

Unmerited suffering and God

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“If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant; if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome.” — Anne Bradstreet

Just as a heads up, this Bible study is an edited excerpt from my (much longer) Bible study titled: *“What the Bible really says about heaven, hell, judgement, death, evil, sin, and salvation”* (and I’d highly recommend reading that one all the way through from beginning to end if you’re able to, in order to get the full picture of what the Bible is talking about when it comes to this topic; but for those who don’t have the time to read that one right now, please do read this Bible study carefully).

As one learns more about the theology of those of us in the body of Christ (not to be confused for the theology of those in the Christian religion), they’re often extremely surprised when they discover our theodicy, meaning what we believe when it comes to resolving “the problem of evil.” When they learn that we believe God is 100% in control of absolutely everything, and that all the suffering in the world is included in the “absolutely everything” we believe He’s in control of, they tend to be very shocked at first. (And while we actually do also include the existence of sin in the “absolutely everything” He’s in control of too, that’s a topic for another post since most people generally aren’t referring to sin so much as unmerited suffering when they discuss this topic, although what we believe about sin does also tend to shock them, so please read my aforementioned *“What the Bible really says about heaven, hell, judgement, death, evil, sin, and salvation”* study if you haven’t already, because I discussed how God is still on Plan A in it.)

Many people who discover our beliefs about God’s sovereignty will argue that God *can’t* be behind the evil and suffering in the world because that would mean He must be evil Himself, or at least that He certainly can’t be very good or

loving. And if you look at the problem from a "forward in time" perspective (meaning, if you begin with what you assume it would say about God if He actually is behind the suffering in the world, and work your argument forward from there), it's easy to conclude that God just can't be behind it.

However, if you instead take a look at the problem from a "backwards in time" perspective — meaning you *begin* with the fact that unmerited suffering exists in the world, and then work your way backwards to figure out why that is — you'll discover that none of the other possible reasons for the existence of said unmerited suffering are any better (and many are much worse) when you really break the options down. Because the fact of the matter is, the world *does* contain unmerited suffering — huge amounts of it — which is to say that people suffer for all sorts of reasons that aren't their fault, such as babies who are born with painful diseases, or people who lose loved ones, among the vast number of other kinds of suffering that nobody chooses to endure or can be blamed for having experienced. So the question we have to ask is, what explanation can we give for this sort of suffering that doesn't take away from God's sovereignty, as well as from His goodness and love. In order to answer that, I'm going to list the seven scenarios that could possibly explain the existence of this type of suffering in the world:

1. **God doesn't want this suffering to occur (meaning He doesn't actually enjoy witnessing it happen), but it all happens against His will because He's powerless to stop it.** We could technically include a variation of this option where God *does* want the suffering to occur, although couldn't stop it even if He did want to, but any variation of this option removes God's omnipotence and sovereignty altogether, which basically means He wouldn't actually be God, so it's a nonstarter, as far as I'm concerned.

2. **God doesn't want this suffering to occur (meaning He doesn't actually enjoy witnessing it happen), nor does He will it to occur (meaning He isn't actively behind it in any way), and there's no ultimate greater good that comes out of the suffering, but while He has the power to stop it, He decides to just sit back and let it occur anyway.** This option maintains God's sovereignty, but it indicates that He isn't very good or loving, since He could have stopped it but chose not to, even though there's no good reason for letting it happen, and He doesn't even want it to occur to begin with but just ignores it for some reason.
3. **God doesn't want this suffering to occur (meaning He doesn't actually enjoy witnessing it happen), nor does He will it to occur (meaning He isn't actively behind it in any way), but while it would be within His power to stop it, the suffering somehow does work out for the greater good, so He simply sits back and lets it happen.** This seems even less likely than any of the other options, when you really think about it. The idea that every single instance of unmerited suffering (out of the trillions of cases or more of it occurring throughout human history — not to mention throughout the history of animals, who also did nothing to deserve the suffering they go through, and yet they *do* suffer, as anyone who has ever owned a pet can attest) could possibly somehow work out for the good of every being who ever experienced it, without God being behind it in some way, is statistically impossible, so this option isn't even worth considering.
4. **God wants this suffering to occur (meaning He enjoys witnessing the suffering), and although He doesn't will it to occur (meaning He isn't actively behind it in any way), because the suffering somehow not only does work out for the greater good, but also because He enjoys watching us suffer in the meantime, He sits back and lets it occur.** This option has the same statistical impossibility as the last one, so it's also not

worth considering, but it also has the additional problem of meaning God isn't good or loving, making it doubly untenable.

5. **God wants this suffering to occur (meaning He enjoys witnessing the suffering), although He doesn't will it to occur (meaning He isn't actively behind it in any way), and while there's no ultimate greater good that comes out of the suffering (other than God getting what He wants), and while He could stop it at any time, He sits back and lets it occur because He enjoys it.** This option would obviously mean that God isn't very loving, so it isn't really an option at all if we're trying to maintain that God is loving, but I'm including it for the sake of including all the possible reasons suffering might exist.
6. **God wants, and even wills, this suffering to occur (meaning He enjoys witnessing the suffering, and is even actively behind much, if not all, of it in some way), and while there's no ultimate greater good that comes out of the suffering (other than God getting what He wants), He actively makes sure that much of it occurs because He enjoys it (I say "much of it" because some of it might also be incidental to His actively making it happen, but He presumably enjoys that suffering too or it's likely He wouldn't let that particular suffering that He didn't cause happen as well).** This option would also mean that God isn't loving, and it definitely *would* mean He's evil, so it isn't really an option at all if we're trying to maintain that God is good and loving and not evil, but, like the other options that don't really deserve consideration, I'm including it for the sake of including all the possible reasons suffering might exist.
7. **God doesn't want this suffering to occur (meaning He doesn't actually enjoy witnessing it happen), but He does will it to occur (meaning He's actively behind it in some way), because He knows there's ultimately a greater good for all of us that will come out of the suffering.**

As far as I can tell, those are the only logical options available to us as to why unmerited suffering occurs (at least within a theistic framework; and while there might be some possible variations of the above that I missed, I don't think any of them are at all tenable without devolving the options into absurdity, and I definitely can't think of any that make sense and are also superior to any of those options, so I'm leaving it at that), and when you look at the suffering that exists in the world beginning from this perspective, it seems to me that option 7 is the only one that actually maintains God's existence, as well as both His sovereignty and His good and loving nature, because it tells us that not only is He behind it, but that He's doing it for reasons that are in all of our best interests (although it's important to point out that option 7 can only be true if it's also true that nobody will actually be punished without end, which is yet another proof on top of the many scriptural arguments I provided in my aforementioned longer Bible study that everyone will eventually experience at least one form of salvation, because if never-ending punishment were true instead, none of the available options could provide any meaning at all for the unmerited suffering of the vast majority of humanity, so again, please do read it when you have the time).

Of course, when considering the above, it's important to keep in mind that there's little-to-no moral difference between being omnipotent yet choosing not to stop the unmerited suffering and actively being behind said suffering in some way, so if you're going to go with an option where God could have stopped it but chose not to, you'd better have a good reason for selecting that option.

Now, as for the question of what the greater good actually is that explains why God did it this way, the answer which those of us who are in the body of Christ will generally give can be called "the contrast principle." Basically, the

conclusion most of us have come to is that one can't truly and fully appreciate good without first experiencing evil (referring to suffering, in this case), and likewise, that we can't fully understand and appreciate God's love without having first experienced a lack of His love, or at least the feeling that we're not experiencing it (similarly, we would argue that we can't fully understand and appreciate grace without first experiencing sin). If this doesn't seem to make sense at first, think about how one can better appreciate the warmth of being indoors after being outside in the cold than they would be able to without ever having experienced the cold. Or, as another example, if the only place snowflakes ever existed was on white sheets of paper of the exact same shade as the snowflakes, we wouldn't ever actually know what a snowflake really looked like. So basically, while it definitely isn't fun in the short term, as we experience the suffering, by the end of the ages we'll all thank God for the suffering He put us through, because we'll all appreciate our existence at that time much more than we could have if we hadn't ever suffered (so, with that in mind, we need to remember that God isn't doing this *to* us, but that He's doing this *for* us; even though we might wish He'd stop already, but I suspect that some of us will wish we'd gone through even more suffering in this lifetime when we're finally quickened, because it might mean that we'd enjoy existence all the more at that point).

Of course, in response to this, the argument is often made that God could have simply created us with the necessary knowledge of good already present in our brains at our birth, and so He didn't have to make any of us suffer (or have to allow any of us to suffer, if you prefer). And while I have to think that He technically could have indeed created us with whatever knowledge He wanted us to have already in our brains (He is God, after all), as it turns out, He *didn't* create us in such a manner that we're born possessing this knowledge, and since He must have had a good reason for *not* doing so, we have to once

again work backwards from that fact and ask ourselves why He didn't. And when you do so, since unmerited suffering still exists, everything I included in the list of options still stands as well.

The fact of the matter is, God didn't seem to create us with *any* conscious knowledge *at all*, but seems to instead want us to have to learn things as we grow, either through study or through experience (or, really, through a combination of both study and direct experience). As for why God did it this way, one possible reason is that, if we didn't actually experience it, our understanding of good (and of suffering) would simply be academic rather than experiential, and based on the way that God *did* create us (having to learn many things through experience), it could very well be that experiencing suffering will lead to a better possible appreciation of good than simply having the knowledge already in our heads at birth could have.

Now, even after reading all of the above, some will *still* assert that, if this is true, then God must be evil, regardless of the points I've made that would suggest otherwise. But in light of the fact that God *didn't* create us fully formed with the knowledge of good and evil already stored in our minds, whether or not that contrast principle *is* why God did things this way, willing unmerited suffering to exist must still be the best possible way to do things. Think about it: Since we *do* exist in a universe where we're born without any knowledge, having to learn things as we grow, if God truly is sovereign, good, and loving, then the sort of universe we currently exist in, including all its suffering (merited or otherwise), *must* result in the best possible outcome for us, meaning the best possible outcome for all of us *must come* from living in a universe where we begin knowing nothing. And since it exists, this would also have to mean that evil and suffering are unavoidable in *this particular* sort of universe. Of course, the contrast principle could still potentially be a beneficial side effect of this sort of

universe as well — or could perhaps be a required principle, based on the fact that the best possible way for us to get to the best possible outcome is to live in a universe of growth and learning and processes and suffering rather than one where we come into existence fully formed with all the knowledge we need already in our brains and with no suffering — but either way, since this is the way the universe is, and since we’re assuming that God indeed *is* sovereign, good, and loving, since the seven options I listed are still the only logical possible reasons for the existence of unmerited suffering (outside of the possibility of God simply not existing, but I’m writing to theists here), I would argue that we’ve now determined this assumption of theirs that God must be evil for this to be true has to be incorrect (and, in fact, somewhat blasphemous) and that it’s time for them to discard that idea, because when we look at it from the “backwards in time” perspective, they’re still stuck with those seven options and only those seven options, and so they’ll have to decide which of them they want to believe.

And this is why those of us in the body of Christ are able to understand that God can cause (or create) evil¹ without being evil, as long as the evil exists for good reasons. As we’ve already discussed, “evil” really just means “calamity” or “destruction” (or “that which causes suffering”) anyway, and we already know that evil can be done to serve a greater purpose (for example, we might amputate a gangrenous leg, causing much suffering, in order to ultimately save a life, which means that evil can be done to bring about a good outcome), so doing or causing evil doesn’t necessarily make one evil anyway. (Some will also claim that this makes God out to be abusive, insisting this would mean that God was thinking, “Healing is so inherently great and desirable that I will get everyone in the world sick so that I can eventually heal them,” to which I would

¹ I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things. — Isaiah 45:7

first respond that bringing God down to a human level there — similar to the way Job did — isn't necessarily the wisest way to go, but also that, based on the fact that we *do* go through unmerited suffering, in light of the fact that the seven options I listed still remain the only options, it might be time for them to accept that perhaps it could be true that it's better for us to have experienced both the sickness and the healing than to not have experienced them.)

And so, with all that in mind, I maintain that this solution to the problem of evil is really the only possible option, at least if you don't want to go with atheism as the reason behind the unmerited suffering that we all experience at one point or another in our lives (which is technically an eighth option, and you're free to choose it, but that option gives us far less hope than option 7 does — in fact it offers no real hope that our suffering has any meaning at all — so I'm sticking with option number 7 because I prefer an option that provides us all a promise of a better future, and also makes the unmerited suffering we all go through actually have meaning). However, if you can think of another option that you believe I missed which actually works as a better theodicy than option 7 does, please do let me know.