



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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Why Does God Allow Evil and Suffering? An Introductory Overview

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In his remarks at the National Memorial Service on September 14, 2001, Billy Graham addressed a question millions have asked, not just in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack that created the need for the memorial service at which he spoke, but throughout history as men and woman have been confronted with evil, pain, and suffering.

I have been asked hundreds of times in my life why God allows tragedy and suffering. I have to confess that I really do not know the answer totally, even to my own satisfaction. I have to accept, by faith, that God is sovereign and he is a God of love and mercy and compassion in the midst of suffering. The Bible says God is not the author of evil. It speaks of evil as a mystery . . . (from the text of Graham's message, September 14, 2001, as reprinted in the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, September 15, 2001).

Many Bible students have been similarly hesitant to attempt to totally explain the reasons for evil, tragedy, and suffering. We are often left with a shroud of mystery as we ponder why tragic events occur and what possible good a sovereign God could have in mind that might justify both the amount and the horror of the suffering we face. While I believe more can be said than Graham had time to say in the setting of his remarks, I would not venture to suggest I can do more in this limited space than introduce a framework for the kind of study needed to explore the question and point to some ideas that will help us when we experience trouble in our lives.

First, let's be sure we understand the appropriate context for considering this question: God's original purpose for humanity. We can summarize that purpose with the word *fellowship*, referring to the relationship God desires to have with all his human creation (cf. 1 John 1.3). Jesus emphasized the importance of this fellowship when he defined eternal life, not as the ultimate in luxury living, but as knowing God and his Son (John 17.3). This is a consistent theme in Scripture, seen especially in the prophets (Isa 11.2, 9; Jer 2.8; 9.3-6, 24; 22.16; 24.7; 31.31-34; Hos 4.6) and several New Testament texts (Phil 3.8; Col 1.10; 2.2; 2 Pet 1.2, 8; 2.20; 3.18; 1 John 2.14; 4.2, 6-8; 5.20). We also see it in the covenant emphasis of both testaments (cf. Jer 31.31-34; Heb 8.6-13) and in statements about what happens to those who do not know God (cf. Mark 12.18-27; Rom 1.18-22; Gal 4.8-9).

It is God's desire that we know him that explains his concerted effort to redeem people, the project that comprises the biblical story. God created people in relationships and also engaged in a

relationship with them (Gen 1-2). The work of Christ aims to bring “many children to glory” (Heb 2.10 NRSV), the glory sin takes away (Rom 3.23). God’s grace reconciles us to him and to each other (Eph 2.1-22), reversing the effects of the first sins (Gen 3-4). The glory of the new Jerusalem is found in the fact that God will live with his people there (Rev 21.3). Throughout the biblical story, the emphasis is always on people living in fellowship with God.

But, for that fellowship to be genuine, we must have real *freedom* to accept or reject it. This is sensible when we reflect on what it means to be uniquely created in God’s image (Gen 1.26). Throughout Scripture, God is presented as a being who makes choices (cf. Deut 7.7; 12.18, 21; 14.23-25; 16.1-8; John 15.16, 19; Eph 1.4; Jas 2.5). Part of what it means to bear his image therefore is that we also have the freedom to choose (Josh 24.15; 1 Cor 9.1; Gal 5.13; 1 Pet 2.16), an ability our experience confirms. This freedom to separate ourselves from God, to choose to do what we want even if that is not what God wants (cf. Rom 1.24, 26, 28), must exist if there is to be genuine fellowship with reciprocal love. As John Mark Hicks wrote,

Without freedom, there could be no real love. Without freedom, there is only a coerced relationship of power and fear.

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 God risked that some would choose their own interest over fellowship with him. The gift of freedom means that humanity could either choose its own direction or share God’s loving community. But if God were going to offer authentic mutual love, then he would have to risk the choice. Without choice, the fellowship would have been superficial and inauthentic. (John Mark Hicks, *Yet Will I Trust Him: Understanding God in a Suffering World*, 61, 64).

Suffering is an outcome of the wrong choice in humanity’s *fall*. Adam and Eve chose wrongly, and death the consequence of their choice. When God commanded them not to eat “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” he implied that they had a choice in the matter. He also spelled out what would happen if they made the wrong choice: “. . . in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen 2.15-17 ESV; cf. Ezek 18.20; Rom 6.23; Eph 2.1-3). That the penalty is not immediately applied when we sin is evidence, not of God’s failure to keep his word, but of his grace as he patient waits for more people to repent (2 Pet 3.8-9).

But to say that the penalty is not immediately applied is to distort the picture somewhat. For with the entrance of sin into the world, something God did not desire, death gained control (cf. Rom 5.12-21) and brought with it “all the little deaths” leading to it—all the pain, suffering, and tragedy that are so much a part of this fallen world (cf. Rom 8.20-23; the phrase, “all the little deaths” is from Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, 135).

In practice, this means that, generally speaking, there are three reasons for suffering: (1) because of the way the world is, corrupted by sin; (2) because of the way we are, sinners separated from God (Isa 59.1-2) who reap the consequences of our sins in ways that are sometimes painful (Gal 6.7); and (3) because of the way others are—sometimes we suffer directly from their wrong behaviors, as in the case of a wife abused by her husband, and sometimes indirectly, as in the cases of babies born with drug or alcohol addictions.

All this helps us understand why evil and suffering are part of our world. But the question remains: why does God permit it to continue and be so horrible? That question must be answered as a statement and act of *faith*. Given humanity’s choices and the negative consequences that ensue, God could justly end all suffering by simply carrying out the penalty for sin. As it is, he still desires

our willing fellowship (2 Pet 3.9; 1 Tim 2.4) and has reached out to woo as many as possible to participate in a loving relationship with him (cf. Hos 11.8-9; Rom 5.6-11). Our choice to sin may have frustrated God's purpose for us (cf. Luke 7.30), but it has not defeated his intention. He worked throughout history, using frail, sinful people in his plan to send his Son to redeem and adopt humanity into a relationship with him (cf. Gal 3.15-18; 4.4-5). But Jesus also revealed God's nature and showed how we can be transformed into his image (cf. John 1.14-18; 14.9; Col 1.15; 2 Cor 3.17-18). Reversing the reversal of God's intention, Jesus was the means of God's grace to forgive us (Rom 3.21-26; 5.1-2), showed us how to live (1 Pet 2.21-25), paid the penalty for sin (2 Cor 5.21; 1 John 2.2), and conquered the death that sinful choice introduced into the world (1 Cor 15.1-11, 51-58). He also identifies with us in our experience of evil and suffering (Heb 2.9-18) and remains with us, empowering us to endure evil and suffering with hope (Matt 28.20; Rom 8.18-39). When we struggle to endure, he intercedes with the Father on our behalf (Rom 8.31-35; 1 Tim 2.5; 1 John 2.1).

The result of this is that, despite our ongoing struggle with evil and suffering, we can live with the confident hope that God's original and ultimate goal for us will one day be accomplished. We can trust that, no matter how great our sufferings, they "are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom 8.18 ESV). We can know God in a relationship that includes the conviction that, even in this fallen world, suffering has some redeeming qualities that make us stronger and more like God in his holiness (Heb 12.10, 14). In other words, suffering is useful for building the kind of character God desires for us and always intended for us to enjoy (Rom 5.1-5; Heb 12.5-11; Jas 1.2-4, 12; 1 Pet 1.6-7; cf. Rom 8.29). Furthermore, we can also trust that God, who has demonstrated his ability to conquer death, will, in spite of Satan's ongoing efforts (cf. Job; Hab 1; 1 Cor 15; Heb 2.14-18; 1 Pet 5.8), be triumphant and "in all things . . . work for the good of those who love him" (Rom 8.28 NIV).

So, we press on, enduring our trials (Jas 1.2-4).. We trust that God, whose ways are not ours (Isa 55.8-9) and who has the wisdom necessary to direct our steps (Jer 10.23), has among the secret things that belong to him (Deut 29.29) the ability to bring about the glorious goal of fellowship with him for all who will accept it.

"As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom 8.36-37 ESV).

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For Additional Study

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