

How can an all-powerful, all-good God permit such evil and suffering?

Genesis 4, Psalm 73, Romans 8

We've been setting before God tough, important questions that we all have as we navigate through life, then asking God to speak to us about these questions by His Spirit thru His Word.

God...do you exist?

I clearly demonstrate – 24/7, day and night – my existence to every human heart, through all that I have made.

God...are not science and Your Word at odds?

Francis Bacon: "A little science estranges a man from God; a lot of science brings Him back."

The better we understand both the Word and the factual findings of science, the more complementary harmony we see

God...why are You/Christians so old fashioned about sex?

The sexual revolution has left your heart empty, sick, and starving; Your sexuality is My unique gift to you to celebrate the joys of your marital oneness. Don't cheapen it. Don't settle for 2nd best.

God...isn't it simply about being decent? Why insist on believing in Jesus?

No one, actually, has righteousness. I've looked. I see every human heart. No one even comes close to the holiness and righteousness I require. Don't offer me yours; let me give you mine through faith in Jesus.

God...isn't your word unfair to women?

I create nothing more beautiful nor majestic as a woman. I call each woman, and I can empower every woman in Christ to be all that she is created to be.

Today, we tackle the toughest of the tough. TOUGH QUESTION #6. In his book (originally titled *No Easy Answers*), William Lane Craig (one of Christianity's most brilliant apologists) begins Chapter 4 like this:

Undoubtedly the greatest obstacle to belief in God—for both the Christian and the non-Christian—is the so-called problem of evil. That is to say, it seems unbelievable that if an all-powerful and all-loving God exists, He would permit so much pain and suffering in the world.ⁱ

He continues:

The amount of human misery and pain in the world is, indeed, incalculable. On the one hand, there are all the evils that result from man's own inhumanity to man. Unlike the beasts, man seems to have a penchant for almost unimaginable cruelty to others. [Read, for example, a book like Daniel P. Mannix's *History of Torture...*]

[The endless examples of...] moral evil [are] bad enough, but perhaps even more difficult to reconcile with the existence of an all-powerful and loving God is the suffering brought about by natural causes in the world...floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, different sorts of diseases such as smallpox, polio, cancer, or leukemia...congenital disabilities, accidents, injuries. Natural intertwined with human evils—millions every day starving, [or trapped children who die slow, excruciating deaths in bombed structures or in relentless floods...]

Oh, God! Craig's heart cries, How could you permit children to die like that? If they had to die, so be it! But You could have let the boy be instantly killed by the collapse of the building or let the little girl drown suddenly. Why these torturous, pointless, lingering deaths? Honestly, when I see these sorts of things go on, it makes it hard to believe in God.ⁱⁱ

Not only this, but Os Guinness argues in his book *Unspeakable* that “the scale and scope of evil has [actually] increased in the modern world. After cataloguing the multiple massacres of the 20th century, he observes,

It is sometimes argued that the modern world is more humane than ever before, and in some ways it is. The paradox, however, is that we save more victims than ever before and [we slaughter] more victims than ever before.ⁱⁱⁱ

The question we have with God is starkly simple. “God, you *could* make it all stop, so why don’t You?...How can you permit these things to go on?” And, we think deep inside, “I mean, if I were God and could do something about it, **I would!**” [& I don’t get why You don’t!]

EARLY UNJUSTNESS - GENESIS 4

When you take your Bible for an example of the problem, you need to look no further than the 4th chapter of Genesis: after Adam and Eve have invited sin into the world, and into their family.

(p.3 ESV) Genesis 4 ¹Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.” ²And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.

³In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell...

As verse 3 indicates, scores of years are compressed and not described in the life of this, the first human family. Adam and Eve lived hundreds of years (cf. Genesis 5^{iv}), fruitfully multiplying hundreds of children. But God’s Spirit chooses to put in the viewfinder two of them, Cain (the firstborn) and his younger brother Abel.

But think about it for a moment. Of all the things the Holy Spirit *could have* included about life in the first family, He prompts Moses to write about the worship of the first family’s sons. Notice:

- Two brothers, pursuing two different professions.^v Commentators agree that both good! endeavors.
- Two brothers, both knowing from their upbringing with Adam and Eve, that worship of their Lord involved bringing the first and the best of what God had strengthened you, and blessed you to produce.
- Two brothers, the older one spiritually mediocre at best, but the younger one passionate and eagerly responsive about the Lord and worship

- Two brothers who bring offerings to the Lord--the older who brings a mediocre offering ("of the fruit of the ground") while the young brings "the firstborn of his flock and of their (notice the plural, more than 1 animal) fat portions."
 - Allen Ross, *"The Hebrew construction describing Abel's offering is elaborate, the writer stressing that Abel when out of his way to please God: he 'brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat'...better translated 'He brought the fattest of the firstlings of his flock.' In contrast to Abel's offering, Cain's is simply mentioned—he brought an offering of the fruit of the ground. Cassuto concludes that, whereas one worshipper went out of his way to please God, the other simply discharged a duty (Commentary on Genesis, vol. 1, p.205)."*^{vi}
- Two brothers, two offerings, two responses by the Lord...Abel's offering is "regarded"^{vii} by the Lord (*gazed at with intent*, thus 'respected') while Cain's offering is met with "no regard" [cf. Kidner, "All that is explicit here is that Abel offered the pick of his flock and that Cain's spirit was arrogant" 4:5b, cf. Proverbs 21:27^{viii})

So that, if you stop here for a moment to ask, "Okay...now what *should* happen? What might we reasonably expect?", the answer appears clear. "Well, that's a no-brainer. Abel should be blessed. Abel should be honored, and rewarded by God and allowed to live a wonderful and full life and raise a whole bunch of wonderful, responsive-to-God children...and **certainly** be *protected!*"

But...what does happen?

Genesis 4:6 The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? ⁷ If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it."

⁸ Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. ⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"

¹⁰ And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. ¹¹ And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."

Three obvious observations

#1 While the Lord makes Cain aware of the condition of his heart, while He offers Cain a 2nd chance at honoring God and being "regarded," while the Lord even warns Cain about the sin that is ready to pounce into his life^{ix}, and the need for him to make the right choice...**the Lord does not FORCE him to make the right choice, nor prevent him from making the wrong choice.**

#2 "**Cain** does not want...mastery over [the] sin" crouching at his heart's door. (Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, p.159). He **wants the sin**, and in sin he wants to destroy his brother, which he does through deception and surprise and bloody violence. "No sooner had the Lord's warning ended than Cain set up on his brother and murdered him. The Hebrew warning shows that it was premeditated."^x

#3 The Lord watches it happen. **The Lord permits it.** Derek Kidner, "While Eve had to be talked into her sin, Cain will not have even God talk him out of it; nor will he confess to it, nor yet accept his punishment"^{xi} (cf. 4:9-16).

What you find in Genesis 4 you find around the world each day. The Lord warns and reminds a right choice is available. Men love darkness rather than light. The Lord, not overruling free choices, permits the consequence of an evil choice.

TOUGH ANSWERS for a TOUGH QUESTION

Clearly, we all struggle with the problem of evil and suffering on several levels.

We struggle with it INTELLECTUALLY. It doesn't immediately make sense that an all-powerful and profoundly good BEING would not police the world that He created better. [As you know, my son is in law enforcement. Some of you are as well. When you're on duty, you do what you can. God?]

We also struggle with it EMOTIONALLY. In our age of immediate, world-wide communication, we see so much of this. This week, AGAIN, senseless slaughter in one of our public high schools. If you're not weeping inside, I'd check your pulse.

Finally, we very much wrestle with this PERSONALLY. I vividly remember to this day when the wife of a seminary brother was cornered and raped in a laundromat – across the street from the school – while her husband sat in class preparing for ministry. I just about threw my faith away that day.

So...what does God have to say?

First, God in His Word **acknowledges that His planned creation included rationale and moral creatures endowed with the both capacity of free choices** and the benefit (or liability) of **experiencing the consequences** of those choices.

It began with Adam, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it, you will surely die" (Gen 2:16-17).

Adam – the choice *is* yours. And...so are the consequences.

Second, God in His Word **identifies the origin of evil**.^{xii} Evil is a possible consequence of moral choices that are free. It arises from the rebellion against God of one or more of His creatures.

- *Cosmic evil on a spiritual plane* originated with the rebellion of Satan (i.e., Lucifer) and his angelic followers (Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 28)
- Human evil originated in Adam and Eve's decision to disobey a direct and understood commandment of God (Genesis 2:16-17)

James Sire explains the implications:

From the beginning, then, this rebellion brought the most tragic consequences: broken relations between God and human beings, between Adam and Eve, men and women, men and men, women and women, human beings and the natural order, even human beings with themselves. Most evil and its painful consequences have their origin in our rebellion against God. Christianity is honest about the sadness of much of human life. The Bible is brutally honest about the despicable evils people perpetrate on each other. Read the book of Judges if you think the Bible is a book of gentle fairy stories.^{xiii}

Third, **God permits us to experience the full consequences of freedom – the INCREDIBLE JOY of morally right choices, and the RELENTLESS HURT of morally sinful choices.**

When Adam and Eve sinned, they destined humanity to operate in compromised creation

(spiritually and physically). You can't understand our world without:

Romans 8:19-21 (p.944 ESV) ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation **was subjected** (υποτασσω – *subordinated to, obedient to*) to **futility** (ματαιοτης – *emptiness, futility, powerless to control, lacking worth, frustration^{xiv}*), not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from *its bondage to corruption* (φθορας ruin, destruction, deterioration, corruption^{xv}) and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

- The physical creation is under the authority of frustrating futility because of man's sin; the physical world often does not cooperate with what we wish would happen.
- Creation will not be released from this until (vs. 19) the revealing of the sons of God...(vs. 21) in the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

In other words, God refuses to override the responsibility that man has for his choices and their consequences, nor does He suspend the chaotic experiences which happen to us because of the groanings of the frustrated, physical world. C.S. Lewis (*The Problem of Pain*) explained why:

“Pain insists upon being attended to.
God whispers to us in our pleasures,
speaks in our consciences,
but shouts in our pains.
It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

The consequences of our sin – morally and physically – God allows us to experience in order that our hearts might turn to God in a HOPE (Romans 1:20b) becomes focused in Him, and not how we ourselves can overcome what will always – in this fallen world – overwhelm us.

Fourth, **God Himself stepped into the consequences of evil, defeating it, conquering it.**
Hebrews 2:14, cf. Romans 8:2, 31-39

One could argue that the worst injustice ever perpetrated in the world was the trial, beating, and bloody crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. He has taken our sin and suffering; He has satisfied the

wrath of God against it all. And, the Lord Jesus Christ has come back from the dead in powerful resurrection life. Which means that there is nothing that this fallen, frustrated world can throw at us but that Jesus, our Savior, hasn't conquered...and will cause us to conquer in the resurrection.

“As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, cool-ly observing the suffering of His creatures. He enters into and shared our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing His son, the 2nd person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself, and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his Son's humiliation and death. (Alvin Plantinga, “Self-Profile” in *Alvin Plantinga*, 36.)^{xvi}

Fifth, God's sufficient answer to sin, evil, and death, including centuries of injustice and tragedy is **resurrection, the promise of unimaginably wonderful future life.**
Romans 8:18-19, cf. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Look again at Romans 8:18-19 (read). In other words, we don't expect our experience in this world to be final or right. We don't demand that of God. He doesn't promise it.

But we trust Him who is able (Romans 8:28) to work together for good “all things” for those who love God, for those who are called according to His purpose. William Lane Craig put it this way: “According to Christianity, this life is but the cramped and narrow foyer opening up into the great hall of God's eternity. When God asks His children to bear horrible suffering in this life, it is only with the prospect of a heavenly joy and recompense that is beyond all comprehension.”^{xvii}

CONCLUSION

And then, he tells of the experience of one of his colleagues who made it a habit simply to visit nursing homes and bring cheer and love to forgotten people. One day he met Mabel.^{xviii}

On this particular day I was walking in a hallway that I had not visited before, looking in vain for a few who were alive enough to receive a flower and a few words of encouragement. This hallway seemed to contain some of the worst cases, strapped onto carts or into wheelchairs and looking completely helpless.

As I neared the end of this hallway, I saw an old woman strapped up in a wheelchair. Her face was an absolute horror. The empty stare and white pupils of her eyes told me she was blind. The large hearing aid over one ear told me she was almost deaf. One side of her face was being eaten by cancer. There was a discolored and running sore covering part of one cheek, and it had pushed her nose to one side, dropped one eye, and distorted her jaw so that what should have been the corner of her mouth was the bottom of her mouth. As a consequence, she drooled constantly...I also learned that this woman was 89 years old, and that she had been bedridden, blind, nearly deaf, and alone, for 25 years. This was Mabel.

I don't know why I spoke to her—she looked less likely to respond than most of the people I saw in the hallway. But I put a flower in her hand and said, “Here is a flower for you. Happy Mother's Day.” She held the flower up to her face and tried to smell it, and then she spoke. And much to my surprise, her words, although somewhat garbled because of her deformity,

were obviously produced by a clear mind. She said, "Thank you. It's lovely. But can I give it to someone else? I can't see it, you know, I'm blind.

I said, "Of course," and I pushed her in her chair back down the hallway to a place where I thought I could find some alert patients. I found one, and I stopped the chair. Mabel held out the flower and said, "Here, this is from Jesus."

That was when it began to dawn on me that this was not an ordinary human being...Mabel and I became friends over the next few weeks, and I went to see her once or twice a week for the next 3 years...It was not many weeks before I turned from a sense that I was being helpful to a sense of wonder, and I would go to her with a pen and paper to write down the things she would say.

During one hectic week of final exams I was frustrated because my mind seemed to be pulled in ten directions at once with all the things that I had to think about. The question occurred to me, "What does Mabel have to think about—hour after hour, day after day, week after week, not even able to know if it's day or night?" So I went to her and asked, "Mabel, what do you think about when you lie here?" And she said, "I think about my Jesus."

I sat there and thought for a moment about the difficulty, for me, of thinking about Jesus for even five minutes, and I asked, "What do you think about Jesus?" She replied slowly and deliberately as I wrote. And this is what she said:

I think about how good He's been to me. He's been awfully good to me in my life, you know...I'm one of those kind who's mostly satisfied...Lots of folks would think I'm kind of old-fashioned. But I don't care. I'd rather have Jesus. He's all the world to me.

And then Mabel began to sing an old hymn:

*Jesus is all the world to me
My life, my joy, my all.
He is my strength from day to day
Without him I would fall.
When I am sad, to him I go.
No other one can cheer me so.
When I am sad, He makes me glad.
He's my friend.*

This is not fiction. Incredible as it may seem, a human being really lived like this. I know. I knew her. *How could she do it?* Seconds ticked and minutes crawled, and so did days and weeks and months and years of pain without company and without explanation of why it all was happening—and she lay there and sang hymns. *How could she do it?*

The answer, I think, is that Mabel had something you and I don't have much of. She had power. Lying there in that bed, unable to move, unable to hear, unable to talk to anyone, she had incredible power.^{xix}

No one has any true nor adequate answer for evil and sin and suffering outside of Christianity.

"Paradoxically" (offers William Lane Craig)...

Even though the problem of evil is the greatest objection to the existence of God, at the end of the day God is the only solution to the problem of evil. God is the final answer to the problem of evil, for He redeems us from evil and takes us into the everlasting joy of an incommensurable good: Fellowship with Him.^{xx}

Let Jesus become "all the world to you."

ⁱ Many agree with Lane regarding the uniqueness of this issue. James Sire in *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?* writes, "If God is both good and omnipotent, why is there so much evil, expressed in the suffering of so many people throughout the world? If God exists, God is either not completely good or not completely powerful. This, I believe, is the toughest question thoughtful Christians ever have to answer" (p.181).

ⁱⁱ William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 75-79.

ⁱⁱⁱ Os Guinness, *Unspeakable: Facing Up to the Challenge of Evil* (HarperCollins, 2005), 4-5. Guinness offers: "The Rawandan bloodbath, for example, was one of the fastest massacres in history. In less than 3 months, machete-wielding Hutus ferociously slaughtered more than 800,000 Tutsis—the clearest case of genocide since the Holocaust, carried out at three times the speed of Hitler's extermination of the Jews and Gypsies...equivalent of more than two World Trade Center slaughters every single day for one hundred straight days. Quite simply, it was the most devastating mass killing since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, which slaughtered a third of a million people. And, as with the Holocaust, it was carried out by men and women like ourselves."

^{iv} Adam was fathering children with Eve at age 130 and beyond. Genesis 5:4-5 indicate that beyond Cain, Abel, and Seth, "He had other sons and daughters," presumably, hundreds. Eve would become (cf. Genesis 3:20), "the mother of all the living."

^v Ross does suggest that there is "a slightly ominous note in the contrast of the boys' occupations. 'Cain is a 'tiller of the ground,' but Able is a 'keeper of the sheep.' While there is nothing wrong with either occupation [both were important in the nation of Israel], there is a hint of the place of each man in the nature of things, for Cain lines up with an occupation that resulted from the fall (Genesis 3:23), but Able with men's and women's original purpose of having dominion over animals (Genesis 1:28). The writer is perhaps suggesting—and only suggesting—that Can was more naturally identified with the curse than was Abel." Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, p.156.

^{vi} Allen Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, p.157

^{vii} The Hebrew word *sa'a* can be translated "had respect" (thus Allen Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, p.157). The Hebrew word broadly is translated "gaze" (i.e., steadily, with interest), and is used in some very interesting passages: Isaiah 17:7-8, Psalm 119:117, 2 Samuel 22:4 (positively, to look toward) and Job 14:6, Isaiah 22:4 (negatively, to look away)

^{viii} ESV, "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; how much more when he brings it with evil intent."

^{ix} Ross: "The participle 'crouching' or 'lies' (robes) is cognate to an Akkadian term used of a type of demon...the Jewish Publication Society's *Torah* offered the translation: 'Sin is the demon at the door.' If such a translation is legitimate, then there is a connection with the oracle about the seed of the serpent" (p.158).

^x Ross, p. 159.

^{xi} Derek Kidner, *Genesis An Introduction and Commentary* (InterVarsity Press, 1967, 1975), 74.

^{xii} Sire, 182-183.

^{xiii} Sire, 183.

^{xiv} See Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (University of Chicago Press, 1957), 496.

^{xv} Ibid., 865.

^{xvi} Craig, 109.

^{xvii} Craig, 97.

^{xviii} Cited in Craig, 110-112.

^{xix} Thomas E. Schmidt, *Trying to Be Good: A Book of Doing for Thinking People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 180-183.

^{xx} Craig, 112.