

Spurgeon Room Studies ~ Knowing God ~ Fall 2018

Session 5

Toward a Theology of Suffering

I. Introduction—Preventive Medicine

Some years ago, Don Carson wrote a book entitled, “How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil.” When it came out in a second edition, he wrote the following in the new preface, “None of my other books has elicited as many moving letters from readers as this one.”¹

I was one who wrote to thank him. Though I have read thousands of books in my life, this was one of only two times I have written to thank an author. I did so because I found the book so very helpful—well written, pastorally sensitive, insightful and even profound. In his preface to the first edition he had written:

Primarily, this is a book of preventive medicine. One of the major causes of devastating grief and confusion among Christians is that our expectations are false. We do not give the subject of evil and suffering the thought it deserves until we ourselves are confronted with tragedy. If by that point our beliefs—not well thought out but deeply ingrained—are largely out of step with the God who has disclosed himself in the Bible and supremely in Jesus, then the pain from the personal tragedy may be multiplied many times over as we begin to question the very foundations of our faith.²

- *If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small.* (Proverbs 24.10)
The point of the proverb is to stimulate preparation in advance of that day.
- Some years ago, I forced myself to go to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Up to that point I had only read things or seen images. But that day I encountered tangible evidence of evil and suffering on a scale hard to conceive. At one point it was too much for me and I went into a stairwell alone to weep. And the questions came, “*How could this happen?*” And, most importantly, “*O Lord, how could You allow this to happen?*”

¹ D.A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 1990, 2006, p. 9.

² *Ibid*, p. 11.

- How *are* we to think about such things? Well, these questions aren't new. They've been around for millennia. For the most part the only times we think deeply about them is when we, or those we love, are in the middle of acute suffering. But then, the proper course of action is not to philosophize or theologize, but to sympathize.

II. The Problem of Evil

A. Usually, the problem is set up with three propositions:

1. God is all-loving
2. God is all-powerful
3. Evil exists

B. Take any two of these and there is no problem. But, all three? Some incorrect ways to solve this conundrum:

1. God is *not* all-loving. But if he is not all-loving, in what sense is he still God? In its extreme form this view says, 'If evil exists then God cannot exist.' This is one of the rationales for atheism. "I refuse to believe in a God who would allow X to happen." In times of acute suffering this may momentarily answer, but the end result is tragic beyond words.
2. God is *not* all-powerful. This reflects those who question the idea of a sovereign God, supposedly omniscient and omnipotent. It says God is limited. In the 'open theology' variety, he has voluntarily limited himself, so as to make room for man's (absolute) free will. This God does not know the future, because the future does not exist to be known. Obviously, there are serious problems with the theology underlying this view. It intends to save God from the embarrassment of being responsible for the presence of evil, but does so at too great a price.
3. Evil does *not* exist. This is the position of Christian Science. Also included here can be the idea that evil is essentially non-being, a privation. It's kind of like a hole in your shirt; it mars your shirt. It is nothing where there should be something.

- But all three propositions *are* true and force us to find some way to account for them.

III. Theodicy—The Justification of God

A. Now, of course, God needs no justification. Theodicy is our attempt to render the Christian faith intelligible to ourselves and others in the light of suffering and evil. Theodicy tries to answer questions like:

- Why do the righteous suffer? (Job, Psalm 44)
- Why do the wicked prosper? (Psalm 73)

B. [*theos; dikaios*] As the etymology of the word suggests, theodicy seeks to justify God. It attempts to get God off the hook for the presence of evil in a good creation. But Scripture never gives any indication that God is *on* the hook. God is *not* in the dock. And in *Job* the one place where we might expect God to answer for what appears to be unjust suffering, instead of questioning God, Job is questioned *by* God. God does not seem as worried as we are in preserving his reputation.

IV. Why Does a Good God Allow Evil to Exist?

This is the question that underlies the whole discussion. It is generally agreed that there are two main approaches to the question, “Why does evil exist?”³ They may be called “the free-will defense” and “the greater-good defense.”

- A. Limits—before looking at these more closely, it is necessary to set biblical limits to the discussion.
1. First, while God permits (or ordains or allows) moral evil, he never does so in a way where he himself is morally at fault or evil himself (James 1.13-14).
 2. Secondly, human beings remain responsible for their actions. Human responsibility and divine sovereignty are compatible. Both ideas are taught in Scripture.

³ Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1993, p. 195.

B. The free-will defense

1. If there is purpose and design in God's creation, why then is there evil? One answer is that God created man with an *absolute free will* (also known by other labels, such as *libertarian free will* and *in-deterministic free will*). If this were not the case, human beings would necessarily be puppets, maneuvered about by a deterministic God (or by an impersonal fate.) Evil is the price to be paid for giving man a free will.
2. There are ways this view is compatible with God's providential rule, but this is gained at a steep price. For instance, God doesn't know the future. So man is, in a sense, writing his own story in a way that may surprise everybody, including God. In *open theism* (also known as *openness theology* and *free will theism*) this embarrassing state of affairs regarding God's ignorance is ameliorated by the contention that the future does not really exist for God to know. In this view, if evil occurs, God is not responsible because he didn't see it coming. This leaves us with a less than omnipotent/omniscient God who lacks the attribute of eternity.
3. There are other problems with the absolute free-will defense. Biblical prophecy, i.e. the foretelling of future events, presupposes that God knows what is going to happen before it occurs. This indicates divine determinism of some sort. In addition, there is the question whether this point of view takes seriously a catastrophic and radical fall of man affecting his will.
4. This does not mean that man doesn't have a free will, but that the adjective "free" needs to be defined clearly. One of the reasons for confusion in this discussion is that definitions are merely assumed, not agreed upon. Divine-human compatibilism does not sacrifice the omniscience and omnipotence of God. Man always chooses according to his nature, so the idea of an *absolutely* free will is impossible, since he is bound to his nature.

C. The greater-good defense

1. In this view evil exists because out of an evil, a greater good results which would not have resulted otherwise. Augustine wrote, “For the Almighty God, who, as even the heathen acknowledge, has supreme power over all things, being Himself supremely good, would never permit the existence of anything evil among His works, if He were not so omnipotent and good that He can bring good even out of our evil.”⁴
2. Paul Helm asserts that for any version of this argument to be plausible on moral grounds, the evil must be a logical necessity. If it were less than necessary, the assumption is that good could have been achieved without any evil.⁵ This could be shown by considering the kinds of good that are defined in contrast to the evil which calls them forth, such as compassion or courage or loyalty, etc. For example, a lifeguard demonstrates courage and compassion in the face of a drowning man.
3. Indeed, when considering the consequent absolute necessity of the atonement and the redemption that Christ purchased for us, “Was it not *necessary* that the Christ should *suffer* these things and enter into his *glory*?” (Luke 24.26), it seems quite apparent. Jesus even directly refers to his passion (suffering) *as* his glory (John 12.23).
4. Paul agrees to this when saying he considers present sufferings “not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us,”⁶ and that slight momentary afflictions are working for us “a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”⁷
5. Part of the greater-good approach involves seeing the bigger picture. “If we, situated as we are in a small part of the universe and unable to see, in this life at least, the whole grand design, are displeased with some detail, this is an inevitable consequence of our limitations as

⁴ Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1961, p. 11.

⁵ *The Providence of God*, op. cit. p. 202.

⁶ Romans 8.18 (ESV).

⁷ 2 Corinthians 4.17 (KJV).

created beings. We resemble the man who looked at one square of a mosaic and accused the artist of having violated the laws of harmony and color because he was unable to see the overall pattern.”⁸

6. The psalmist was vexed when he saw the prosperity of the wicked. But when he entered the sanctuary (the presence of God), he discerned their end (Psalm 73.17). Bound as we are by time and space, we are in no good position to make final determinations about the justness of sufferings.
7. On the relationship of the greater-good argument to spiritual growth and maturity, Scripture has much to say. In the bigger picture, the peaceful fruit of righteousness is enjoyed by those who submit to the fatherly discipline of a God who chastens those He loves. The benefit comes not in the moment, however, but later (Hebrews 12.11). Even Jesus learned obedience through the things he suffered (Hebrews 5.8). And God turned the positively evil actions of Joseph’s brothers into good for the saving of many lives, providing us with an extended illustration of Romans 8.28 (Genesis 37-50.20).
8. The question remains however, if it is moral for God to ordain evil so that good may come. And if so, what about apparently disproportionate evil, such as the Holocaust?⁹ Questions like these demonstrate the very delicate ground we walk on when attempting to deal with this problem. The fact is, we have reason to be humble. There are severe limitations to our knowledge.

D. The Cross

1. Finally, any discussion of this problem must take seriously the reality and necessity of the cross. Imagine the apostles on the Saturday after Good Friday. The most magnificent Person to ever walk the earth had just died a brutal death. In Him all their hopes for the long-awaited Kingdom of God had resided. And now, He is dead. It is impossible to imagine the depths of despair they must have felt. Truly, the death of

⁸ Gerald Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo—Life and Controversies*, The Canterbury Press, Norwich, 1986, pgs. 205-6.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 204.

God the Son is the greatest evil ever to have occurred in the history of the universe. But everything changed on Sunday morning! Somehow God transformed the greatest evil into the most sublime and far-reaching good.

2. It was not fully apparent to them at that moment just how important it was that Christ rose. The truth of their justification and the joy of their adoption were yet to dawn on them as they began to interpret the Scriptures in light of Jesus' death.
3. Though the ultimate defeat of death yet lies in the future, can there be any doubt that God had turned evil on its head? And are we not justified in thinking that if God could do that with the death of Christ, can He not reverse all evil? One day! He often does so in time, so why not for all eternity? Indeed, this is the message of Revelation 21, when he will wipe away every tear from our eyes.
4. The Bible is full of examples of faith and patience in suffering. The Psalms, in particular sound all the notes of human emotion toward God. The Scriptures promise that in a purposeful universe designed by God, no suffering is meaningless. *But the Bible does not promise individualized explanations for particular sufferings.* And this is what people want. They want to know why. And usually the only answer that can be given is, "I don't know." But some day we will.