

Evil and Suffering, part 1

Grace and Truth—part 11

July 2, 2023

DAY 1: The Epicurus dilemma

James 1:2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

1. The most common question skeptics throw at Christians is the problem of evil and suffering. Epicurus was the first known person to offer this dilemma. Here it is simplest form:

- a. If God is willing to defeat evil but not able, then he is not omnipotent.
- b. If God is able to defeat evil, but not willing, then he is not benevolent.
- c. If God is both willing and able to defeat evil why doesn't He stop evil?
- d. If he is neither omnipotent or benevolent, then why call him God?

2. Skeptics conclude that believing in an omnipotent and benevolent God is impossible because of the presence of evil and suffering.

3. Answering the problem of evil and suffering requires two approaches. First, there are intellectual and philosophical answers to the dilemma. Second, there are also personal and pastoral answers to this dilemma. This week we'll address the intellectual answers.

4. Epicurus and skeptics who argue this dilemma make a very important assumption.

The assumption is that there are no morally justifiable
and good reasons to allow evil to exist.

5. No one can prove that there are no morally justifiable reasons to allow evil and suffering.

6. God is good and should want to stop evil. God is all-powerful and could stop evil. God must have morally justifiable reasons to allow evil to exist to which we may not humanly understand.

7. The bible gives many reasons of God allowing evil to exist, and many examples of so doing.

8. One example is the opening verses of today's devotional. James gives several reasons. We will look at more this week. What strikes you from James 1:2-5?

9. What strikes you from today's devotional?

DAY 2: Why am I going through this time of evil and suffering?

1. Skeptics may counter with, “there are no morally justifiable reasons to allow evil to exist.”

2. Several years ago, I did a bible study to find different reasons God allows people to go through times of suffering and to endure evil. I found fourteen different purposes where God uses evil and suffering to bring about eventual good. (It was not an exhaustive study. I believe there are many more).

3. But, when we are in the midst of suffering, it is often difficult to discern what kind of purposes God may be pursuing through our suffering. We are finite creatures, with limited understanding of what God is doing, and very limited understanding of our future.

4. A very real example is from Jeremiah 29.

Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

5. These promises are given to God’s people, not in the middle of blessing, but in captivity, in Babylon, under dictatorial rule. Some of the false prophets heard these words and wrongly deduced that they would return within a relatively short period of time. Jeremiah corrected them.

6. Instead, some of the people were in exile their entire lives, while some of the people were able to return to Jerusalem. All of the people were told to build houses, plant gardens, raise their children, and ply their trade in the land of Babylon.

7. If you are trying to wrap your head around this example, take solace in Isaiah’s words.

Isaiah 55:8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. 9 “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

8. Just because we cannot make sense of what God is doing when we are confronted with evil and have to endure suffering doesn’t mean that the goodness of God’s story in our lives is torpedoed. Even when suffering makes no sense to us, that doesn’t mean that good purposes are not being played out.

9. Remember, this week we are only dealing with the intellectual question of evil and suffering. We will deal with the personal and emotional side of suffering next week.

10. What strikes you from today’s devotional?

DAY 3: Job's story

1. The suffering of Job is one of the most well-known examples of unexplained suffering.

Job 1:1 In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. ² He had seven sons and three daughters, ³ and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.

2. In one day, the following occurred:

- a. Bandits raided one of his ranches, stole all his oxen and donkeys, and killed the servants,
- b. A fire wiped out all the sheep and servants on another ranch,
- c. Another raiding party stole all the camels and killed the servants.
- d. All four of his children died due to a tornado.
- e. Soon afterward, Job is smitten with sores from head to toe.

3. Here is Job's initial response.

Job 1:20 At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship ²¹ and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised."

²² In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

4. But, as the reality of Job's loss and grief deepens so do his questions and anger. Several friends try to help him but they are too much of the "fit-it" types.

5. Lots of explanations and theories make no sense to Job.

6. Finally, God speaks, but it is in language that is earth-shaking. Whereas Job had questioned God, it is God who now questions Job. Job 38-41 is a long list that contrasts God with a human being. It is God who rules the universe, and does whatever He thinks will move His story in the lives of people, forward.

7. Finally, Job speaks.

Job 42:1 Then Job replied to the LORD: ² "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ³ You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. ⁴ "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' ⁵ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. ⁶ Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

8. What did Job come to understand? How would you describe Job's attitude?

9. What strikes you from today's devotional?

DAY 4: Some of the reasons we go through dark nights

1. Depravity of man: sin runs much deeper than we imagine. We justify, rationalize, are “arrogant” and rebellious. God has a lot more work to do in us than we ever imagine.
Jeremiah 17:9-10; Rom. 3:10-18
2. Fallen world. There is a lot more pain and “reality” to life than we imagine when we’re younger. People disappoint us; we experience betrayal; people are deceitful and self-centered. I will hurt. Life will disappoint me more than I thought it would. *Genesis 3:14-19*
3. Priority shift: God uses dark nights to help us put God first; not just in theory; we’ll pay any price to become more like Christ; *Matt. 6:33; Romans 12:1-2*
4. Suffering: Becoming like Christ *requires* suffering and testing. *Acts 14:22; Deut. 8:2-3*
5. One way God glorifies himself to us! Our backs against the wall, no human action will do; deliverance! *Psalms 106:7-12*
6. Trust shift: Actually trusting God means learning not to trust what we’ve trusted before!
Prov. 29:25; Proverbs 28:26
7. Walk by faith, not by sight: we know this but hate having to do it. Faith sometimes brings “good” results and sometimes doesn’t. Walking by faith instead of sight includes not walking by our emotions, not walking by “guaranteed outcomes” or results, living by the promises of God, and developing “childlike faith” = delightfully dependent! *2 Cor. 5:7; Hebrews 11:1, 6*
8. Building a greater joy and anticipation for heaven: loosening our grip on this world, what this world has to “offer.” We are “aliens and strangers;” this world is not our “home.” We are never really “home” until we arrive in heaven.” *1 John 2:15-17; Hebrews 11:13-16*
9. Maturity; God is working to make us more character and commit driven and less emotion or results driven. *Ephesians 4:13*
10. Examples from the Psalms: psalms of lament (22, 77, 88, etc.) Even God’s greatest believers went through dark nights of the soul. *Psalms 22:1-5*
11. Difference between God’s “real” presence and His “felt” presence: We “know” God is with us, but when we don’t *feel* his presence we start to freak, or get discouraged.
Hebrews 13:5-6; Psalm 22:1
12. The desert: God’s metaphor for change. His laboratory for spiritual formation. *Hosea 2:3, 14*
13. God’s occasional discipline to get us on track. *Hebrews 12:4-13*
14. Seeking God first: and with all our hearts. Loving him in actuality, not just in theory.
Deuteronomy 4:29; Matt. 22:37-38

Closing thoughts:

A. It’s possible that you may be going through one of these now. Or, you may be going through several of these at the same time. You may be able to see God’s purposes or you may not.

B. The bible describes God as inscrutable. There are many attributes of God we can understand, but there are some beyond human wisdom, finite understanding, and finiteness, itself.

Rom. 11:33 O, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways.

C. What strikes you from today’s devotional?

DAY 5: A challenge for skeptics...

1. For decades I have heard skeptics refuse to consider Christianity because of the problem of evil and suffering. Ironically, I have never had one skeptic offer their explanation of why the world has evil and suffering.
2. If you are a skeptic, take up this challenge, but I'll warn you ahead of time: whatever answers you conclude are lame and weak.
3. Observe how skeptics talk about evil and suffering. Their #1 go to is to deny it, minimize it, "maintain a positive attitude," sugarcoat life, and just not think about it.
4. C.S. Lewis found the problem of evil and suffering as an argument *for* the existence of God! Lewis wrote during WWII, and did radio broadcasts to the nation, in the face of the evils of Nazi Germany. The existence of evil was a reason to believe in God, not to deny God.
5. Here is an excerpt from Mere Christianity. "My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But, how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has an idea of what a straight line is. What was I comparing our universe with when I called this universe "unjust"? If I said that calling something "unjust" might just be a product of my own mind, but that also did not help my unbelief. Instead, my argument against God collapsed as well. My argument depended on me or everyone saying that the world was unjust.

In the very process of hoping to deny the existence of God by the problem of evil and suffering, I discovered that contrary to my original thoughts, the observation that the world really was unjust, my idea that the world that is unjust made justice a notion full of sense. Consequently, atheism turned out to be too simple."

6. When we look around us and say, "This is wrong. This is evil," the natural conclusion is to say, "I can't believe in a God who would allow this to exist." His visceral reaction against God is due to evil and suffering proved there was a standard of right and wrong, good and evil that came from somewhere. There must be a God, for how do you explain this very notion of right and wrong, good and evil, in the first place?

7. This was the dilemma Bertrand Russell, a noted atheist faced when looking at WWII. He was a contemporary of C.S. Lewis, and he too offered words on BBC radio. But his conclusion was very different than Lewis'.

"'Dachau (a concentration camp) is wrong' is not a fact. Gravity is a fact.
But 'Dachau is wrong' is not a fact. I think it is wrong but I can't prove it."

8. That is where we are left without a God.

9. You *know* Dachau was wrong because there is a moral law built in your soul that says it was wrong.

What strikes you from today's devotional?