

WHY?

SERIES DEVOTIONAL

"GOD AND SUFFERING" | SUNDAY, MAY 3, 2020

GRACE
FELLOWSHIP

KEY THOUGHT

#1

Do suffering and evil disprove the existence of God?

"The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he." (Deuteronomy 32:4)

"The Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him." (Psalm 92:15)

Some atheists use this reasoning to argue that God does not exist: "If God exists, He would be all-good. If God was all-good, He would prevent or stop suffering and evil. Suffering and evil exist. Therefore, God does not exist."

However, the atheist's reasoning is flawed. The atheist assumes that suffering and evil in and of themselves are objectively *bad*...and we may agree with him on that point. But here's the problem: The only way we can know that something is objectively "bad" is if ultimate, objective "good" exists first. If "good" doesn't exist, then we have no basis for comparison and concluding that something is "bad." Ultimate, objective good *does* exist and it has a name: God! The Bible asserts in Deuteronomy 32:4 (above), Psalm 92:15 (above) – and in many other scripture passages – that God Himself is the ultimate, objective good. So, we can know what is objectively bad because that which is ultimately, objectively good – God – exists. Ironically, as you can see, in this case the atheist must rely on God's existence to argue against God's existence!

When he was an atheist, C.S. Lewis maintained that the problem of suffering and evil prevented him from considering Christianity's claims. However, Lewis gradually realized that his atheism removed any basis for calling anything good or evil, just or unjust. He wrote:

"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 some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?" (Mere Christianity)

Indeed, rather than disproving the existence of God, the realities of evil and suffering are strong evidences for the existence of God.

TALK ABOUT IT:

- In your own words, explain why the existence of suffering and evil is evidence *for* (not against!) God's existence. Hint: Use Lewis' "crooked / straight line" analogy if it helps.
- In Deuteronomy 32:4 and Psalm 92:15 (above), why do you think God is referred to as a "Rock" in the contexts describing His perfection, justice, faithfulness, and righteousness?
- What are some emotional reasons why a person might reject God and have no interest in logical arguments?

KEY THOUGHT

#2

Did God create evil and suffering?

“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” (James 1:13)

God created angels and humans with a free will—the ability and opportunity to make choices that affect their destiny. The angel Lucifer chose to rebel against God and was evicted from Heaven (Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 28). One-third of angels followed Lucifer in his rebellion and eviction (Revelation 12).

After creating the first human beings, Adam and Eve, in His own image (Genesis 1:26-27), God communicated the moral standard, allowed Adam and Eve the dignity of free will, and honored that choice with appropriate consequences (Genesis 2). If God had not given Adam and Eve – and us today – a free will, then we would be like robots with no choice but to do whatever God programmed us to do. God commands, pleads, and encourages us to obey Him; He even promises blessings when we obey Him—but He does not force us. Tragically, Adam and Eve chose disobedience (Genesis 3). God did not tempt, coerce, or lure Adam into disobedience (see James 1:13 above)—Adam chose of his own free will to go against God.

The world’s current sinful, rebellious state is directly linked to choices made by Adam and Eve, but the same rebellious choice has been made by every human being since. Our choice to sin—to rebel against God—includes the consequences that go with sin (Genesis 3). So, while God did allow for the possibility of sin by dignifying us humans with a free will—it is we, not God, who brought sin and its consequences of suffering and evil into the world and into our lives (Romans 5:12). *In Peace with God*, Billy Graham wrote:

“We have seen that the most terrible, the most devastating fact in the universe is sin. The cause of all trouble, the root of all sorrow, the dread of every man lies in this one small word: sin. It has crippled the nature of man. It has destroyed the inner harmony of man’s life. It has robbed him of his nobility. It has caused man to be caught in the devil’s trap.”

However, the good news is that our sinful fall did not end God’s plan for humanity. God did not give up on us in our rebellion against Him. Instead, He would ultimately use suffering and evil to accomplish the greater end of redemption in Jesus Christ. God hates suffering and evil, and yet He permits it in order to carry out an incredible far-reaching plan in Christ—a plan that would forever surpass and outshine the suffering and evil in our present world. God used our very worst (sin) to bring about His very best (salvation) through Christ.

TALK ABOUT IT:

- How does God creating us with free will and appropriate consequences dignify us humans, rather than if He’d created us as robots programmed to obey without choice?
- How do the realities of evil and suffering give us a glimpse into God’s loving ways and higher purposes?

KEY THOUGHT

#3

The meaning of life is found in loving and glorifying God, and suffering can be a means to these ends.

“I created [everyone] for my glory.” (Isaiah 43:7)

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” (Matthew 22:37)

King Solomon, the author of Ecclesiastes, had wealth beyond measure, wisdom beyond any person of his time or ours, and pleasures that were the envy of kingdoms. He said that he pursued anything his heart wanted (Ecclesiastes 2:10). Yet he summed up life “under the sun”—meaning life lived without God—as meaningless and empty (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

People pursue many things, thinking that in them they will find meaning and purpose. Yet our experience has shown that even while achieving goals of wealth, relationships, and pleasure, there is still a deep void inside, a feeling of emptiness that nothing seemed to fill. In *Confessions*, Saint Augustine wrote, “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”

God wants us to know the meaning of life. Out of His great love for us, He may allow evil and suffering to strip away our desire for temporal things and our façade of self-righteousness to reveal the deeply rooted sin within our hearts, creating in us a longing for Christ.

In *When God Weeps*, Christian author, artist, and quadriplegic Joni Eareckson Tada wrote:

“God cares most—not about making us comfortable—but about teaching us to hate our sins, grow up spiritually, and love Him. To do this, He gives salvation’s benefits only gradually, sometimes painfully gradually. He lets us feel much of sin’s sting while we’re headed for Heaven where at last, every sorrow we taste will one day prove to be the best possible thing that could have happened.”

Jesus said, *“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly”* (John 10:10). When we receive Jesus we gain salvation, ultimate life-meaning and fulfillment, and eternal life in Heaven. Christ makes us new creations and enables us to love and glorify God. This is why James wrote about rejoicing in suffering, *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness...that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing”* (James 1:2-4).

TALK ABOUT IT:

- Is suffering worth it if it gains for you greater knowledge of God? Why or why not?
- Why are pain and suffering so effective at getting us to refocus on God?
- What evidence is there in your life that you are holding loosely onto the temporary things of the world and gripping tightly on the eternal things of God?