke 13 Verses 1-5**\*\*\*

Here Jesus scotches the idea that suffering must be because someone did something and now they are being punished by God – so a kind of “justice done” sort of thing.

Instead Jesus insists that – suffering should serve to point us to **REPENTANCE**.

This in turn suggests that there is something more, something yet more fundamental beneath or behind suffering – and

that what the bible calls **SIN**.

Is this not just DODGING the real question

Now this conclusion you might, initially at least, feel is a way of Jesus somehow dodging the question or moving the focus away from the real issue.

(So, don't answer the question, just change its focus so that it becomes a completely different question!)

But **Luke 13** is \*not\* the only place where we can see this suggestion being brought to the surface.

Take the account in the gospels of the paralysed man that is brought to Jesus – perhaps you remember the story, one account is there in Mark chapter 2 – let me try and summarise it:

\*\*\* **RE-TELL THE START OF THE STORY OF THE PARALYTIC in **Mark 2 verses 1-12**** \*\*\*

Now as we get to Verse 5 we read:

(Mark 2 and Verse 5) “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, **your sins are forgiven.**”

He doesn't say your suffering is fixed, your healing is here – so go home to your wife and kids.

No he points to the real issue, to the greater issue that is behind and underneath things and that is his sin and his need for forgiveness.

Ok – we've done some **FIRST STEPS** – just mapping out the territory of this “**PROBLEM OF EVIL**”.

We've considered **FALSE STEPS** – some avenues which might be tempting but don't really help us

### #3 – FORMAL STEPS

And in this section I want to try and provide some answers for the first three forms of this **PROBLEM OF EVIL** (and don't worry if you can't quite remember what they were – we'll work through them):

#### 1. The MORAL or LOGICAL Problem of Evil

We're going to start with the **MORAL or LOGICAL Problem of Evil**.

2 weeks back we had the question: **Q. Has SCIENCE disproved God?**

This morning our question actually appears a bit similar in format:

**“Q. Has EVIL disproved GOD?”**

Hopefully this next video clip will go some way to answering the age-old chestnut that Epicurus first put in riddle form.

\*\*\***PLAY VIDEO CLIP – The MORAL PROBLEM Explained**\*\*\*

You see at the end of the day the **LOGICAL** problem **BUILDS** its case upon **AN ASSUMPTION** along the lines of:

- If there were an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving God, **SURELY** there would be no evil OR suffering in the world.

You see we don't actually know this – what we are really saying is that **we just can't think of any good reasons why a loving God might permit these things to remain.**

Because we can't think of any good reasons – Q. Then surely there can't be any can there?

You can start to sense a little of the slightly arrogant presumption that underlies this seemingly water-tight argument.

Why doesn't God look after His own and immune them to trouble?

- because He does not desire “rice Christians” (who simply love Him for what they can get)
- AND because He wants people to see that Christians have the God-given resources adequate to cope with this world and still come out trusting and praising God

It is part of our human dignity that we are fully and freely able to exercise choices – even if we sometimes end up making the wrong choices.

## 2. The METAPHYSICAL or ORIGINS Problem of Evil

Here the argument goes:

**1) God created everything that exists    2) evil exists    THEREFORE    3) God created evil**

### a) Evil an illusion

Now some people would simply say well evil is actually **an illusion** (Eastern religions such as **Buddhism** and **Hinduism** or sects like **Christian Science** have taken this view)- but I have to say that doesn't seem to fly too well as far as I can see.

### b) God & Evil – co-eternal realities (DUALISM)

You might say well **God** and **Evil** are just **two co-eternal realities** (this is what you would call **DUALISM**) – the problem here is that, if this is so, your notion of an **INFINITE GOD** is has to be modified because now He is **necessarily limited** by the presence of His “equal and opposite number” **EVIL**.

The Bible – speaks plainly about evil, but it does not map it against God but against Good.

Scripture – indicates that evil arises from Satan and he is a fallen angel, not one on a par with God.

So, if you actually want to put **Satan** on a par with someone then that would be the **archangel Michael**.

### c) Going back to Augustine

Q. So what's the answer?

Well for this we can go right back to the **4<sup>th</sup> Century AD and to Augustine**.

He has given us most of what we need to see our way through this one.

His reasoning goes along these lines:

- all things created by God are good. Nothing in its created nature is evil.
- evil, therefore, cannot exist solely on its own. However, evil is real; it does exist. Still, it must exist in

something good; it cannot exist on its own.

- evil is therefore to be seen as a privation. A lack or absence of a good that should be there. Evil is a corruption or perversion of God's good creation. So for example: blindness in a man is evil, for God created man to see. However, blindness in a rock is not evil, for God never meant rocks to have sight.
- evil is a lack of a good that should be there

**Augustine** stated that God did not create evil; He merely created the possibility for evil by giving men and angels truly free will.

### #3 - The PHYSICAL or ACTS OF GOD Problem of Evil

The issue here is that much physical evil is not directly related to human choices. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and deaths of innocent infants are examples of physical evil.

Q. So what can be said to this?

Well I think there are a number of responses as follows, so let me chuck out 4 in swift order:

- **The FIRST** answer is what we call "**SOUL-MAKING**".

Pain and struggle present us with choices and these represent GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES.

We must choose how we will face each instance of suffering.

Our choice is whether we will sink or rise above it, whether we will look to our own self-sufficiency or whether we will draw strength and help from God.

Paul Tournier in his book "Creative Suffering" has said that the vast majority of great human leaders have all had to go through great suffering.

- **The SECOND** is the reality that **\*not all\*** "**ACTS OF GOD**" are, in fact, completely **divorced from human agency and influence** – so for example take the **Aberfan** slag heap disaster in 1966 (where 116 children and 28 adults were killed when it slid down the hill onto the primary school) – I think it was unfortunate that a local clergyman felt the need to say to a BBC interviewer that "...we have to admit that the Almighty made a mistake"!!!

The reality of many very sad situations is that the blame, **if you rigorously trace it back**, is to be found at man's door. His greed, his misuse of the world etc.

Though I'll be quick to say I am not suggesting this as an adequate answer for all incidences of natural evil.

- **The THIRD** thing to notice is that Scripture alerts us to the fact that we live in a **spiritual world where demons are involved** and given permission to bring about suffering in certain situations.

So for an example of that you can just turn to the book of Job in the OT and see how it was that Job lost all of his children due to an "**apparently**" NATURAL disaster.



- **The FOURTH** thing is that God often uses PHYSICAL EVIL as a **helpful warning**.

This is the way that CS Lewis puts it: “Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

Q. Have you ever wondered about the deformity of leprosy sufferers?

It is a classic example of the vital nature of pain to us. Because leprosy sufferers lose the sense of pain, they have no way of knowing whether or not they are burning a finger on the stove or perhaps crushing a toe in a door and so they end up with many deformities as a result.

Though man is limited in knowledge and cannot always know why God allows each and every case of physical evil, the reasons that I’ve mentioned help us to see that the presence of PHYSICAL EVIL in no way rules out the existence of the God of the Bible.

## #4 – FINAL STEPS

**SO THEN:**

**Q. Is that it?**

**Q. We just explain pain, evil and suffering away?**

Well no.

You will perhaps remember that I suggested that when we talk of the PROBLEM OF EVIL – there are really 4 questions and the last of these we have not tackled and that is the EMOTIONAL ASPECT.

You see God has not left us FUNCTIONALLY RESOURCELESS.

God has done specific things to take the sting out of evil.

Q. So what are they?

- **FIRST** – God has SPOKEN.

He has not remained gloriously detached whilst we suffer.

He has given us His word to show us how to live in the best way. The Bible represents – the highest set of laws that exist anywhere in this world.

- **SECOND** – He has given us HOPE for the future.

He has shown us that despite all appearances to the contrary, our suffering is, by comparison to eternity, short

lived and one day it will give way to a situation where there will never again be crying, mourning, pain etc.

- THIRD – God has granted the gift of His Holy Spirit to dwell within us and give us the power to change and the power to live out a godly life.

Wonderful to see people who are in the midst of suffering – and yet they have strong and unshakeable faith working concretely in tandem.

\*\*\*PLAY - JOHN PIPER VIDEO\*\*\*

- FOURTH – God has even come down into this world of suffering and tasted it on our behalf.

### We have a suffering God

Dorothy Sayers in her book “Creed or chaos?” writes:

“For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is— limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—He had the honesty and the courage **to take His own medicine.**

Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death.

**When He was a man, He played the man.**

He was **born in poverty AND died in disgrace AND thought it well worthwhile.”**

Jesus up there with the worst of it.

\*\*\*PLAY CLIP OF “THE LONG SILENCE”\*\*\*

At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God’s throne. Most shrank from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly — not with cringing shame but with belligerence. ‘Can God judge us?’ ‘How can he know about suffering?’ snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. ‘We endured terror ... beating ... torture ... death!’ In another group a black man lowered his collar. ‘What about this?’ he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. ‘Lynched for no crime but being black!’ In another crowd, a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes. ‘Why should I suffer?’ she murmured. ‘It wasn’t my fault.’ Far out across the plain were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he had permitted in his world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred! What did God know of all that men had been forced to endure in this world? ‘For God leads a pretty sheltered life,’ they said. So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most. A Jew, a black, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly disabled arthritic, a thalidomide child. In the centre of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to

present their case. It was rather clever. Before God could be qualified to be their Judge, he must endure what they had endured. Their verdict was that God should be sentenced to live on 34 earth — as a man! Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind when he tries to do it. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured. At last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die in agony. Let him die so that there can be no doubt that he died. Let there be a whole host of witnesses to verify it. As each leader announced the portion of his sentence, a loud murmur of approval went up from the throng of people assembled. When the last had finished pronouncing sentence there was a long silence. No one uttered another word. No one moved. For suddenly all knew that God had already served his sentence.

These powerful words point to this stupendous truth: God understands our suffering because he has experienced it. The very word in our dictionaries EXCRUCIATE come from this one human-divine act of the God-man Jesus.

AMEN