

Notes

1. Tori Amos, 'God', *Under the Pink*, (Warner Music, 1994).
2. Genesis, 'Tell Me Why,' *We Can't Dance*, (Atlantic Records, 1991).
3. John 16:20. See also Romans 8:22.
4. Sarah McLaughlin, 'Dear God,' *Rarities, B-Sides and Other Stuff*, (Netzwerk Productions, 1996).
5. Psalm 39:9, Job 30:20f; Job 19:6-8; Job 27:2-6.
6. Philippians 4:7.

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Does God Care?

A Christian Perspective
on Evil and Suffering

My friend, Lisa, wrote me recently:

Suffering has been the story of my life. I am at a point in my therapy where I almost don't want to remove any more barriers blocking memories of my childhood for fear of yet another ordeal to face.

Millions would echo her words, 'Suffering has been the story of my life'—physical suffering, emotional, psychological, spiritual. Hunger, war, disease, bereavement, estrangement, abuse, slavery, deprivation...the words that describe human suffering would fill a dictionary by themselves.

One reason people choke on the idea of a loving God is that the world is this way. They ask, how can an all-powerful, all-loving God allow a world, which he supposedly loves, to get into such a mess?

In the song 'God', Tori Amos complains, 'God, sometimes you just don't come through.'¹ Phil Collins, as he looks at the world's suffering, sings a song entitled, 'Tell Me Why'.² Even cartoons share this frustration. When class bully Moe knocks Calvin off the schoolyard swing, Calvin comments, 'It's hard to be religious when certain people are never incinerated by bolts of lightning.' Calvin might well conclude with Phil Collins, 'It seems there's no-one listening.'

It seems there's no-one listening. Frankly, I think this is the strongest argument against God's existence. Any honest believer would say the same, because—let me be quite upfront about it—ultimately we do not have The Answer. There are some clues, some hints, but no complete, water-tight answer. However, I would want to add, for reasons you will see, that there are still strong grounds for maintaining belief in a loving God. Indeed, it makes *more* sense to believe in God in a world of evil and suffering than not to believe.

The argument against God has three clear steps, which go like this:

- a. *We are asked to believe that a God exists who is all-powerful and all-loving;*
- b. *however, we know perfectly well just from looking at the newspaper that terrible suffering and evil exist in our world—which surely any powerful, kind God would want to put a stop to;*
- c. *therefore this God cannot exist.*

However, the logic here is not as watertight as it might at first appear. In fact, I think you can drive a truck through the holes in this argument. To tighten it up, you would have to add to the equation such statements as:

- d. *God has no good reason for allowing evil and suffering to continue;*
- e. *God is doing nothing about these problems, and*
- f. *they will last for ever.*

That makes for a much stronger argument—in fact, fool-proof. Under those conditions I for one would accept there was no God—at least not an all-powerful and loving one. So the believer's responses tend to be aimed at refuting those three additional statements.

One defence is to ask:

Why might God allow evil and suffering to exist?

One answer that has been suggested is:

God wants us to have free choice

God wants our love and allegiance but respects our freedom. Nobody can be programmed to love. God does want our love and obedience, because that is what fulfils us and gives us joy, but God also wants us to be able to choose to give them. After all, that's what real love is: love which you freely choose to give.

However, if the choice is real, then there has to be a genuine alternative. You cannot have true good without the possibility of real evil. If God hopes for our freely-chosen love, God has to be prepared for our freely-chosen rejection.

Those who believe in God—theists—argue that much evil and suffering is attributable to the misuse of that most dangerous gift: human freedom. Children might not be dying of starvation if we chose to be more generous. Some major floods would not happen if we treated the environment more responsibly. And so on. You can think of plenty of examples.

There is some truth in this, obviously, but when pressed, it comes dangerously close to saying evil is 'really' a good thing. The world is ultimately a better place because evil has been allowed to enter. That might be true in some cases: I break my leg, and am treated by a doctor with whom I fall in love, so I end up being glad I broke my leg. Yet the evil of this century is, for most people, impossible to interpret that way. We have seen evil to be too solid and intractable and horrendous for anyone to say it is a good in disguise.

We can agree that freewill is necessary in the kind of world we have, particularly if love is to be a real possibility, but it isn't in itself a strong enough reason for the existence of evil. My Jewish atheist friend asks: why was the freewill of Hitler more valuable to God than the freewill of the six million Jews Hitler murdered? We all like freewill, but in some cases we limit the freewill of criminals like Paul Bernardo or a Clifford Olson by locking them up for life. Freewill is not the only good for human beings.

Then too, there are some forms of evil it would be difficult to attribute to human irresponsibility: volcanoes, tornadoes and earthquakes, for instance—those things theologians like to call the dysteleological surd. Who else can we blame for

those things except God? So freewill may be a clue, but it is not an adequate answer.

Pain is not always and necessarily a bad thing

We should be grateful for pain. It signals impending danger. People with Hansen's disease (leprosy) do not feel it, and as a result their extremities become horribly damaged. Without pain, many of us would be dead. Certainly that is an extreme example—though it gets us started—so let's bring it a bit nearer home.

That children's classic, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, reminds us that it is only as you suffer through love that you become real:

'Real isn't how you are made,' said the Skin Horse. 'It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.'

'Does it hurt?' asked the Rabbit.

'Sometimes,' said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. 'When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.'

'Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,' he asked, 'or bit by bit?'

'It doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse. 'You become. It takes a long time... Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.' (Williams 8)

Anne of Green Gables knows something similar: as she drives with Matthew to Green Gables for the first time, she is struck by the beauty of The Avenue, and comments in typical Anne style:

'It's the first thing I ever saw that couldn't be improved upon by imagination. It just satisfied me here—she put one hand on her breast—it made a queer funny ache and yet it was a pleasant ache. Did you ever have an ache like that, Mr. Cuthbert?' (Montgomery 20)

To which Matthew, predictably, replies:

'Well now, I just can't recollect that I ever had.'

But many of us, like Anne, have had that ache. There is a kind of beauty which causes pain, and yet we would not want to lose the pain, which is somehow part of the beauty.

Pain and love. Pain and beauty. But also pain and meaning. I suspect that, whatever we believe, the things that have been most worthwhile in our lives are also those that we have suffered for: birth itself, art, adventure, relationships, exams, prizes. It depends, of course, what you think the purpose of life is: if you think the purpose of life is to be happy ('the pursuit of happiness'), then you will try to avoid suffering, and have a hard time doing so.

On the other hand, if the purpose of life is something else—for instance, to become the person God intended for you to be, to find your place in the universe and live it to the hilt with all the energy, creativity and exuberance of which you are capable—that will make you happy some days, but on other days it will be deeply, agonizingly frustrating. In order to be the best *you* it takes effort, strain, exercise, training, risk, love, patience, creativity and the freedom to fail. In other words, suffering is a part of experiencing life to the full, quite apart from whether you consider yourself religious or not.

I caught a glimpse of this in an interview I heard on Peter Gzowski's *Morningside* some time ago. His guest had been involved in the underground resistance in France during the Second World War. After the war was over, she went back to

the bakery she had always gone to before the war, and there was the same woman serving behind the counter. 'What did you do during the war?' she asked. 'Oh,' said the woman with a smile, 'I just stayed here in the bakery, serving customers till it was all over.' At first Gzowski's guest said she felt angry, but then she changed her mind: 'At least I had lived,' she commented, 'the other woman hadn't.'

How does this relate to God? If God is all-loving, as Christians claim, God wants you to be all that you are capable of being—unique, incredible, extraordinary. So God is not so mean as to give you an easy world of 100% happiness. The Christian God is like a wise coach who knows you can win an Olympic gold medal, and makes you train for it until you think you're going to die, then cares for you, and encourages you, then makes you do it all over again.

Lisa is discovering this too: she writes that her mother wants to rewrite their family history. But, protests Lisa,

I wouldn't change a thing. I wouldn't wish this on anyone else, but I like the person I am becoming through all of this.

This is not the same as saying a loving God planned all these evil things for Lisa's ultimate good. It is simply saying that God is able to bring good out of evil to make us better, more beautiful people.

Even death may be part of this bringing good out of evil. Many of our complaints about this world centre on the belief that death is the end of everything, the worst thing that could ever happen. But in the Christian scheme of things, death is not the end. And that puts the whole thing into a different perspective.

CS Lewis, in *The Problem of Pain*, goes so far as to suggest that 'even if there were pains in heaven, all who understand

would desire them' because they would be pains of this same kind: the pain of beauty, the pain of love, the pain of growth (Lewis 114).

However, this too falls short as a total answer. People do not always rise to the challenge. Sometimes the burden of evil and suffering is simply too much. People are broken and destroyed by evil and suffering because it is simply beyond their capacities to cope.

So if this is God's only answer, then it is not good enough. Wasn't there any other way God could have taught courage, self-sacrifice or endurance? We can't imagine one, but then we don't claim to be omniscient or omnipotent. This is certainly another clue, but it is not the answer. What other answers are possible?

Jesus taught of a powerful presence of evil

According to Jesus, the evil in our world is not just a result of our misuse of freewill, nor of natural disasters, but is at least in part the work of an evil Force which actively seeks people's destruction. This being is known as the Devil (the one who accuses) and Satan (the adversary).

There are few clues in the Christian Scriptures as to who this being is, but the most likely interpretation is that Satan was originally the powerful angel given responsibility for caring for our planet. Satan then declared himself independent of God and set himself to attack and if possible overthrow God and all God's works.

Some people (not necessarily religious in other respects) believe they have experienced the power of Satan personally. Or again, some situations in the world appear so evil, more than simply the work of the evil people involved, that the hypothesis of an evil power would make sense of the data.

Normally it is impossible to distinguish between human evil and supernatural evil. Nevertheless, as we analyze the sources of evil and the reasons for evil, this is one factor to keep in mind.

Of course, this explanation is still not enough. The same problem may be levelled against it as against the freewill argument: why did God feel it was worth the risk to create a powerful angel with freewill?

There may be answers which we do not and could not know

See if you can figure out the next number in the following sequences: 14916253 or 85491763. Many people can get the first with little difficulty; few can figure out the second (see note below). It is often the case that one human being cannot understand the reasoning of another.

If this is true between two people, how much more is it true between creatures and their Creator! Some of Jesus' analogies for God actually suggest this. He says, for instance, that God is like a shepherd, a king, a good father. This leads us to believe that:

- a. *God knows more than we do: as shepherds know more than sheep, kings know more than subjects, parents know more than children.*
- b. *God may be trusted—like a good shepherd, a good ruler, a good parent—even though we don't always understand what is going on.*

That is not ducking the issue; it is merely being realistic. If we are finite, and God is infinite, then of course there will

Note. The first sequence is squares: 1 squared is 1, 2 squared is 4 and so on. In the second, the numbers are in alphabetical order.

be some things God does, or allows, which we will not understand. A God whose IQ is only the same as that of the average believer would have had quite a problem with creation.

The second line of defence for the believer has to do with the duration of suffering and evil: if the pain is going to stop, it may change our understanding of it. So we ask:

When will God put a stop to evil and suffering?

This question is a serious, rational one but also a powerfully emotional one.

God promises that one day there will be an end

Jesus taught that at the end of time there would be a day of reckoning, when everyone would receive their just deserts. When that judgment is over, nobody will have any grounds for complaint left. It's not that everyone will necessarily be happy: justice, after all, is a two-edged sword.

Jesus also says the sufferings of this world will be remembered as the labour pains of a woman giving birth.³ There are two kinds of physical pain. One kind signals that something is wrong, part of our body is in danger of being hurt or destroyed. The other kind is positive, a sign of coming life: the pain of childbirth. At face value, both feel awful. Yet the two kinds signal totally different outcomes, one negative, the other positive.

Jesus seems to be saying the pain of this world feels like the first kind: awful, negative, totally unproductive. But try

thinking of it the other way. Certainly it is terrible, but in fact the pain is because this old world is giving birth to a new world.

It is really rather presumptuous to suppose that right now, in our little corner of the world's history and geography, we have sufficient evidence in our limited brains to make a final judgment on whether the Creator of the universe should have allowed evil and suffering. How do we know that we have sufficient data in our hands?

After twenty years in prison for the cause of democracy in South Africa, Nelson Mandela was asked if it was worth it all. And he said 'Yes! I'm sure that if you had asked him at the beginning whether it would be worth spending the next twenty years in prison, he would have answered, 'Of course not.' If you had asked him half way through, the same. But at the end, he could see the whole thing in perspective, and knew it had been worth it. So for us, we may be only half way through the story; it is too soon to bring in the verdict. The Christian says: we don't have all the evidence. And we will not have enough data until God chooses to wind up this universe and writes the full-stop at the end of the human story. And then we will see differently.

But the question of 'When?' is also an angry one, so we need to know that:

We may express anger to God for the mess the world is in

When things are hard for us—when our parents split up, when a friend dies of cancer, when someone we know is paralyzed by a car crash—our questions to God are angry, not academic: *Why do you let this happen? Why me? Why now?* And when we're angry what we want is not just answers; we want someone to hit, someone to swear at, someone to kick and scratch. And who better than God to be on the receiving end of that anger?

A friend of mine, whose child was almost totally paralyzed as the result of an accident, used to go into a church at night, carrying the child, and weep and swear and shout at God, telling God ‘things that have probably never been said in that church before or since.’

Sarah McLaughlin, in the XTC song, ‘Dear God’, expresses many people’s feelings. She recounts the sufferings that God seems to allow and comments angrily: ‘You’re always letting us humans down,’ drawing the understandable conclusion that ‘Father, Son and Holy Ghost / Is just someone’s unholy hoax.’ In the last line, with cold, bitter sarcasm, she sings, ‘If there’s one thing I don’t believe in, it’s you, / Dear God.’⁴

Even cartoon characters understand this. Having waited weeks for his beanie to arrive in the mail, Calvin finally promises God he will never do anything bad again if his beanie comes that day. When he arrives home and (inevitably) it has not come, he yells at the unresponsive sky, ‘What’s it take, huh?’

Is it legitimate to feel like that towards God? People in Bible times certainly didn’t pull any punches in relation to God. Some of the Psalms speak in very blunt terms. One turns on God: ‘you are the one who has done this’. Job accuses God: ‘you turn on me ruthlessly’, ‘God has wronged me’, ‘God has denied me justice’.⁵ Most strongly of all, Jeremiah 20:7 may be translated, ‘You have seduced me.’* Jeremiah felt that God had led him on and then taken advantage of him—and he was not afraid to express that to God! The interesting thing to me is that in none of these instances does God correct or reprimand these people.

Writers of some of these Psalms work through their anger to a place of reconciliation and faith. In the same tradition, Elie Wiesel tells of three rabbis who put God on trial during the

* *The same word is used in Exodus 22:16 to refer to sexual seduction.*

Holocaust and found him guilty. Then they noticed it was time for prayers—and prayed (McAfee Brown, cited by Middleton 53). Many of us have experienced the freedom to express anger that comes in an intimate and accepting relationship, and the reconciliation that is possible on the other side of anger. This seems to be what is happening in the relationship of these writers to their God.

How can I say so definitely that God lets people speak their minds? Because Jesus who showed us what God is like let us hammer nails into his hands and his feet. That’s how I know God can handle our anger and our hate, and still love us. God understands why we feel that way, and out of intense love for us God is willing to take it.

So anger is quite appropriate, and has strong precedents in the Bible. It is certainly better than apathy, or misplaced anger, or turning away from God.

Finally, I want to ask:

What is God doing about evil and suffering?

The answer may seem somewhat surprising:

God works through people to fight against evil

Some years ago, my wife and I experienced two miscarriages. Although we prayed for help to God, God appeared to have gone on holiday. Fortunately we had good friends who cared for us in practical ways. We confessed our disappointment with God to one of these, whose name was Anne. She prayed with us that we ‘would have eyes to see how God was answering our prayers.’ It was not long after

that we realized it was through people like Anne that God was in fact showing his love for us.

It was ever thus. Jesus—who claimed to represent God in a unique way—did not give theoretical explanations, but he did fight evil and suffering: he healed the sick, raised the dead, fed the hungry, comforted the lonely and the bereaved, forgave the guilty, and challenged the corrupt. And he commanded his followers to imitate his example.

All down the centuries, believers have continued to fight against evil, and have claimed that God inspired them and gave them strength to do it. I think of William Wilberforce fighting for 40 years for the abolition of slavery; of the Salvation Army; World Vision; Mother Theresa; Jean Vanier. They have built hospitals, run schools, taught agriculture, reformed prison systems, fought against corruption. I personally know many who are involved in medical missions or literacy programs in developing countries.

It is true that other people, who do not call themselves Christian, do that sort of thing also—though I suspect the proportion of humanists throwing away their lives like that is smaller than the proportion of professing Christians. What is significant is that believers claim that they do what they do because God wanted them to do it.

The Christian God seems to have a policy of working in partnership with people of faith whenever possible.

God brings good out of evil

In Britain in the 1950s, some people were saddened by the end of the Second World War for one reason at least, that the community spirit of wartime—the intense and sacrificial caring for other people, often for strangers—quickly evaporated. Many could tell similar stories from different decades and

different cultures of how hardship and suffering ‘brought out the best in people.’

Christians attribute this phenomenon to the activity of their loving God. God does not stop the evil, they argue, but at least God creates good out of evil.

The atheist responds, *yes, but evil can also come out of good*. A classic example is the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. It was heralded by the West as a triumph for freedom and democracy, an unqualified ‘good thing’. Then the trouble started: the economic crises, the rightist backlash, the civil wars, the internecine strife which had been quiescent for decades, the renewed danger of nuclear weapons. Is that not evil coming out of good?

It is hardly fair, however, to present these two facts—evil comes out of good and good comes out of evil—as equally significant. In a world that suffers from entropy, the gradual breakdown and disintegration of all structures (does your room ever tidy itself? does it get untidy by itself?), it is hardly surprising that evil comes out of good. Human beings do their best, but entropy finally wins. On the other hand, when good does come out of evil, that is startling. When it happens (and it does), there seems to be some force working against the natural grain of the universe. Christians attribute this activity to God.

God has suffered and does suffer with suffering people

Elie Wiesel, in his book about the Holocaust, *Night*, tells of prisoners who are forced to watch the execution of a young boy. One prisoner asks, ‘Where is God now?’ Wiesel says, ‘I heard a voice within me answer him: Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows’ (Wiesel 76).

Suppose for a minute that God really exists, and that you are God. Suppose too that you have some good reason for tolerating the existence of evil for a time—a reason that your human creation cannot understand. Suppose too that you were loving. What is the best thing you could do for your suffering creation to help them without violating their freedom?

The Christian's answer is that you would come to earth in human form, you would demonstrate your hatred of evil and suffering, you would inspire others to fight it, you would empathize with those who suffered, you would arouse the opposition of the political and religious bureaucracy, and you would suffer in your own body the very worst that evil could inflict. And your name would be Jesus Christ.

Christian faith says that God, in the person of Jesus, has suffered the worst that evil can do. Christians believe that when Jesus died by crucifixion in AD33, by one of the most vicious, sadistic and protracted methods of execution humanity has ever devised, in some mysterious sense it was God who was being tortured and dying. God has known the darkness. Because of that, when human beings suffer today, God continues to suffer and weep with them.

For many people, the time of suffering is when they feel most abandoned by God—maybe because they have an image of God as one who never suffers. God watches, but does not get involved; God's hands never get dirty; God never hurts, or grieves, or yearns.

For others, who have understood this paradox of the suffering God, the experience of suffering is quite different. God is present, not absent. God suffers, is not impassive. God is in the thick of things, not on a distant throne. I was very moved in reading Lisa's letter because in spite of all the hard things she has gone through she can say:

This last year and a half has been life-changing for me. I have met Jesus face to face and have accepted his invitation for a real and passionate love relationship with every ounce of my being.

Chuck Ohlrich has written in *The Suffering God*:

The recognition of God's participation sometimes causes me to shrink back and cover my mouth in horror. [God] loves us so much and at such cost...it is almost too much. Whenever the vision of [Jesus] the man of sorrows comes into my mind, I can barely stand to look into those eyes which tell the agony of God (Ohlrich 97).

That kind of experience doesn't answer the questions that inevitably come, but it makes it possible to live with those unanswered questions. It is the difference between having a doctor who explains to you from the textbook why you are dying, and the person who sits by your bed and holds you and weeps with you.

An elderly couple, who lost their only son in the Second World War, paraphrased Paul's words in his Letter to the Philippians by speaking of 'the peace of God, which is better than knowing the reason why.'⁶ The loving presence of a suffering God is more use than any amount of cold academic answers.

For the Christian believer the real solution to the problem of evil and suffering is not a proposition but a person; it doesn't begin in the intellect but in a relationship—with an all-powerful, all-loving but also suffering, all-vulnerable God.

A few years ago, my wife Deborah nearly died during a two month hospital stay. She puts it this way: all of us are going to suffer, if we do not suffer already. The only choice we have is whether we wish to suffer alone, or to suffer in the hands of a loving God whose hands are already scarred from the nails of crucifixion.