

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Show Stoppers

Evil and Suffering - WHY?

(2 Peter 3:9)

Study #2

Introduction: The odyssey to a theodicy...

For the past several years I have been involved with and have led a men's discipleship group. A little over a year ago, this group decided to wrestle with the kinds of questions you are I am currently dealing with on Sunday mornings. Show-stopping questions about life and God.

I had a set order in which I wanted to address the questions we would deal with and had begun with "the God question," as we did last week. Does God exist? Is He real?

I had planned on moving from the first to a second question, which concerned itself with the possibility of miracles. That seemed to me to have been a logical, reasonable, next step. If God exists, is it reasonable to assume that He is actively involved with the world He created? Does He step in? Are miracles possible?

It was when I suggested this next question that there was a minor mutiny. The men objected to this order and said, "*No. That is not the next logical question. If God exists, the next question to ask is the question of evil.*"

I now believe that they were right. If God IS, the next question that screams to be addressed is, "*Evil and suffering - WHY?*"

The question can be framed in a variety of ways, and it is as old as faith in God itself.

- If God is all-good and all-powerful, why did He make a world with so much suffering?
- Why do innocent people suffer from things like disease and natural disaster?
- If God is so good, loving and powerful, why doesn't He put an end to suffering now?

To consider these questions is to consider a topic that philosophers and theologians call "theodicy."¹ The questions deal with the justice of God, His rule of the world.

In the Bible, the patriarch, Job, dealt with the question. His book, written about four thousand years ago, is all about theodicy. And there are many, many other places in the Bible where the question, "*God, what are You doing?!*" is raised by thoughtful people.

I'd be surprised if most of us here today, at one time or another, have not wrestled with the question.

Now, the question of theodicy is a fascinating philosophical conundrum, and worthy of debate and discussion. But it is not just an academic question for people who actually suffer. And suffering is a pretty universal experience.

I know people in our church who have suffered greatly. Some have suffered as a result of regrettable decisions. But many suffer innocently.²

I look around at people here and see some who have lost loved ones to disease, who suffer mental or physical disease themselves, who have had devastating financial reversals, who have experienced relational earthquakes - and more.

¹ Taken from two Greek words; "theos" which means "God" and "dikiow" for "justice."

² Not discounting Lamentations 3:39, which says, "***Why should any living man, or any mortal, offer complaint in view of his sin?***" In this verse, Jeremiah makes clear that there are no completely innocent people.

And that is to not even consider the sufferings of people in the broader world.

We could consider the suffering experienced due to natural disasters like famine and drought and bitter cold and tornadoes. Named storms like Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Ike kill and leave devastation in their wake. An unnamed tsunami killed over a quarter of a million people in Indonesia in 2004 and an earthquake in China killed tens of thousands.

As we meet, AIDS is threatening to wipe out much of the African population and in many developing countries, other diseases take a horrible toll.

Recent world history reminds us of mass atrocities in Germany, the Soviet Union and China. And genocide has robbed the Balkans, the Sudan, Darfur, and Rwanda of millions of people.

One missionary living in Rwanda and who saw the atrocities committed there was quoted in Time magazine, "*There are no devils left in hell. They are all in Rwanda.*"³

Suffering is real. Suffering is tragic. Suffering is all around us!

And when we reflect on our own suffering or on suffering at large we may, from time to time, ask the question of God, "*Why?*"

The presence of evil and suffering in the world has prompted some people to question or even to dismiss the idea of God altogether.⁴

They don't care much for philosophizing about the existence of God. They just don't want to have anything to do with a God who would allow history and life to proceed as it has.

³ Time, May 16, 1994

⁴ H.G. Wells once said, "If I thought there was an omnipotent God who looked down on battles and deaths and all the waste and horror of this war - able to prevent these things - doing them to amuse Himself, I would spit in His empty face." Like Wells, philosophers David Hume and Bertrand Russell concluded, based on their observations of the evil that is in the world, that the God of the Bible does not exist.

They will even state the issue with the precision of a categorical syllogism:

- An all-good God **would** destroy evil;
- An all-powerful God **could** destroy evil;
- Evil is all around us.
- THEREFORE, there is no all-good, all-powerful God.

The evil in the world appears, at first blush, to be primarily a problem for the person who believes in God. And the atheist may think that he has solved the problem by eliminating God.

But I'd like to propose that the presence of evil turns out to be a tremendous problem for the person who professes to NOT believe in God.

Option #1: There is no All-Good, All-Powerful God

Problem #1 - EVIDENCE

First, we should realize that there are lots and lots of evidences for the existence of God. We considered this idea last week and saw some of that evidence.

Evidence abounds from the natural world. It is seen in the order and design that is apparent in all living systems. It is seen in the human capacity for abstract thinking about beauty and spirit. There is evidence for the existence of God in the expanding universe, the abundance of hydrogen, and more.

If we choose to disbelieve in God because the world is filled with evil, we have to turn a blind eye to the evidence for the reality of God.

But, the whole idea of evil in the world may, upon reflection, not be much of an argument against God's existence at all.

One of my favorite Christian thinkers, C.S. Lewis, came to believe that the reality of evil and suffering in the world was actually a strong argument FOR the existence of God.

Problem #2 - LOGIC

Lewis had seen the horrors of war, fighting in the trenches of Europe in World War I. Because of what he saw there and his other observations of life's cruelty, he had rejected the whole idea of God. Then he came to realize that evil was even more problematic for his atheism.

Listen to what he says: *“My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of ‘just’ and ‘unjust’?...What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?...Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too - for the argument depended on saying that the world was REALLY unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies...Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple.”*

Lewis' reasoning was that our habit of fixing titles like “right” and “wrong” and “evil” to things that happen in the world begs the question, *“And just where did we get this idea of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’?”*

He concluded that the notion of moral outrage at suffering argued FOR the existence of a God who put that sense of moral obligation deep within.⁵

Thoughtful people who are troubled that moral evil is present in the world find little help in opting for an atheistic approach to life.

In fact, God's existence is the best explanation we have for the very fact that there is a wrestling match about evil at all, AND there is still too much evidence for His existence to dismiss Him.

Another possible way to handle the whole problem, though, is to suggest that evil itself is not real. There are those who would say that evil is just an illusion.

⁵ Philosopher Alvin Plantinga writes, “An [atheistic] way of looking at the world has no place for genuine moral obligation of any sort.”

Option #2: There is No Evil

Those Who Hold to This View

This is primarily an eastern world view and, from what I have read, is embraced by some branches of Hinduism. It is a “pantheistic” view (pantheists are those who believe that God is in all things; that everything is God).

In the west, the Christian Science religion believes this, which explains their refusal to use many forms of modern medicine. They do not believe that things like disease are real.

However, this view (that evil is not real), fails the sniff test of reality for a number of reasons.

Objections to This View

Contrary to our senses

For one, to deny that evil exists we would have to deny our senses and consistent personal experiences. The suffering of innocent people and moral evil are all around us. If we can't trust our senses that evil is real, how could we trust our senses in any other arena?

Contrary to clear science and history

As well, this idea is contrary to all historical evidence. Our understanding of history reveals that suffering of all kinds has always existed, and to deny evil would be to deny the world and life as we know it.

Now, this is exactly what pantheists say they do. They say that they deny evil. But, for the most part, their lives are no different from our own. They criticize falsehood and murder and immorality just as we do.

Contrary to the teachings of the Bible

Finally, this view contradicts Jesus and the Bible. From beginning to end, the Bible makes it clear that evil is real. Jesus repeatedly confronted moral evil and even evil personified (Satan and devils)!

So, people who try to deal with the problem of evil by eliminating God from the equation face the difficulty of denying the strong evidence for God's existence, including the argument from moral outrage. And people who try to resolve the moral dilemma by denying evil altogether have to deny reality itself.

We are left with a conundrum. God exists AND evil exists. And you won't be surprised that efforts have been made to explain how the two can coexist...

Option #3: Evil Exists AND so Does God

Finitism

One explanation of the tension rescues the goodness of God at the expense of His power. Some people suggest that God is simply not able to do away with evil.

You'll remember the argument from the beginning today.

- If God is all-good, He **would** destroy evil.
- If God is all-powerful, He **could** destroy evil.

A popular explanation among some people for the existence of evil is that there are simply some things that God is not powerful enough to do - like destroy or control evil.

In 1981, the Jewish rabbi, Harold Kushner, wrote the best-selling, book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People.

In it, Kushner argues, "*A powerful God who allows injustice is cruel. I would rather believe that my God stands for forgiveness and love and mercy - that he is our friend, not our enemy. That he does not want bad things to happen to us. But there are some things which God cannot prevent.*"

The idea is that God is limited in His powers. He would like to help us, but He just can't. He doesn't have the power to do so. And there are at least a couple of problems with this view.

First, it doesn't take into consideration that God's timing is not our timing. The fact that God has not defeated evil today does not eliminate His ability to do it later.

Second, though, it proposes a "god" who is not God at all. By definition (or at least by biblical definition) God is all powerful (the theological word is "omnipotent"). To say that God cannot destroy evil is to say that there is no God - and that takes us back to the untenable position of atheism.

Well, enough of the preliminaries.⁶ We've considered atheism and the possibility that evil doesn't exist and have wondered if maybe God is not strong enough to do away with evil.

I think we are ready to consider the possibility of theism.

Theism is the idea that there IS indeed an all-good, all-powerful God AND that there does exist genuine evil. This is the position presented in the Bible.

And I think that the Bible presents an explanation of the appearance of pain and evil that is rational, that is internally coherent and that deals honestly with life as we know it. It also provides strength and hope to live in a world filled with suffering and evil.

⁶ Some suggest dualism. This is the idea that evil and good are co-equal opposites, but this is not possible. It is like having an immovable object and an irresistible force. It's a fun thing to think about, but it is a logical impossibility. If there is an immovable object, no force could move it. If there is an irresistible force, no object could be immovable. In the same way, good and evil, which are opposites, cannot be equally strong cannot be co-equal opposites. One has to be stronger and, as philosophers have argued since Plato, the stronger has to be "the good." This is because evil is not a "thing." It is a corruption of a thing. In the same way that dark is not a thing (it is the absence of light) and cold is not a thing (it is the absence of heat) evil does not have an existence in and of itself, but is the absence of something good.

Theism

Remember the argument:

- An all-good God **would** destroy evil;
- An all-powerful God **could** destroy evil;
- Evil is all around us.
- THEREFORE, there is no all-good, all-powerful God.

The logic seems airtight and irrefutable. But we can amend the syllogism to arrive at another piece of airtight logic.

- An all-good God **would** destroy evil;
- An all-powerful God **could** destroy evil;
- There is an all-powerful, all-good God;
- Evil is not yet destroyed
- THEREFORE, God will one day destroy evil.

This is the Bible's position - that God will destroy evil. He just hasn't done so yet.

But how, given an all-loving, all-powerful God, did the world come to be so filled with evil and pain and suffering? Is this the world He intended to make?

No - not at all! And to understand how it happened that we came to have the world we have, we need to go back to the very beginning of everything.

At creation, there is no question but that God had a wonderful plan for planet earth and her citizens.

How did the world get so messed up? (or, "Why did God create a world in which evil exists?")

The original plan for planet earth (Genesis 1-2)

The first chapter of the Bible describes God's creative work and says that everything He made was "good" "good" and "very good"!

Chapter two goes on to describe the special creation of the man and the woman, Adam and Eve, and their placement in the Garden of Eden.

Eden was a perfect environment. Literally.

It would have been a nature-lovers' delight. There were animals and flowing waters and birds flying and abundant natural resources. Ecologically, the Garden of Eden was flawless. Beautiful trees of all varieties grew in abundance.

There was no pollution, no crime, no fear, no unmet needs of any kind. Adam and Eve were given meaningful work; there was relational integrity and intimacy; there was no fear of exploitation.

That's the way everything started. And the last two chapters of the Bible describe God's eventual plan for His world and for people.

The eventual plan for planet earth (Revelation 21-22)

It is a place called "the new heavens and the new earth." It has streets of gold and God's own presence and natural beauty. Like Eden, there are rivers and trees in abundance.

There is no questioning God's power or His goodness if we look at the beginning and the end of the story.

But some time after the creation, the Bible says that something happened that changed everything.

Genesis 3 changed the world!

In the Garden of Eden, God had placed a limitation on Adam and Eve. They were told that they could eat from any tree in the Garden, except one. They were not to eat from a tree in the middle of the Garden that God called "*the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*"

Genesis 3 tells us that they disobeyed. They ate from that forbidden tree. And that choice, the choice to rebel against God, ruined everything.

The Bible tells us that when they disobeyed, the world changed drastically from a perfect, unspoiled world to the world we know today that is filled with pain and suffering.

We might wonder, “*How could that one choice effect so much damage?*”

Well, different choices bring about different consequences. The consequences of choosing to drink Coke vs. Pepsi are not that great. But the consequences of eating arsenic vs. an apple are pretty huge.

And the Bible tells us that the consequences associated with disobeying God resulted in the ruin of the world.

Let’s keep going. Let’s keep thinking.

Adam and Eve made a choice to rebel. Their choice ruined the world. So why did God make people who were even capable of making this kind of ruinous choice?

Why did God create people with free will?

I think the answer to this question centers around God’s purpose in creating people in the first place.

He created Adam and Eve for His own enjoyment, an enjoyment that could only be realized if they chose to respond to His **power** and **goodness** and **love** with **obedience** and **trust** and **love**.

He had to make people who could make the choice to love Him. And that creative decision carried with it a risk, the risk that they would NOT love Him, that they might rebel.

Wherever there is the possibility of real, meaningful love, there is the possibility of rejection. That is true in human relationships and it is also true in our relationship with God.

Could God have designed a world in which people did not have the capacity to sin? Sure. But He could not have done that AND made people free to love Him at the same time.

OK. So God made free moral agents who chose very badly and made a mess of the world. If that is how evil came to be, why doesn’t God stop the bleeding? If He is able to stop evil, why doesn’t He do it now?

Good question. Great question!

Why doesn’t God stop the bleeding and end evil now?

And in fact there was a time when God destroyed everything. In the days of Noah, He saw that evil had grown to such an extent that He determined that He would give earth a “do-over.”

He saved Noah and his family by preserving them in the ark that Noah built and destroyed everything else by a flood. And as soon as the flood ended, Noah’s family picked up with the same sorts of rebellion that had been happening prior to the flood!

What is clear is that for God to do away with evil, He will have to do more than eradicate all diseases, eliminate earthquakes, hurricanes and droughts, and turn bullets into Jell-O. He will have to wipe out evil and the *potential* of evil.

And if God did decide to do away with evil and its potential at midnight tonight, how many of us would be left at 12:05?

So, God could have avoided the problem of evil in the first place by making us robots. And He could end the problem of evil by wiping us out.

Are we left then, with a hopeless, fatalistic world in which we simply say, “*Life’s hard - and then you die*”? Or has God done anything at all to deal with the evil and suffering in the world today?

Yes! God has indeed done something.

What HAS God done?

What did Jesus do?

God has not remained aloof, removed from our suffering. He sent His Son Jesus. Sin is the cause of the problems in this world. And Jesus conquered sin by His sacrificial death on the cross.

It is important to understand what Jesus accomplished by His death.

Clearly, from a physical standpoint, His death was gruesome in the extreme. Crucifixion was designed to extract the maximum amount of pain from its victims. But Jesus' physical sufferings were not the greatest physical sufferings anyone has ever experienced.

Many others have faced equal or even greater pain. And some - even some of His own followers! - faced gruesome deaths with perfect calm and courage. The kind of calm Jesus did not show on the night before He died.

In the Garden of Gethsemene, He suffered terrible anguish as He anticipated what He would experience. So why the traumatic dread? Why did Jesus, who clearly was a courageous Man, loathe His coming death and sweat great drops of blood?

What drove Jesus to desperation in Gethsemene was the knowledge that He, the perfect sacrifice, would bear the burden of the guilt of all the sins committed by rebellious people from Eden forward. And He knew that that this burden-bearing would result in His once-in-all-eternity separation from His Father.

Jesus' suffering was not just physical. It was a relational suffering more terrible than the loss of any relationship you or I have ever suffered, be it close friend, sibling, parent, or spouse.

On the cross, Jesus tasted infinite separation from the Father with whom He had known nothing but eternal intimacy. And He suffered that break in relationship to pay the penalty for your sin.

And NOW, anyone who places their trust in that finished work - His payment for their sin - receives forgiveness of sin and the promise that after this life of suffering is over, an eternity in the presence of God awaits.

Looking at the cross of Jesus may not tell us what the final answer to suffering and evil in the world is, but it does tell us what it is NOT. It is not saying that God does not love us. The cross shouts God's love and care.

Does the promise of heaven remove suffering in this life? Of course not! But the promise of heaven does indeed impact our ability to face the sufferings of this world with courage and hope.

Jesus' accomplishment and its benefits NOW

Imagine that you are a soldier captured by enemy forces in the heat of battle. You have become a prisoner of war and are placed in solitary confinement where you await unspeakable torture and possibly years of deprivation. You are in a hopeless situation.

Now imagine that on the first night of your imprisonment, an angel visits you in your cell and assures you that though the next three years will be very difficult, at the end, you will be released, you will suffer no permanent injuries, and you will be restored to your loving family who will be waiting for you with open arms.

Would that angel's revelation make a difference in the way you face those three years of misery? You bet it would!

And this is what the prospect of Heaven does for those of us who live in a world filled with suffering.

Nobody denies that pain hurts or that injustice is awful. But the anticipation of heaven after this life equips us to know peace and joy NOW, despite the suffering and pain.

So, God doesn't promise to take away our sufferings in this life. In fact, He promises exactly the opposite!

But in addition to promising that after this life is over there will be eternal joy, He also promises to use our sufferings **redemptively**.

God's ability to turn suffering and evil to good

Many people struggle with the seeming pointlessness of suffering and pain. And, in fact, it is true that some suffering appears to be pointless!

As J. L. Mackie wrote in The Miracle of Theism, "*If a good and powerful God exists, He would not allow pointless evil, but because there is much unjustifiable, pointless evil in the world, the traditional good and powerful God could not exist. Some other god or no god may exist, but not the traditional God.*"

The major premise of Mr. Mackie is that so much of the evil and suffering in the world is “pointless.” There is no good reason for it and nothing good could possibly come from it.

But that major premise is flawed from the get go. Just because suffering *appears* to be pointless does mean that it *is* pointless.

The Christian philosopher Alvin J. Plantinga argues against this reasoning by the illustration of what we call in South Texas, “chiggers” and what are called in other places “no-see-ums.”

He says that if you look into your pup tent for a St. Bernard and don't see one, it is reasonable to assume that there is no St. Bernard in your tent. But if you look into your tent for a “no-see-um” and you don't see any, it is not reasonable to assume they aren't there. They might still be there and you just can't-see-um!

It is truly blind faith that argues that if our minds cannot discover good answers to suffering, well, then, there surely can't be any!

Consider the Joseph story from the Bible. Here was a young man, a favored son, who was betrayed by brothers, sold into slavery and assumed dead by his family for decades.

But the book of Genesis reveals that during those forgotten decades Joseph rose in prominence to become the second most powerful man in Egypt and was able to save his family from starvation during a terrible drought.

Late in the story, Joseph has the audacity to say to his brothers who betrayed him, *[Genesis 50:20] As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.*

Joseph's story highlights that God is able to bring great good out of great tragedy. He even uses all manner of suffering to accomplish His great purposes in the world and in our lives.

Though most of us would not say that we are giddy happy about the sufferings we have experienced in life, many of us will admit that we wouldn't trade the insight, the character or the strength that is grown in us as a result of going through the sufferings for anything.

If you have a God great and transcendent enough to be angry with because He hasn't stopped evil and suffering in the world, then you have (at the same moment) a God great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing suffering to continue that you can't possibly grasp. You can't have it both ways.

Final Thought:

Experience tells us that evil and suffering are part of the world in which we live. The Bible tells us that one day, God will bring an end to evil and suffering.

When He does, time will have run out and there will no longer be a chance for anyone to choose Him. It will be too late.

And every day that God allows the world to continue as it is gives us who know Jesus one more day to share the Good News of salvation with people who do not know Him.

And every day that God allows the world to continue as it is gives one more day for each and every person to place the precious treasure of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

[2 Peter 3:9] The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.