

June 27 **Where God Is The Author Of Suffering Exodus 1:8-14, 22; Matt. 5:43-48**

If you read the comic strip *Shoe* this week, Skyler asked Cosmo *what ever happened to that guy who went nuts in the modern museum*. Cosmo replied that he got off by pleading contemporary insanity.

Unless you live in a bubble, that's the kind of insanity we see in our world; the ever present, up to the minute, contemporary kind. Some insanity comes from humans, some comes to humans by way of disease or disaster. For all of history, humankind has grappled with suffering, catastrophe and evil. We've tried to explain the unexplainable; to come to grips with a power that grips our world. Evil and suffering are a problem not only for what they do, but what they are.

One of the first philosophers to address the problem of evil was Epicurus who wrote, "*Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, but does not want to, he is wicked. If God can abolish evil, and God really wants to do it, why is there evil in the world?*"

Epicurianism is alive and well today among skeptics. Many philosophical arguments and theodicies have been put forward over the centuries by Christians, but none stand up to rational criticism. Hence, skeptics today reject God as either incapable or unwilling to cure this world of evil.

Theodicy is a word you'll run into if you read about the problem of evil. The term is the combination of the two Greek words for *God* and *justice*. A theodicy is an attempt to show that God is just even though evil exists. Some are very well crafted defenses of God, but none can stand against the power and presence of evil and suffering.

I was introduced to this shortcoming when I sat with a 24 year old widow who had just lost her husband of 6 months because he walked into a robbery and was shot. Not yet a seminary graduate or pastor, I said something like, *God will bring about some good out of Michael's death*. I was merely repeating what I had heard. She looked me straight in the eye and said "*why couldn't God do something good without letting Michael die?*"

My youngest, Adreanna, is nanny to a 14 year old girl who suffers from Devres Syndrom. She had told us about this girl but on Friday we met her. I knew that the constant seizures of Devres had seriously damaged her brain and that she functioned on a two or three year old level. I was expecting her to look the part.

But when she walked in our door, what I saw instead was a pretty petite redhead with green eyes and a sweet smile; she would have fit in perfectly in our youth choir; except she could barely speak or understand. And I thought of a song by **Rascal Flatts** called *It's Not Supposed to Go Like That*. She should be a giddy teenage girl. The injustice of it sucker-punched me in the stomach. I had a visceral reaction. Our world is deeply broken by evil and suffering.

If we think only atheists struggle with this profound injustice, we haven't read the book of Ecclesiastes in a while. I encourage you to read it again because it faces this calamity of our world, even though it doesn't claim to know why a loving God would allow it.

Neither Scripture nor any philosophy or theodicy will ever explain evil and suffering to our satisfaction. So we're off the hook trying to give an explanation to unbelievers. What Scripture does do better than any other religion or philosophy is take evil seriously. It does not dodge the subject. The Psalmists do not put on a good Sunday face when they suffer; they cry out to God openly and passionately; holding on to thin hope.

We have read two passages that give us different looks at God and evil. In Exodus, we read how the Hebrews became slaves in Egypt and suffered for 400 years. Exodus 1...***The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.***

An unconvinced reader will wonder *why* God didn't tell his people to get out of Egypt BEFORE that paranoid Pharaoh came to power. The Hebrews were eventually redeemed and liberated, but why did God wait 400 years before he acted? Where was justice for all those oppressed generations who died in slavery?

But then we get a different view of God in the Sermon on the Mount; a view of God's goodness to all. Jesus taught us to love our enemies and said that God *makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous*. According to Jesus, God isn't playing favorites or tilting the scales. A just God created the world so that all would have sunshine and rain; springtime and harvest.

The story of Job is instructive, but not conclusive. In this story, Satan was allowed to bring evil and suffering upon a man who was righteous before God; Job became a human piñata for Satan, testing whether or not he would curse God or have faith. Some say this story teaches that Satan is the source and cause of evil and suffering and all of it is a test of our faith. But for believer and skeptic alike, God's willingness to let Satan inflict Job with the worst imaginable suffering is still anathema. Can't God be merciful in testing us?

Many still choke on what is called God's permissive will. Parents would never allow their child to starve or be carried off in a flood or die from disease IF THEY COULD STOP IT. Yet God permits this in our world.

Skeptics have some serious misconceptions about Christian teaching in regard to evil and what God is doing about it. And we have contributed to that misunderstanding. Skeptics think we all believe that God micromanages the universe; that life follows a blueprint already designed by God. They don't get this from reading John Calvin, but from well-known Christians who say things like *AIDS is God's judgment upon homosexuals, or we prayed and God steered that hurricane away from us*. Skeptics hear this version of God's sovereignty and conclude that evil is the work of God. They say if God steered that hurricane away from us, then God unleashed it upon some other coast.

Just like I didn't understand how that widow would react to my theodicy, we don't understand how believers and skeptics will respond to our spiritual clichés. To say *it's all God's plan* may sound hopeful to us, but the suffering one might ask, couldn't God come up with a better plan; something more just? Or they think we are trivializing their suffering.

When we say things like "God helped me pass that test" or "God provided that close-in parking place" or "God healed my friend who had heart surgery" skeptics conclude that we believe God is deeply involved with all the affairs of this world; even the minor ones.

But when we say God takes care of parking places and grades, skeptics want to know why God doesn't take care of poverty too. If God helps you get over a cold, why doesn't God heal my loved one from cancer? They say, "if you want to give God the credit for help, you must also give God the responsibility for suffering or allowing the suffering of innocents."

The presence of enormous evil and suffering in our world is likely the number one reason skeptics reject God: not why they dismiss us, the church or faith; but God!

Bart Erhman, a popular writer who teaches in the religion department at Chapel Hill, used to be a confessing Christian but now has rejected Scripture's God. I heard the interview where he said the cause of this was his inability to reconcile an all-loving and powerful God with the suffering in God's world.

Buddhism accepts this world and all its evil and suffering as an illusion not unlike Plato. Escaping this world is the only solution. **Hinduism** asserts that the evil inflicted on people now is explained by the wrongs committed in a previous life. This personal evil is remedied by obedience to one's karma which progresses over consecutive reincarnations.

Marxists think that evil will be dealt a blow when the proletariat or common people rule the world and create a more just economic system. Any means of securing this goal, including violent revolution, are justified. We ask, “how can violence and suffering end violence and suffering?”

Islam sees evil as the result of many not following the prophet Mohammed. Islam deals with evil by bringing the world under the rule of their prophet. But this does not eliminate evil; it only manages it. Many Christians in this country believe the same way except that they want our government to uphold Christian standards and to hold evil at bay.

Biblical Christianity is the only faith that fully addresses the problem of evil in our world and proclaims a permanent resolution to evil and suffering. Scripture declares to us that evil is not just the worst of actions by humans but that evil itself is a supra-personal power. All of us participate in evil at some level, but there is also a destructive power beyond the human and the natural that distorts and destroys the goodness of life.

If you meet skeptics who struggle with God being the creator of evil, invite them to read the book by Scott Peck, People of the Lie. Here, an agnostic psychiatrist that later became a confessing Christian, comes to believe in the extra-personal power of evil seen most clearly in lies that are lived as truth. These lies are accompanied by unbending claims to be in the right. We see this in terrorists, but are blind to it in our own lives and culture.

Most of the people around us do not care about evil until it strikes them. Consider the damage and destruction that is still happening because of our economic crash. Even though the actions of banking and government have caused untold suffering, our culture cannot name this as evil. The best we can do is to call it greed or government failure. It might be greed to want lots of money; or to profit in the failure of the investments you created, but so much more has happened.

What of the people who lost their life’s savings? This is destruction. What of the millions who have lost jobs or the families that have been split apart, or the depression, drinking, violence and suicide that have resulted? To describe this as a result of greed is to describe the Holocaust as racism. This is more than personal sin at work. It’s evil and nothing less.

Peck says that people and systems can live lies. BP accepted a lie as truth when they cut corners to save money on their deep water drilling; dismissing what could happen and what it would do to the Gulf and her residents. The government agency that oversees the oil industry was living a lie: “we don’t really need all this bureaucratic oversight of oil companies because they are our friends, they treat us right; and they know what they are doing.”

Intricate webs of lies or self-delusion are more than human foible, Scripture declares. It is the work of principalities and powers of this world, led by the prince of darkness and deception. Christianity takes evil seriously.

One of the reasons evil is such a problem for the modern skeptic is that it completely undercuts their myth of constant and automatic human progress and evolution. For all the technological advances we have made, we are still a human race that is capable of the worst.

So how can we help move this stone of stumbling between skeptics and God? First, we must not claim what we do not know. Instead of saying God did this or God did that, even if we believe it, to skeptics we should simply thank God for any fortune and grieve any evil that comes our way. Skeptics can recoil at assertions about God, but usually find no offense in our expressions of thanksgiving or sadness.

Avoid clichés in the face of evil and suffering. I can assure you that when someone is suffering, these thoughts of hope and comfort don’t help. Instead, they trivialize the evil. When we engage those in suffering, our presence and love are what God uses to comfort the afflicted.

Third, we don’t have to answer every question about evil that comes our way. Scripture does not and we cannot. Admit that you have no adequate answer. Empathize with their suffering.

And lastly, if you have a real relationship with a skeptic and that skeptic is not in the midst of a crisis, you can help them understand the biblical remedy for sin and suffering.

The Bible teaches us that the world is broken and God is trying to set things aright without sacrificing human freedom in the process. How can God balance the scales of justice for all, meaning all those who have lived and died in suffering?

There really is only one way to bring justice to all creation throughout all history. God must give new life to those who have lost it. He must give full health to those who suffered from the lack. God must take upon himself the sin and injustice of this world and one day create a new heaven and earth where there is no injustice or sin.

Getting better and smarter as a human race isn't enough. God must and will make all things new.