

**The Problem(s) with God: Why Does God Permit Evil?**

Psalm 73:1-14

Our reading today comes from a psalm of Asaph. Asaph was a Levite who led the temple musicians during the time of David, and the psalms attributed to him are notable for their thoughtfulness and depth. We read Psalm 73, verses 1-14:

*A Psalm of Asaph.*

- <sup>1</sup> Truly God is good to the upright,  
to those who are pure in heart.*
- <sup>2</sup> But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;  
my steps had nearly slipped.*
- <sup>3</sup> For I was envious of the arrogant;  
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*
- <sup>4</sup> For they have no pain;  
their bodies are sound and sleek.*
- <sup>5</sup> They are not in trouble as others are;  
they are not plagued like other people.*
- <sup>6</sup> Therefore pride is their necklace;  
violence covers them like a garment.*
- <sup>7</sup> Their eyes swell out with fatness;  
their hearts overflow with follies.*
- <sup>8</sup> They scoff and speak with malice;  
loftily they threaten oppression.*
- <sup>9</sup> They set their mouths against heaven,  
and their tongues range over the earth.*
- <sup>10</sup> Therefore the people turn and praise them,  
and find no fault in them.*
- <sup>11</sup> And they say, 'How can God know?  
Is there knowledge in the Most High?'*
- <sup>12</sup> Such are the wicked;  
always at ease, they increase in riches.*
- <sup>13</sup> All in vain I have kept my heart clean  
and washed my hands in innocence.*
- <sup>14</sup> For all day long I have been plagued,  
and am punished every morning.*

Throughout the history of our faith, the most common problem that people have had with God is this one. If God is truly good and loving, and if God is indeed almighty, and if that God created

the world and called it “good” – what went wrong? Why do we have so much pain, grief, and suffering? God? What part of all that did you think was good? This is sometimes called the “Problem of Evil,” implying that the problem is that there should be any pain at all. After all, God created a world in which it is impossible for people to walk through walls; why not one where it’s impossible for an adult to hurt a child? Other times, it is called the “Problem of Innocent Suffering,” which takes a different approach. Here the problem is not so much the existence of suffering at all but rather the unfair distribution of that suffering. This is the question of Psalm 73: Why do the arrogant, violent, gluttonous, boastful scoundrels of the world do fine – *always at their ease, they increase in riches* – while others who do their best to follow God live in constant pain, distress, and suffering? Why do arms dealers and sweatshop owners get rich, while Syrian refugee children wash up on beaches? Why is the drunk driver the only one who survives the head-on collision? Couldn’t God have created the world in such a way that stuff like that didn’t happen? Is God not as powerful as we say? Or not as good?

Most of us have asked this question at one point or another. Some may be dealing with it right now. Because of that, before I offer even the few small suggestions I have, I need to say something up front. If this question is real for you right now because of a grief that you are experiencing fresh, then nothing I say is going to help. I’m sorry. All I have today are a few theological concepts, some partial explanations, and when the pangs of unjust suffering are still raw, then explanations are worthless. Explanations go no deeper than the brain, but grief comes from the gut. So if your questions today come from that deep place, I know what that pain is like, because I’ve been there, but I have no words that might help you. All I can say is, I’m so sorry.

Now, for the rest of us, those who are removed enough from immediate grief to hear a few thoughts, I have another preliminary word. Can we please get rid of these: *Everything happens for a reason. God moves in mysterious ways. God will never give you more than you handle.* All of these begin with the same presupposition: that everything that happens is orchestrated by God, and therefore is for the best. You may not understand why your child contracted terminal cancer, but God has a reason. One day, it will all be clear. Now I understand that this divine determinism must be appealing to some, otherwise it wouldn’t keep showing up. If you find comfort in believing all is planned in advance by God, then may you indeed be comforted. I am not. I find no comfort here. To my mind, a God who orchestrated the First Crusade, the Massacre at Montségur, African slavery, Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, Rwanda, and Srebrenica because they all served some hidden but higher purpose is a god of extraordinary cruelty whom Jesus Christ would not recognize. For my part, I reject all these deterministic explanations of suffering unequivocally.

So what can we say? First, I have found it helpful to distinguish between what are sometimes called “Natural Evil” and “Moral Evil.” By “Natural Evil” we usually mean “perfectly normal things that we call evil because they have injured or inconvenienced us personally.” Take an earthquake, for instance. An earthquake in an uninhabited desert is just a natural event. The same quake in a major city becomes a crisis of faith. Snowstorms are normal, even necessary, but are still dangerous. They aren’t *evil*; but suffering can still result. Or, to take one more example, we have survived as a species because of the incredible ability of our cells to

evolve to face threats and to multiply and replenish themselves when they are damaged. Unfortunately, these processes without which none of us would be alive, are the same ones at work in cancer cells. So, some of what we call “evil” is part of nature, and we call it evil only when it touches us. That makes it no less painful when your loved one is the one with cancer, and I’m not dismissing that grief. We can still ask why God created a world in which natural processes can be so painful – and we will – but this is still a different category than the evil that humans do to each other.

That evil we call “Moral Evil,” and the usual explanation for that evil, at least among Christians, involves some recognition of the reality of free will. Our faith teaches that we were made in the Image of God; like our creator, we can choose to act beyond nature and instinct. This is the deep truth of the Eden story in Genesis 2 and 3, which tells us that God created Man and Woman with the freedom to transcend creation and become God’s regents on earth, or to throw it all away and look for a short cut to divinity. You see, if the choice is to be free, we must be able to choose the worst option as well as the best. We can choose to transcend our instincts – for instance, through acts of courage or compassion for the weak – or we can choose the opposite path and act in cowardly selfishness or cruelty. If we can choose to be saints, then we must also be free to choose to be demons.

But whether we’re talking about “Natural” or “Moral” evil, we still end up where we started. Why did God make the world dangerous? Why not create natural processes that *don’t* flood New Orleans and cause thousands of deaths? And why did God make us with free will? If free will is going to result in things like the Holocaust, is it worth it? If you ran an asylum for the criminally insane, would you toss a box of deadly weapons out in the day room each morning and invite the inmates to “make good choices”? So why would God give *us* the means to do so much harm to others?

Let me approach this through a different analogy – the one that the Bible most consistently uses for God: a parent. Parents, do you ever let your children make bad choices? Why? Because the lesson they learn by putting their finger in the flame is the one that they’ll remember far longer than they’ll remember the hundred times you told them not to. If the child doesn’t choose badly, the child never grows up, never becomes independent. Well, what’s so great about independence? Why do we want our children to be independent? *Because we love them and want them to love us back, and love must be free.* Love is not love that is constrained by circumstance or is the only option. We try to raise our children to be strong, free, and independent so that we can enter into a strong, free, independent *mutual* love with these beings we already love beyond words. We raise them in love, so that they too can know the joy of loving others. But it must be free.

This is the only answer that works even partly for me. God, being love, created creatures to love, and more importantly to return that love. But that had to be free. And to make that choice freely, those creatures had to be able to learn and to grow. So God created a world designed for growth and change. We’ve asked why God didn’t create a world without pain. Well, let’s try to imagine one, in the words of philosopher John Hick. “Suppose that . . . this world were a paradise from which all possibility of pain and suffering were excluded. . . . No one could ever

injure anyone else; the murderer's knife would turn to paper or the bullets to thin air; the bank safe, robbed of a million dollars, would miraculously become filled with another million dollars; fraud, deceit, conspiracy, and treason would somehow leave the fabric of society undamaged. No one could ever be injured by accident . . . There would be no need to work, since no harm could result from avoiding work; there would be no call to be concerned for others in time of need or danger, for in such a world there would be no real needs or dangers" (Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 47). You see what I mean? A world without the possibility of suffering sounds like a world without wisdom, integrity, courage, compassion, or love. But instead God created a world in which all these things are not only valued, but necessary. The first century theologian Irenaeus called this world a "vale of soul-making." We were created in a dangerous world, with the freedom to make it even worse if we chose to, because only in such a world could we become truly wise, truly whole, and truly merciful. Only in such a context could we freely love God and our neighbors, and in this way truly become the Image of God.

That's the best I got. No, it doesn't answer every question. No, it doesn't satisfy every complaint. I still think God could have established some narrower limits that might have averted the Holocaust. And I still ache from the pain I have known myself. I still think it's unjust that my beautiful, gifted sister died at age 13, that one of my best friends died five years ago this spring at age 50, and another one two years later at age 52. So here's what I do: I yell at God. Sort of like Job. Sort of like the psalmist of Psalm 73. Sometimes it doesn't help. Sometimes, at the end of my anger, I know that I am loved, and I feel my heart enlarged to love others. The psalmist knows the same feeling. We read the beginning of Psalm 73. Here's how it ends:

*Nevertheless, I am continually with thee,  
Thou dost hold my right hand.  
Thou dost lead me by thy counsel  
And afterward, thou wilt receive me to glory.  
Whom have I in heaven but thee?  
And there is nothing else in the earth I desire besides thee.  
My flesh and my heart may fail,  
But God is the strength of my heart, and my portion, forever. . .  
As for me, it is good to be near God  
I have made the Lord God my refuge,  
That I may tell all thy works.*