

# CHRISTIANITY and ATHEISM

## 2. The Problem of Suffering and Evil



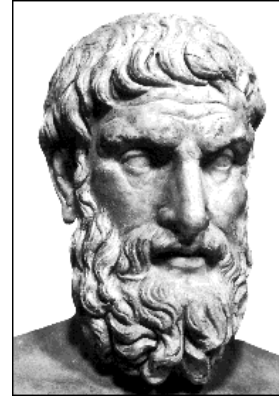
### Introduction

Suffering and evil is certainly one of the most difficult problems for believers and unbelievers. Many atheists will offer this issue as the number one reason why they refuse to believe in God. There are also numerous stories of believers who have turned away from God because they cannot reconcile the problem of suffering and evil with a good and gracious God. One prominent example is Charles Templeton, one time cohort of Billy Graham. Templeton was a rising star in the arena of Christian evangelism. But all that was unfortunately reversed by the doubts this and other issues created in his mind. At one point these arguments even began to threaten Billy Graham. You can read more about this in *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel (p. 7ff).

Charles Templeton and Billy Graham  
<http://pic.templetons.com/brad/photo/cbt/brad/>

## The Development of This Issue

One of the first to struggle with this issue was the philosopher Epicurus (371-270 BC). He wrote: *Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to; or he cannot and does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, and does not want to, he is wicked. But, if God both can and wants to abolish evil, then how comes evil in the world?*



Since then many philosophers and theologians have struggled with this problem. The defense of the existence of God in an evil world is called *theodicy*.

C. S. Lewis has probably summarized the problem best in this way: *If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.* (*The Question of God*, Armand M Nicholi).

Sooner or later we all become aware of the problem of suffering in this world. It is not hard for any Christian to see how someone would question the existence of God when we see the incredible cruelty that man is allowed to inflict upon his fellow man.

## Logical Response to the Problem of Suffering and Evil

1. Classical Defense: "The classic defense for the existence of God against the problem of evil is that it is not logically possible to have free will and no possibility of moral evil" (*The Case for Faith*, p. 37). One of the challenges theologians have made has been: Try to conceive of a world without free-will, without pain and suffering? That God would create a world with the *possibility of evil* does not mean that God created evil.

2. St. Augustine: *Since God is the highest good, he would not allow any evil to exist in his works unless his omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil.* Suffering also creates the opportunity for good.



3. What the Atheist Offers: While Christians argue for the possibility of good in the face of suffering and evil, atheists have little to offer after they have rejected God. When confronted with suffering Freud could only offer the concept of *resignation*. In a letter to a friend who had lost a loved one he simply said there were "no consolatory words." (*The Question of God*, p. 213).

### **Biblical Response to the Problem of Suffering and Evil**

4. The Bible clearly links suffering and evil to sin. God did create Adam and Eve with free-will and with the capacity to sin.

Genesis 3:16 To the woman He said: "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you."

Isaiah 24:5 The earth is also defiled under its inhabitants, Because they have transgressed the laws, Changed the ordinance, Broken the everlasting covenant. <sup>6</sup> Therefore the curse has devoured the earth, And those who dwell in it are desolate. Therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, And few men are left.

Romans 8:20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; <sup>21</sup> because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.

5. At the same time God is not indifferent to the problem of suffering and evil. In fact the main message of the Bible is that God has entered into the problem of suffering and evil in the incarnation of Jesus. He endured the pain and suffering of the whole world innocently in order to remove the curse of sin.

Isaiah 53:3 He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. <sup>4</sup> Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.



2 Corinthians 5:21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Galatians 3:13 Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"),

Philippians 2:5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, <sup>7</sup> but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

An Illustration I've used with the 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> graders:

A farm boy came home from college for Thanksgiving break and announced that he no longer believed in God. He argued that there could not be an all-powerful God who would allow suffering and pain. His father was very patient and decided to hold his tongue. Just before his son was to return to college, he made an announcement to the family: He was going to sell the farm. Everyone was stunned. "Why?" they asked. "Because I'm a bad farmer" he said. "What?" his son blurted. "You're one of the best farmers in the county!" "But," said the father, "Every year I battle with weeds. Even now I have two broken tractors in the shed." The son reminded him that he's always had to battle with weeds and that he will eventually get the tractors fixed. At that point the father looked at his son and asked, "Couldn't you give God the same chance? Isn't there the possibility that He is fixing this world even as we speak? Just because there are problems in the world, doesn't mean God isn't doing something about them."

God's tolerance of sin and evil is temporary. It is part of His patience and His love for sinful man. To dismiss God because there are problems in the world is as foolish as reading half of a novel and then criticizing the author for failing to resolve the plot!

6. Rather than resignation, God calls His children to hope and to servanthood. In the face of suffering and evil God calls us to love, to "bear one another's burdens."

Isaiah 58:6 " Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?



John 13:14 "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>34</sup>  
"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

Galatians 5:13 For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh,

but through love serve one another.

Galatians 6:2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:14 Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.

Many people would affirm that good things have come out of the crucible of suffering. These good things come when we live in hope that "all things work together for good to them that love God and are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8.28).