

# Christian Apologetics

## Foundations- Unit 316



### **Week 3 – Suffering and Evil**

## Introduction:

In the Olive Tree Media survey they found that 'suffering' was the 5<sup>th</sup> highest blocker to people being open towards Christianity

Before covering this topic it is important to recognise that when people ask the question 'why God doesn't stop evil' they are often asking because they are personally caught up in a time of suffering. This lesson will deal with this topic from a philosophical and theological perspective but this is not the perspective for the people going through the suffering. What these people need is a friend to be alongside them to help them in their time of need.

When people suffer what they need is the presence of the Kingdom of God in their lives at that time.

We need to recognize that this is a question for which we will not have the final answer.

## Towards Belief presentation:

- The existence of suffering and evil is a powerful challenge to any faith but particularly the Christian faith.
- You can't use the existence of suffering to disprove the idea of God – how do we know that an all-powerful and all wise God would not have valid reasons for the existence of pain and suffering? John Dickson
- Underneath of questions are assumptions about the character of God. Are these assumptions correct? Do we have the capacity to know the mind of God?
- The cost of real freedom is real choice and we suffer the consequences of those choices.
- There is a deep mystery behind suffering.
- God entered our suffering in the Incarnation. Therefore God knows our pain because he has experienced pain.
- If we take God from the scene then all that life is headed for is injustice and death. God and his resurrection promise give hope for the future.
- While there may be a purpose behind the suffering the reality is that we live in a world in revolt and this brings its own consequences.
- The future is about the hope in a new creation in which justice is paramount and death has been destroyed.

## The Argument against God because of Suffering:

Generally the argument raised by suffering goes like this:

- If God is all powerful
- And God is all good
- Then he would do something to stop any suffering in the world BUT there is suffering in the world, so...

Therefore

- God is either not all powerful which means he hardly deserves our worship
- Or God is not all good which makes an even more scary case
- Or God does not exist at all.

There is then a logical argument which says, **“It is impossible for God and Suffering to Coexist.”** There are a number of hidden assumptions here.

1. If God is all powerful, he can create any world that he wants. He could create a world without suffering but there is suffering so he must not be able to create such a world so he must not be all powerful or he does not exist.
2. If God is all loving he would create a world without suffering. There is suffering so God is not all loving or he does not exist.

In both these cases the idea of freedom of the human will plays a part. The assumption is that God will overrule the human will whenever decisions that a human is about to make will cause suffering, or God just does not give free will to humans at all.

There is an evidential argument which says, **“It is improbable that God could have good reasons for permitting suffering.”** This is the argument when the discussion goes to suffering being both pointless and unnecessary.

Again there is a large assumption here;

1. It is assumed that we are in a position to understand God’s reasons for permitting suffering.

However given the complexities of the universe in which we live is this a valid argument?

If you have a god great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in the world, then you have (at the same time) a god great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know. Indeed you can't have it both ways.<sup>1</sup>

## What is evil?

Of the three major world views;

- Atheism affirms the reality of evil and denies the reality of God;
- Pantheism affirms the reality of God but denies the reality of evil;
- Theism affirms the reality of both God and evil.

Is evil a 'someone' or a 'something'?

1 Chronicles 16:34 – God alone is eternal and he is also all good.

Genesis 1:1, Col. 1:16 – God is the creator of all

It would seem by the above verses that if God is the creator of everything and evil is a something, then God must have created evil!

Rejecting the first idea, that God is the creator of everything leads to Dualism; that is there are two eternal forces, good and evil, that are the cause of the universe.

Denial of the second idea, that there is evil, leads to pantheism which denies the reality of evil.

The answer to the problem is in how we define evil.

The theist responds that evil is not a *thing* or substance. Rather it is a *lack* or privation of a good thing that God made. Evil is a

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<sup>1</sup> Keller, *Reason for God* 25.

deprivation of some particular good. The essence of this position is summarized:

1. God created every substance.
2. Evil is not a substance (but a privation in a substance).
3. Therefore, God did not create evil.

Evil is not a substance but a corruption of the good substances God made. Evil is like rust to a car or rot to a tree. **It is a *lack* in good things, but it is not a thing in itself.** Evil is like a wound in an arm or moth-holes in a garment. It exists only in another but not in itself.<sup>2</sup>

## Evil – with Tom Wright

- Real serious evil exists
- The solution to evil, says the secular world, is to educate people better or bring democracy or help people be wealthier.
- We often think that evil is in other people not in us. Evil is the really, really bad things that happen. It is not the small ‘not really bad’ things we do.
- When people are labelled as evil then they become non-human.
- The cross and the resurrection are the events that have overcome evil.
- Jesus placed forgiveness on the frontline of the way of dealing with evil.
- When we use the weapons of evil to fight evil we do not overcome evil but rather to strengthen it.

Embracing the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and cross brings profound consolation in the face of suffering. The doctrine of the resurrection can instil us with a powerful hope. It promises that we will get the life we most longed for, but it will be an infinitely more glorious world than if there had never been the need for bravery, endurance sacrifice or salvation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker reference library (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 220.

<sup>3</sup> Keller, 33.