

The Question of Evil & Suffering in the World

From childhood, we've all heard the phrase, "That's not fair!" It's a statement of protest conveying a universal experience we share—one of being treated unfairly. The most common response to this childhood outcry is, "Well, *life's* not fair." While not particularly comforting for a child, over the course of life we each learn that, in fact, the world is not a fair place.

As we grow into adulthood, the question of fairness can transform into two philosophical questions: Why do bad things happen to good people? and Why do good things happen to bad people? The unfairness of life experienced as a child may later develop into an unexplained injustice experienced by many. When applied against the Christian faith, these two questions form the foundation upon which the central question of the existence of evil resides. This is typically expressed as, "If God is all-good, all-loving, and all-powerful, then why does He allow evil to exist in the world?"

If you've asked this question yourself, then you are in good company. In the opening verses of the Old Testament book of Habakkuk, the prophet expresses his discontent and confusion over why evil is allowed to exist. Habakkuk writes,

How long, LORD, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?
Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.
Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted. (1:2–4 NIV)

Throughout the world, there are injustices of every kind. It seems the daily news conveys nothing more than story after story of the innocent suffering, whether from political oppression, lack of food, pestilence, or some form of persecution. But why? Why does God allow suffering to occur? In these few verses Habakkuk asks

several profound questions, all of which connect to the question of evil's existence in light of God's reality.

Habakkuk is writing after the reign of Josiah, who was a just king of Judah, during the time when Jehoiakim, one of Josiah's sons, had come to power. Unlike his father, Jehoiakim's rule was not characterized by fairness for the poor and needy. Instead, it was one of exploiting his subjects for his own gain with no concern for justice or mercy. To make matters worse, those in lesser positions of authority took their cue from Jehoiakim, resulting in national oppression and violence. The only hope was for God to intervene on the people's behalf.

The questions raised by Habakkuk are still relevant today—questions that for some challenge the very existence of God. The argument for this conclusion is based on the following two premises: If God is good and loving, then He would not want anyone to suffer; and if God is all-powerful, then He could stop all suffering. The logical conclusion to these two premises is that because suffering exists, a good God must not exist, for if an all-powerful, good God did exist there would be no suffering.

The problem with this argument is twofold. First, the conclusion that God does not exist because suffering does exist does not explain why evil is present in the world. God's existence seems to have no impact on whether evil exists. Whether or not a person believes in God's existence does not negate the reality that bad things happen. In fact, humanity's ability to recognize the existence of evil demonstrates that there is an inward moral law allowing them to determine good from bad. A moral law is only possible if given by a moral lawgiver who exists outside our reality. This, however, supports God's existence rather than denies His existence.

At first this might sound like philosophical trickery. But without some type of moral law, humanity would be incapable of determining right from wrong, good from bad, and would therefore not be able to recognize evil. It is only because God exists and has given us a moral law through which to know good and bad that we can recognize evil. Ironically, this allows people to call into question His very existence.

Second, while statement two is true, that an all-powerful God can stop suffering, it does not follow that statement one is

necessarily true: that because God is good and loving He would not allow suffering to exist. As parents, though we dearly love our children and could shield them from most harm, we allow them to experience hardships from time to time to prepare them for the real world. Suffering and pain can offer valuable lessons in life. For instance, our bodies use pain to tell us that something is wrong. But most would argue that this is not the type of suffering being referenced. Instead, it is the suffering of innocent people—a suffering that is characterized as excessive evil, which we will address below.

To answer the question of evil, we need to clarify what is meant by the term. In its broadest sense, *evil* can be defined as that which is not good, or any act that causes negative consequences. This, however, is much too broad a definition to be useful. We will, therefore, divide evil into two main categories: natural evil and moral evil.

Natural evil encompasses physical catastrophes such as tornadoes, wildfires, earthquakes, volcanoes, and illnesses like cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and pandemics like Covid-19. Many of these natural evils are commonly labeled “acts of God.”

Moral evil, on the other hand, refers to acts of people against other people such as physical violence, political oppression, war, and criminal activities. Within the category of moral evil is a subset that goes beyond one person treating others with hostile intent to extreme acts of injustice such as human trafficking, child abuse, and torture. These are acts that cause us to ask, “How can people treat others so badly?” These actions demonstrate that within humanity there exists the ability to commit the most heinous acts of violence against others, and they show that the reality of evil in the world is the result of humanity’s fallen nature and not an act of God.

It should be noted that the worldview of atheism has much to answer for regarding the category of moral evil. The number of deaths caused by those who followed an atheistic worldview is revealing. Consider these atheist leaders: Kim Il Sung, leader of North Korea, killed upwards of 1.6 million people who opposed his rule. Pol Pot, leader of the Communist Party in Cambodia, in his attempt to “cleanse” the country killed between 1.7 and 2.5 million people—approximately one-third of the country’s population.

Perhaps one of the most notable atheist leaders in history is Adolf Hitler, the Führer who subscribed to the German philosopher Nietzsche's "God is dead" philosophy and killed upwards of ten million people. A number many estimate to be much higher.

Finally, we should mention Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong. Stalin, Secretary of the Communist Party and leader of the former Soviet Union, is attributed with up to twenty-three million deaths. His approach to leadership was to rule the people through fear. Alexander Solzhenitsyn estimated that the total loss of life under the leaderships of Lenin, Stalin, and Khrushchev to be close to sixty-six million people.

Mao Zedong is perhaps the most violent of all leaders with a death toll reaching between sixty and sixty-five million people. Within the first five years of his rule, he solidified his position of power by killing four to six million people either by sentencing them to death or to work in labor camps. Later, through his failed leadership in the area of steel production, he caused twenty million people to starve to death. Other deaths came through his continued push for control and power over the very people he led.

According to Greg Koukl, deaths resulting from atheistic leaders are the result of ideologies that leave God out of the equation. Koukl goes on to say that

Fascism and communism, both of which are atheist ideologies, are responsible for the death of more than 150 million people in the 20th century alone. And communist and other anti-god regimes have continued to kill hundreds of thousands since. When we add the millions of rapes, tortures and enslavements by these same godless regimes, an ugly picture is produced.

History shows that far more deaths have resulted from the political oppression of atheist leadership in the twentieth century than from Christianity's 2,000-year existence.

In response to the above, some will assert that the history of Christianity is not without its own faults. In this they are correct. Throughout history there have been many who profess the name of Christ yet are responsible for much bloodshed. Some of the more popular accusations levied against Christianity include the Inquisition, the Crusades, and the Salem witch trials. These atrocities, however, dwarf in comparison to the brutality of atheism.

has wrought in the world. The Inquisition resulted in around five thousand deaths over a period of about three hundred years. The Crusades, eight in total, resulted in approximately 1.5 million deaths, and the Salem witch trials ended with a total of nineteen people killed.

The lower numbers of people killed in the above examples in no way minimizes the suffering of those afflicted, nor is there any excuse for the actions that produced these tragedies. But they do show that Christianity is not nearly as violent as some have asserted. These examples demonstrate the fallen condition of human nature even among those who falsely profess the Christian faith to justify their actions.

It should be recognized that those who engaged in these types of activities while professing to hold to the Christian faith were acting counter to what they professed to believe. A true Christian is someone who not only believes the truths of the Bible but whose life seeks to reflect those truths. However, those who disavow God's existence are in many ways acting in agreement with their worldview because without God there is no absolute moral law by which to identify an action as truly evil. And without a measure by which to identify an evil act, how can the act be said to be wrong?

This does not mean that Christians are perfect, but merely that those who profess the name of Christ would not commit the morally reprehensible acts associated with such incidents as the Crusades or the Inquisition. We can conclude then that it is not reasonable to reject the Christian faith over the actions of a few whose lives are lived contradictory to what the Bible teaches.

Without a doubt, the question of evil is one of the most difficult issues to address for skeptics and even for our own times of doubt and testing. According to Josh and Sean McDowell, "Evil and suffering are not merely intellectual matters to be solved but belong to our personal experience." The answer to the problem of evil, biblically speaking, is rather straightforward. Evil exists because of the fallenness and freedom of humanity. This does not imply that the Bible in any way minimizes the grief and suffering people experience. It simply explains the cause *and* provides answers and hope.

In Genesis 3 we read of Adam and Eve's rebellion against God and the fall that resulted. All people born after Adam and Eve have been born with a sin nature—a disposition that does not seek

to live a righteous life as God prescribes. The overarching story of the Old and New Testaments is about how God is working to reconcile humanity back to Himself, which He does in Jesus. In addition to a sin nature, humanity also has freedom: freedom to do what we want, which is usually that which benefits us most. Humanity, in our desire for power, affluence, and glory wage war, create plagues, oppress people, and assert our personal agendas—too often at the expense of others. This is where moral evil finds its basis: in the selfish actions and greed of others.

But what about natural evil—extreme weather and other disasters characterized as “acts of God”? These events are also a result of the fall of humanity. In Romans 8:20–22 we read that the fall did not just affect people, but it affected the whole of creation in that it was “subjected to futility” until the day when creation will be “set free from its bondage to corruption.” The natural order awaits its own redemption when it will be reset to its original state as described in the last few chapters of the book of Revelation.

In the final analysis, because of our limited human comprehension we do not fully understand the “why” of some events. This does not mean that God is unaware or uncaring of the human condition. In fact, it is because of our human condition that God offers redemption in the face of humanity’s darkest actions. He can use even the most heinous of events for His ultimate purposes.

Taking God out of the equation does not answer the question of why evil exists. Without God we are still left with evil actions and a moral law we cannot explain apart from His existence. So maybe the question is not, why doesn’t God intervene in human suffering? But rather, why does humanity refuse to follow God and live in peace with one another as God desires?

In a fallen world damaged by the very people who live in it, God offers the hope of an eternal and a transformed life. The challenge is that people want to be free to act as they desire, yet they also demand that God intervene at every point in history to alleviate the suffering that results from that freedom. Unfortunately, we cannot have it both ways. The Bible foretells a day when all evil and suffering will end and the original state of creation will be restored. In this we can find hope not only for today but for eternity.