

Suffering: The World Breaks Everyone And That's Not How It's Supposed To Be

Introduction

Many have claimed the God Christians believe in must be a monster and is indefensible in light of suffering because a good, gracious, loving, and sacrificing God would prevent suffering and evil. I will claim in this brief essay that not only can a Christian view of God be defended, the Christian view of God makes the most sense of humanity's grief in suffering and evil and our longing for goodness and flourishing. I'll do this by evaluating what evil and suffering are and why we humans can't simply accept them as byproducts of life. Next, I'll evaluate the Christian view of God and God's obligation to mend a broken world. Lastly, we'll look to the mangled mess of the cross and tomb where God conjoins suffering and salvation.

Lisbon's Day of Suffering

I grew up in the heart of Lisbon 200 years after the disastrous earthquake and tidal wave that brought grief so intense it remains in the cultural psyche to this day. Not only did I walk the twisted streets and down the steep stairs and past the still charred cathedrals that bore the scars of the past, I also lived in a culture that carried the pessimism aligned with Voltaire's poem, *Le Désastre de Lisbonne*.

*But how conceive a God, the source of love
Who on man lavished blessings from above
Then would the race with various plagues confound
Can mortals penetrate His views profound?
Ill could not from a perfect being spring
Nor from another, as God is sovereign king;
And yet, sad truth! in this our world 'tis found*

*What contradictions here my soul confound!*¹

In his preface, Voltaire outlines the challenge of suffering and evil posed to the Christian view of God. Voltaire rejected Alexander Pope's, *What is, is Right* and Leibniz's "best of all possible worlds." It wasn't good enough for Voltaire because, though it seems that he could conceive of a God that gives freedom and acts sovereignly, he couldn't reconcile the *loving* God held by Christianity and the suffering experienced in a city so dedicated to that God.

The Portuguese people gave treasures to the Church, they gave popes to the church, and missionaries and societies to the poor. In fact, they were worshipping Christ in the very moment on all saints eve. Yet, God's *sovereign* world cracked open and swallowed them. Voltaire was troubled by a God who would treat his ardent supporters that way. How Can Christians believe in a God like theirs while suffering and evil abounds?

What is Evil?

Naturalism struggles to define evil because the realities of this world are what we should expect from a natural universe. Richard Dawkins states the conclusion well:

"The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease. It must be so...The universe

¹ *Le Désastre de Lisbonne, Voltaire, 1759*

that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.”²

In other words, this is what the world is. For Christianity, however; this world is not okay and this isn't the way things ought to be.³ Humans were made to flourish. The creation of humanity is not toward a subsistent existence but toward what Jesus described as an abundant life. Starvation, thirst, disease, war, violence, loneliness, jealousy, greed, and death are aberrations not expectations. The world was made for thriving. Humans were made to be united to God.⁴

Evil, according to St. Augustine, is the absence or void of good.⁵ It's as if someone pulled the plug on the rich ocean of goodness and it's all been drained into a dry desert.

Evil is the darkest of nights taking up residency on earth. Tolkien wrote about a *creeping blackness*. The New York Times writes the daily news. Instagram shares stories and reels. Historians compile dates of inflection points.

To the Christian, evil is the interconnected system of sin and death—the void of goodness. Evil, for example, is what enables and builds a system that resulted in the murder of George Floyd on a Minneapolis sidewalk. Death was the result for Floyd, but evil is what drove centuries of work before and still today. Los Angeles rapper Kendrick

² Dawkins, *River Out of Eden*

³ Plantinga, *Not the Way it's Supposed to Be*, 10.

⁴ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 93

⁵ St. Augustine, *City of God*.

Lamar speaks about evil and our need of rescue from it when he writes: *"Everyday I try to escape the realities of this world."*

Evil, in short, is the uncontrolled spiraling and cascading destruction of human flourishing.

Suffering is For Everyone

Ernest Hemingway's haunting last page of his novel, *Farewell to Arms*, offers humanity language for suffering. He writes: *"The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially."*⁶

The problem with suffering is not that some people have tough lives or some people get sick. Suffering is not an issue of a philosophical possibility that some people might be brought to grieve the loss of a good friend. No. *Everyone suffers*. The religious devotee and the morally corrupt. The innocent newborn baby being held in the arms of their mother—despite all efforts from those around it—will taste pain. When that child has grown up and comes to the end of their life they will have been to funerals, lost jobs, been diagnosed with disease, been harmed by others, and be awaiting an ultimate suffering of death.

To the naturalist, the way forward is to just embrace suffering as a reality of life. Dawkins tries to help us move toward acceptance of suffering:

"It must be so. If there ever is a time of plenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in the population until

⁶ Hemingway, *Farewell to Arms*, 142

the natural state of starvation and misery is restored. In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice."⁷

Like evil, suffering is not supposed to be a problem for naturalists because they accept it as an expected outcome in material universe. However, the Christian has an issue with suffering because their belief not only in God but in the world he created is not *supposed* to be this way.

We Can't Accept Suffering and Evil

As hard as we try, we can't embrace suffering as our *de facto* existence. When a child dies the parents are not consoled that this sort of thing is expected in a universe like ours. No, they're told, "We lost them too soon." When a victim is robbed and they go to the police, the policemen don't say, "What do you expect of the survival of the fittest?" No, they say, "We're sorry, that shouldn't have happened." When the UN human rights council uncovers evidence of genocide in Rwanda their executive summary does not say, "another example of our universe of electrons and selfish genes." No, they say, "This is not how it's supposed to be...it is evil."

We're driven to hope this life can be free of suffering. We make companies, build roads, fund medical research, and hire therapists. Why? We long for flourishing. We protest wars, fight for the rights of the oppressed, and grieve the loss of human life as a rejection of "it is what it is". Instead we have within us a conviction that evil and

⁷ Dawkins, *River Out of Eden*, 1995

suffering is not the way life is supposed to be. We know we're made for goodness, for peace—for abundant life.

Jonathan Safran Foer's novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* tells this story of a family grieving a myriad of heartbreak and injustices in New York City. The grandfather, who after surviving the holocaust, losing his son on September 11th, and losing his wife to an affair, demonstrates our knowledge that we weren't made for this when he confesses to his grandson: "Sometimes I can hear my bones straining under the weight of all the lives I'm not living."

The human intuition of evil and dissatisfaction toward suffering reveals a similarly intuitive belief that we were made to live lives without both evil and suffering. Where does this hope for goodness and flourishing and rejection of evil and suffering come from? What makes sense of this longing for goodness, grief over suffering, and repulsion toward evil?

It seems to me, that perhaps, we were actually made for goodness and flourishing. That's the natural order and organization of things. Evil and suffering are not the way it's supposed to be.

The Christian view of God makes the most sense of our response to and even language of evil and suffering. Even more, the Christian view of God gives the most clarity to our longing for a world of peace, thriving, and goodness.

The Christian View of God is Love

To understand the Christian view of God we will look at two classic confessions on the nature of God by protestants and Catholics throughout centuries. First, the Westminster Shorter Catechism has this answer to the question, Who is God?

"God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth."

This shared belief speaks to the nature and force of God in his everlasting nature and his power. Essentially, the Christian view of God is that he can do what he wants and whatever he does is in line with what is true, noble, honorable, and just.

Yet, this is incomplete because it doesn't speak to the Christian view of the heart and experience of God. Perhaps the oldest definition of Christian God is from John son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' disciples, who wrote "God is Love."⁸

Medieval Catholic philosopher, Thomas Aquinas explains love must have two things:

1. Desire for the good of the beloved.
2. Desire for union with the beloved.

The Christian view of God, therefore, is not only that he is powerful and just but that he is love. Put another way, not only is God unendingly love, he's capable of consummating his desire of love. God is powerful to make good for his beloved and he is able to make union with his beloved possible. God is compelled to turn suffering into goodness and evil into flourishing.⁹

Furthermore, humanity was created for good, which according to Aquinas' argument, is ultimately fulfilled in our union with God. Or as

⁸ 1 John 4:7-9

⁹ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 91

St. Augustine famously said it, "Our hearts will not find rest until they find their rest in Him." If this is who God is, he must and will both desire and accomplish whatever is good for us, namely bring about our union with him.

The Christian View of God's Suffering

The core moment of Christianity is suffering and evil in the cross of Jesus and his burial place. Those two locations and the violence of one and the haunting silence of the other are where God fully conjoins sorrow and joy turning God's suffering and absorption of evil into resurrection of broken things into union with God and flourishing.

We fail to see how suffering can be good. But the message of Jesus, the gospel, the center of the Christian faith is this: carnage is turned into glory. Injustice becomes justice. Death becomes life. Suffering becomes joy. This is the entirety of Christian faith.

The gospel is shorthand for what happened with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. His life was filled with false accusations, criticism, plots against him, rejection. Essentially, "a man acquainted with sorrows and grief" that was his life. And we think Hemingway is right, "See, the world breaks everyone!" In his death he was abandoned, mocked, and tortured. The most awful thing in human history: innocence destroyed. Then, in the the tomb. The dark damp place where rotting is supposed to happen and all ought to be forgotten. Except, the resurrection. In the resurrection of Jesus, God's power and justice is displayed through his love. God's love compels him to suffer for all suffering. God's love compels him to die for all who might die. Even better, God's power raises Christ from the dead. God's justice swallows all evil.

The Christian View of Suffering and Evil

While other worldviews ask you to accept suffering and tame your desires for goodness and flourishing, Christianity asks you to hope that all suffering will, like the cross and tomb, be turned into joy and life. One day the crushing weight of the lives we're not living will be lifted. Evil and death will be no more. Fyodor Dostoyevsky describes this well through Ivan's long speech to Alyosha in *Brothers Karamazov*:

"I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood that they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened."¹⁰

This is the Christian hope based on the active work of Jesus to not only overcome his own suffering, but to overcome all suffering. So then, what do we do in rebuilt Lisbon among the generational scars of suffering and evil? We trust that all of this will be for our good and we, even now, are being brought into union with God. We're defiant towards evil because it is the aberration not goodness. We're resilient in turmoil because we know the arch of the world is bent through resurrection. Ultimately we lament and grief with honest vulnerability because we know this isn't the way life is supposed to be.

¹⁰ Dostoevsky, *Brother Karamazov*, Chapter 3, "Brothers Make Friends."

Tim Keller wrote it well in *Walking with God in Pain and Suffering*,
“While other worldviews lead us to sit in the midst of life’s joys,
foreseeing the coming sorrows, Christianity empowers its people to
sit in the midst of this world’s sorrows, tasting the coming joy.”¹¹

¹¹ Keller, *Walking With God in Pain and Suffering*, 31

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