

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING: HOW CAN ANYONE BELIEVE IN GOD WITH SO MUCH SUFFERING IN THE WORLD?

Study Leave, November 2025

Part one

A recent national poll in the United States asked, "If you could ask God only one question and knew he would answer, what would you ask?" The most common response was, "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?"

Philosopher David Bentley Hart summed up this challenge to the Christian faith when he wrote, "One might well conclude that the world contains far too much misery for the pious idea of a good, loving and just God to be taken seriously, and that any alleged creator of the universe in which children suffer and die hardly deserves our devotion."

Both the poll and Hart's summary are indicators of the universality of suffering and the challenge suffering is to the idea of God who claims to be who he says he is. For if God is all-loving and all-powerful why is there so much suffering?

To address this problem, this study will look at

I. The Problem

II. A Caveat and Definition

III. Responses to the Problem

I. The Problem

A common expression of the problem of suffering is attributed to the philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC) and was popularised by David Hume (1711-1776 AD).

This argument claims that suffering is logically incompatible with the existence of a God who is:

- Omnipotent (all-powerful)
- Omniscient (all-knowing)
- Omnibenevolent (all-loving)

The reasoning is as follows:

1. If God is all-powerful, He could prevent all suffering.
2. If God is all-loving, He would want to prevent all suffering.
3. But suffering exists.
4. Therefore, such a God likely does not exist.

That is to say, if God allows evil and suffering to continue because he cannot stop suffering, then he might be good but he is not all-powerful. On the other hand, if God allows evil and suffering to continue because he could stop suffering and yet will not, then he might be all-powerful, but he is not good. Either way, an all-loving, all-powerful God as described in the Bible could not exist. This is the claim

This argument is especially prevalent in the West where secular world views, such as atheism, predominate.

II. A Caveat and Definition

Before responding to this claim of logical incompatibility, it is important to explore the motivation behind the objection. If the objection is academic, intellectual and objective then an academic, intellectual and objective response is appropriate. This is the line this study-project will take. However, if the objection is personal, distressing and subjective then a listening ear and personal support is a much more important starting point.

C S Lewis in his preference to “The Problem of Pain” put it like this.

“The only purpose of the book is to solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering. For the far higher task of teaching fortitude, and patience, I was never fool enough to suppose myself qualified. Nor have I anything to offer my readers, except my conviction that when pain is to be born a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy, more than much courage and the least tincture of the love of God, more than all.”

As well as this caveat it is helpful to distinguish between two causes of suffering. Suffering can be thought to originate from natural or moral evil.

Natural evil involves suffering experienced from living on the planet earth. This includes suffering due to flood, fire, famine, earthquake and the like. Moral evil involves suffering with human origins. This includes violence, war, oppression, intimidation, theft, gossip and the like. Often these evils combine or intermingle in suffering. So, deforestation (moral evil) can set up the conditions for devastating floods (natural evil) causing loss of life, injury and destruction of property.

With an awareness that suffering is deeply personal and definitions of natural and moral evil this study will address responses to suffering.

III. Responses to the Problem of Suffering

1. Other Religions and Suffering

When it comes to suffering it is not just Christianity that has to give an account. So, before exploring the Christian response to suffering it's helpful to consider how alternative world religions and world views approach suffering.

i. Main World Views

There are three main views to ultimate reality:

- a. Physical only (no transcendence) - reality is made up of matter and energy only.
Examples: atheism, agnosticism
- b. Physical and Spiritual (transcendence) - reality also includes God or gods, creation and a creator.
Examples: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism
- c. Pantheism - the physical world and spiritual worlds coalesce into the impersonal
Examples: Buddhism, aspects of Hinduism.

ii. Religions on Suffering

How then do religions respond to and resource their adherents to face suffering?

a. Buddhism - claims suffering originates from our desires¹. When we eliminate desire and attachment to this world then natural or moral evil are unable to cause suffering. Buddhists offer the Noble Eightfold Path to help followers disconnect from their desires and so relieve suffering.

b. Hinduism - views suffering as a consequence of actions in previous lives. This is explained by karma where suffering is tied to the soul's journey through cycles of reincarnation. Under this view suffering is always deserved and never arbitrary. Karma means there is no such thing as random, unfair or innocent suffering. Hindus deal with suffering by attempting to live better lives in the cycle they find themselves in so that in the next cycle they will experience less suffering.

c. Atheism - views suffering as a consequence of living in an indifferent universe. Suffering is arbitrary and has no greater meaning than what we personally attribute to it. This leads to a fatalistic approach where suffering "just is" and we are to make the best of it. As a consequence, atheism as a world view has little to offer someone suffering because humans are finite beings with no relief or justice experienced beyond in this world².

Though it is the responsibility of these religions and world views to justify their stance on suffering these contrasting views highlight what Christianity contributes to the marketplace of ideas when it comes to suffering. Tim Keller helpfully summarises these differences when he writes, "Christianity teaches that contra to Buddhism, suffering is real; contra to karma, suffering is often unfair; and contra to atheism, suffering is meaningful."³

2. A World with No Suffering

Now, many people ask that if God is all powerful and all loving could he have made a world without suffering? Yes, he could. However, it would be a world in which we could not live. To explain, let's consider worlds where no natural and no moral evil exist.

i. Removal of Natural Evil

Could God create a world without natural evil, so humans would not suffer from effects of plate tectonics and extreme weather or from a broken limb or stubbing a toe? To answer this, we'll imagine a world where two natural processes (pain and plate tectonics) are removed.

¹ Described by The Four Noble Truths

² It's interesting to note that atheists believe they have solved the problem of suffering by claiming that life is bleak and you just have to get used to it. Suffering is down to pure luck and "DNA just is, and we dance to its music" (Richard Dawkins). However, atheism is no solution because it does not remove or alleviate suffering. Worse still, by claiming that death is the end this removes all hope of things being finally put right. Atheism leaves no hope of compensation or final justice for those who have been a victim of moral evil.

³ Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 30

a. Pain

Our body experiences pain (ie physical suffering) through our nervous system. Over the ages many have dreamed of having bodies never experience pain. However, pain serves a vital function for survival. Pain is the body's way of alerting us to danger and motivating us to do something about it. This was made clear when doctors discovered how leprosy affects the body. It was found that leprosy attacks nerves near the skin, especially in the hands, feet and face, causes a loss of sensation. This meant patients could not experience pain in their skin

How does this play out? Normally when a person places a hand on a hot stove pain receptors in the skin generate a reflex action that jerks the hand away before there is a chance to react consciously. This minimizes the damage, reduces pain and alerts the person to run the hand under cold water and seek treatment. However, with leprosy this reflex action does not function. Without this protective mechanism those with leprosy can burn, cut and injure themselves without noticing. The severe injuries that can result from relatively minor accidents can over time cause damage that leads to amputation of fingers, toes and even limbs. Leprosy highlights the vital role physical pain has in keeping humans safe and the impossibility of living in a world where physical pain was removed.

b. Natural process

On top of this, there are natural processes that cause suffering but are also essential for life on our planet. Good examples include volcanic activity, earthquakes and tsunamis that result from plate tectonics. Though these natural events can cause great suffering (Boxing Day tsunami, 2003) they are vital for sustaining life on earth. These processes recycle nutrients and minerals, create ecosystems (mountains, valleys etc), counter erosion and contribute to the carbon balance of the atmosphere. Although having a planet without plate tectonics would remove suffering from earthquakes, volcanoes and tsunamis the resulting planet would eventually be unfit for life

So, although God could create a world without natural evil (like pain and plate tectonics) it would not be a planet we could live on.

ii. Removal of Moral Evil

This leads us to ask if its possible for God to create a world with no moral evil. To answer this, the study will look at the role of free will and being human.

Given that God is all-loving we are not surprised that God created humans with the ability to love and be loved by others. However, to genuinely love someone means there needs to be the capacity for someone to say no as well as yes to love that is offered them. When it comes to love, free will is vital. There are many accounts, both true and fictional, of how futile it is to force someone to love another. Having free will is indispensable to genuine love - a core part of being human.

Now, for God to grant humanity free will comes at great cost to himself. For with free will comes the ability to say no to God. For instance, God expects humans to humanity obey the ten commandments that include not to murder, commit, adultery, steal and lie. However, due to free will humans have the capacity to break these commandments and inflict suffering on others and themselves.

Now, God could have created humans without free will. However, without free humans would become automatons or robots. This would be deeply unsatisfying for both God and humankind and so God granted humans free will, knowing the risk. More than this C S Lewis writes in *The Problem of Pain*, “Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free wills involve, and you find that you have excluded life itself.” So, for the benefits of being able to love and experience life to the full God granted humans free-will. However, the downside is that this makes moral evil possible and with this great suffering.

So, to the question could an all-powerful God create a world with no suffering, the answer is yes but it is not a world we could live in and world without love. In this context C S Lewis writes, “Perhaps this is not the ‘best of all possible’ universes, but it is the only one possible”.

3. Purpose to Suffering

A key Christian response to suffering is the claim that it is never pointless but serves a greater good. Now, in the light of extreme suffering this claim to a greater good has often been challenged. Philosopher J. L. Mackie, put it like this, “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.”⁴

Note Mackie’s claim that there is “much unjustifiable, pointless evil in the world”. While Christians agree that there is much evil in the world they challenge his use of the words “unjustifiable” and “pointless”. For, by using the word “unjustifiable” Mackie seems to be asserting that Christianity claims evil can be justifiable. This is not the case. Evil is never justifiable. The Bible is clear: evil is always wrong. Christianity also teaches that evil is to be resisted through just laws and encouraging respect among differing ethnic groups, belief systems and religious views. Indeed, Christianity teaches that though the fallen state of our world makes evil inevitable it is to be resisted.

This brings us to Mackie’s second point where he asserts much evil is pointless. Here too, Mackie is wrong to assert that just because evil *appears* pointless to him then it *must be* pointless for everyone. For no matter how extreme an act of evil is, to declare it is pointless in the long term is an over confidence in our ability to perceive what has purpose and what has not.

Mackie’s claim that just because pain appears pointless then it must be pointless fails from a logical consideration as well as from experience. There are countless examples of people who suffered, feeling it was pointless at the time and yet in the long term recognised that it led to a greater good. Take the story of Joseph in Genesis. Joseph was an arrogant young man who was hated by his brothers. In their anger they forcibly sold him a life of slavery in Egypt. However, though he experienced years of bondage and misery, Joseph’s character was refined and strengthened. Eventually he rose to become the prime minister of Egypt saving a nation, and his own family, from starvation. It was only then years later that he understood God’s purpose as explains to his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done,

⁴ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*

the saving of many lives.” (Genesis 50:20). If God had not allowed Joseph to suffer, Joseph never would have been such a powerful agent for social justice and spiritual healing.

Then there is the story of Job. Job was a righteous man blessed with health, wealth and family. However, Satan challenged Job's integrity, claiming Job only served God out of self-interest. God then allowed Satan to test Job, stripping him of every blessing. The key here is that while suffering Job had no idea that there was a purpose – a greater good. For despite intense physical and emotional pain, Job refused to curse God. Though he questioned God's justice he remained faithful. In all this it was only after the suffering had stopped that Job could see bigger purpose of his ordeal. God's purpose, the greater good, was that the devil's claim was refuted, God's honour was upheld and Job experienced God in a deeper more meaningful way. Notice Job's words in Job 42:5, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you." Job knew God's goodness and power in greater measure because of his suffering. Job finally understood that his suffering was for a greater good.

So, Mackie's claim that there is "much unjustifiable, pointless evil" is an arrogant claim to know the multitude of implications that can arise from any act of evil.

That suffering has a purpose has significant pastoral implications. Mark Clark, author and pastor tells the story from while he was a staff member at a large church there was a funeral of a 16-year-old whose life ended tragically. Clark was so disturbed that he left the church wondering why this lad's life had been cut short. Clark admitted to God that he was struggling to see what possible good could come from such pain. He found his way to a nearby cafe to untangle his thoughts. Soon afterward, a man who attended his church came in and sat next to him. Mark told of his confusion and asked, "What good could possibly come out of such meaningless pain?" The man let Mark vent for a while and then prayed for Mark. As he was getting up to leave, he asked, "By the way, did I ever tell you how I came to know Christ? I was going down the wrong road," he said, "and God completely transformed my life. And it all started at the funeral of a sixteen-year old boy, a friend of mine. It was there that I heard the gospel for the first time, and I gave my life to Jesus." Clark went on to write, "In that moment God peeled back the veil for a second and gave me a glimpse of a bigger story where good in different measure and in different ways can come from suffering, even if from our human perspective we don't always understand it because of our limitations"⁵

That suffering gets our attention is expressed in C S Lewis' often quoted statement, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

4. A Suffering God

Another compelling Christian response to suffering is seen in the crucifixion of Christ. For if God is all-loving and all-powerful, what is he doing on the cross? The answer is that because God is all-loving Jesus died on the cross in our place and because God is all-

⁵ Clark, Mark. *The Problem of God: Answering a Skeptic's Challenges to Christianity*, 119-120

powerful God raised him from the dead. Exploring this in more detail will help us understand God's response to suffering especially when skeptics rail against him.

God created humans in his image to be in relationship with him. This involved granting humans free will, with the power to reject as well as embrace. And this rejection of God didn't take long to play out. For in their desire to be like God the first humans ate the fruit of that what was forbidden. This break in the God-human relationship came at huge cost with moral evil being unleashed on the world. In restoring this relationship two criteria would need to be met. First any act of reconciliation would need to be proportionate to the scale of the rebellion, and any penalty would have satisfy the injustice. As no human could meet both criteria God, in the greatest act of love possible, sent his Son to die in our place. Jesus' death was both proportionate to our rebellion and a suitable penalty to right the injustice. The judgment we deserved was placed upon by Christ on the cross. On top of this with the cross not only is the criteria of proportionate punishment satisfied but because of Christ's resurrection humans can be reconciled and adopted as God's daughters and sons.

And although questions about evil and suffering still swirl around the cross, what the death of God's own Son makes clear is that he is never distant or removed from human suffering. In no other religion does a deity suffer for any human who deserve punishment. In all other religion, God (or gods) remain aloof and distant from human suffering. However, this not so for the God who reveals himself in the Bible. For Christ experienced what it is to be human and then suffered with us and for us.

That God became human and experienced suffering is absolutely unique and supplies a powerful personal and pastoral response to people going through suffering.

IV. Summary

For many people the horrific suffering in our world is seen as evidence against the existence of God. After acknowledging that this question can be asked from either an academic or personal perspective, we've briefly surveyed other views within the marketplace of ideas to see how Christianity compares. We've also seen that since freewill is core to being human it is impossible to create humans without moral evil being possible and the suffering that follows. We've also seen that suffering has meaning and that God works for a greater good through pain. Crucially, we've seen that God is not indifferent to suffering but that Christ came in human form to suffer with us and for us. Indeed, it is because God is all-loving that Christ died on the cross and it is because God is all-powerful that Christ was raised from the dead. It is these characteristics of God, so evident on the cross that we are assured that suffering has meaning and that for all who look to Christ suffering and injustice will be resolved when we join Christ in heaven or he returns to put all things right.