

Problem of Evil

- facing objections to a belief in a God who is good

ENGAGING WITH THE PROBLEM

“Do you really want to know?”

‘Apologetics’ has nothing to do with apologizing! It is rather, the ability and responsibility to give a careful, sensitive and reasoned response to anyone who challenges the validity or rationality of some aspect of, or indeed the whole of, the Christian faith¹.

Christians who are open about their faith in the real world often face challenges about their beliefs. When you think about apologetics: imagine you are having a drink in a pub, when someone confronts you with a question similar to the one we are grappling with together in this session; “How can you as a Christian believe in an all powerful loving God when there is so much pain and suffering in the world?”

Challenges like this (and there are many of them), have a way of instinctively setting a Christian on to their back foot, making them defensive; especially if they are spoken to in a derogatory manner. People often describe ‘apologetics’ as ‘a defense of the faith’, this is unfortunate, being defensive is the wrong way to engage with these kinds of questions. Added to this, you don’t have to defend the truth, just engage with it. These are always important questions and we need to approach them in thoughtful dialogue. To defuse the tension, and create the right atmosphere, always begin by gently asking your challenger, “Do you really want to know?”

This will probably not be the opening response they are expecting! The element of surprise will be useful, but it will also get to the heart of their true intentions. If they shrug and answer “No”, then their aim is only to try and trap you or simply wind you up. If this is so, tell them you have no interest in pursuing the topic if they are not really interested; change the subject and talk about something else – Jesus did this all the time! It will stop them in their tracks and make them think, it might even encourage them to return to the topic with a different attitude on another occasion. Christians have no reason to be defensive; we are to be at ease with our faith – not because we arrogantly know all the answers – but because we are only concerned about the truth and eager to discuss and learn if others will join us in this open conversation.

If our questioner’s reply is “Yes, I really do want to know”, then you have shifted the balance of power and have created the space for a genuine discussion and dialogue from which you both can learn. From now on no body should be trying to score points or win the argument. You should both be engaging with the real issues, listening to each other, and trying to get as close to the truth as possible.

¹ It comes from the Greek word *apologeomai* meaning ‘to speak in defence’. An ‘apologist’ is someone who defends the rationality of belief, the name comes from the Greek *apologizomai* meaning ‘to render an account’. Both words have traditionally been associated with the Christian faith but of course can, and are, be widely used for anyone defending a position of belief or faith.



“Yes, we really do have a problem!”

Having established that our companion really does want to know the answer to this very difficult question, it is essential to be absolutely honest, and as a Christian, to admit that when it comes to pain, suffering and evil in the world, “Yes, we really do have a problem”!

Too many Christians refuse to take on board the full force of this objection to their faith (probably because they personally find it too disturbing to really engage with) and dismiss it simply as ‘an intellectual problem’ of no real importance. This simply will not do. The problem of evil is a huge issue that has the potential of totally destroying the Christian faith, its full ferocity must be engaged with.

To the ordinary person life seems so full of promise, yet for most people so little is ever fulfilled. We instinctively sense the beauty and potential of existence, but we constantly see it overwhelmed and frustrated by events and forces that can only be described as evil.² This evil shows itself in a multitude of different forms:

- **Tragedy**
People’s lives are suddenly and terribly broken by fatal or maiming accidents. Marriage, family and other relationships destroyed by divorce, bitterness and cruelty. The lives of millions of people find any full purpose for themselves extinguished for want of health, employment, education or opportunity.
- **Disease**
Human bodies are so often ravaged by the pain and suffering of disease. There is genetic failure, which often brings the deformity of, mental or physical disability. There are the multitudes of sickness that result from attacks by bacteria, virus and other organisms.³
- **Violence**
There is cruelty in the home; in Britain today the single most dangerous place to be is an unborn child in the womb. The second most dangerous place to be is an infant under one year old at home. There is domestic violence. There are stranger attacks on the streets with muggings, rape and murder. There is civil unrest, international war and potential acts of mass destruction.
- **Injustice**
The poor, within nations and between nations, suffer exploitation. Most individuals feel powerlessness to right wrongs. There is an unfair distribution of resources between peoples. Good people are crushed while the unscrupulous so often succeed.
- **Despair**
Thousands of individuals are locked up into fear, loneliness and meaninglessness. This leads to anguish, sometimes suicide; yet even death brings only ‘escape’ not a ‘solution’.

² We recognise that the word ‘evil’ is a very emotive term and will have very specific ideas and meaning for different people. Here in our discussion we are using it in the broadest possible way to embrace all expressions of negative experience such as fear, pain, suffering and destruction as well as specific moral evil. This is to aid communication and understanding; how the word ‘evil’ is being used in each situation should become clear from the context.

³ Remember that organisms like bacteria and viruses are not evil, they are God-created expressions of life. Like many things, in certain environments, they can create havoc with pain, suffering and death, so it is a question of how we live with them not a belief that they are evil in and of themselves.



- **Natural disasters**

There are frequent quite unpredictable natural disasters that claim the lives of thousands. They take the form of earthquake, volcano, landslide, hurricane, storm, flood, fire, drought and famine, all of which are usually referred to simply as, 'acts of God'.

- **Nature red in tooth and claw**

Within the food chain the strong prey on the weak. There is often purposeless killing and animal pain is frequent. The very fabric of nature appears to have 'pain' written into it.

Faced with these, and other situations, individuals shake their fists at the heavens and deny that a good God can exist. It is very easy to understand why.

As we review this catalogue of pain, suffering and evil, we begin to observe two things:

- There is pain and suffering as a consequence of simply how the world is - this can be described as '*accidental*', a random consequence of simply living in the world and we shall have some serious questions to ask and issues to discuss about this.
- There is pain, suffering and evil as a consequence of how people behave - this can be described as '*moral*', a result of either deliberate or neglectful actions towards others and raises other questions and issues that we shall engage with.

“This problem is everybody’s problem!”

We have openly admitted to our questioner that, “Yes, we really do have a problem”; and have tried to demonstrate we understand how extensive and all-pervading evil is, in both human experience and in the world at large. However, we now want to show that this is not just a problem for Christians, or other faiths (like Judaism and Islam) that believe in one all-powerful, all-loving God, but that it is in fact a problem that everyone with the experience of being human has to grapple with.

Every single person, irrespective of faith or belief, encounters and experiences life as painful and destructive, in the way that we are describing evil. If this life is to have any true meaning then this presence of evil has to be engaged with and explained in some way, it cannot be ignored.

Every religion and philosophy has had to address the problem of evil; in fact for some it has become the central theme. Examining the different world faith attempts at a solution is very helpful; it illustrates how all-pervading evil is, it introduces a range of different perspectives, it makes us sensitive to how others grapple with the problem and helps us to isolate the essential issues. It is of enormous importance to a Christian to hear these other voices as we grapple for understanding ourselves. It should encourage us to ask our questioner, “The fact that you are asking me this question suggests that pain, suffering and evil are also a problem for you as well; if you believe it denies the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving God, then please tell me what is your explanation?”

Here are some examples of the way world faiths and beliefs engage with the challenges of the problem of evil:



▪ Polytheists

This is the belief in and worship of 'many gods'. It is at the root of all primal religion, which sees its gods as being either 'good' or 'evil', and usually as displaying certain human features and characteristics:

- The Greek gods of Mt. Olympus were seen as beings with human desires, good and bad traits. Evil was seen to be the result of the gods arguing and working out their passions; events in which people found themselves caught up.
- A rather delightful African legend explains the presence of evil by telling of a good god who goes about doing good, but who is constantly pursued by an idiot brother who follows behind spoiling everything that he does! While this is a charming story, illustrating well how experience often leaves us feeling, it is clearly a wholly inadequate solution philosophically!

▪ Hindus

The Vedic philosophy of Hinduism states that all existence is evil and therefore pain and suffering is all that one can expect from life. Evil is a part of *maya*; the 'illusion' that existence creates. It is the consequence of 'ignorance'; the only solution is to come to *samadhi* (enlightenment), which in turn will bring *moksha* (escape and release) from *samsara*, this world of material physical existence, with its endless cycle of death and rebirth.

▪ Buddhists

Buddhism is the one world faith that has come into being with the primary purpose of dealing with the problem of pain, suffering and evil. Its founder, Gautama the Buddha, having led a totally protected early life suddenly encountered pain and suffering that traumatized him, setting him on a quest for a solution. After years of searching he came to a point of 'enlightenment' based on the 'Four Noble Truths':

- Suffering is part of life;
- Suffering is due to selfish desire (the inner thirst for things and being);
- Suffering will stop when desire is extinguished;
- Desire is extinguished by following the noble eightfold path.⁴

This is a very powerful response to the problem of evil; it shares the same worldview as Hinduism in purposing to find release from the world of *samsara*.

▪ Zoroastrians

Originating in Persia (centuries BC), but surviving today with the Parsi's of India. They believe that 'good' and 'evil' eternally exist, locked in constant conflict in the heavens. Evil is *Ariman* the god of darkness; good is *Ahura Mazda* the god of light. Humanity and creation are both caught up in this conflict. There is however hope that ultimately 'good' will completely triumph over evil.

⁴ The Noble Eightfold Path is made up of:

- Right viewpoint
- Right values
- Right speech
- Right behaviour
- Right living
- Right effort
- Right mindfulness
- Right contemplation



- **Gnostics**

They taught that 'all matter is evil' and the product of an evil god, the *demiurge*. The good god is 'spirit' and some people, maybe all, have a fragment of its light imprisoned within them. The only answer is to escape from this material world. Salvation is freeing the spirit from matter by gaining secret *gnosis* (Greek for 'knowledge'), which had the power to release individuals from their imprisonment within matter. There was no intellectual resolve to the problem of good and evil. The Gnostics caused many problems within Judaism and also in the early church, which have left their mark on some aspects of popular traditional Christian thinking right up to today.

- **Humanists**

Given their wholly 'empirical' and 'scientific' approach to life, 'evil' for the humanist is not understood as objective. Philip Pullman, the best-selling author of the 'His Dark Materials' trilogy says, "There is no God, we create our own good and evil".⁵ They argue that pain and suffering are probably the inevitable consequence of freedom, but more particularly the result of people, as yet, not being able to finely tune themselves, society and creation. They believe that given time, intellect and education all problems can ultimately be solved; however strongly the evidence may appear to the contrary. It is interesting, nevertheless, that shortly before his death the great humanist philosopher Bertrand Russell was investigating the question, "Surely evil is more than the fact that I simply don't like it".

- **Jew: Christian: Muslim**

These three great monotheistic faiths have significant differences in both understanding and expression, but what they have in common when it comes to the problem of evil is a shared belief in an uncreated Creator who is 'good', and that evil is something that ought not to be. That in fact evil is the consequence of something having gone terribly wrong.

Judaism, with its long history of suffering, climaxing in the horrors of the 20th century 'holocaust', has particularly had to engage with huge challenge of the problem of evil. The Christian community of faith has much to learn from listening to and dialoguing with them.

Reflection

It was Augustine who expressed this greatest of human dilemmas most succinctly:

"God either cannot, or will not, abolish evil.
If he cannot he is not all-powerful.
If he will not, he is not all loving".

We have seen that the experience of pain, suffering and evil, in its many and varied forms, pervades every fiber of existence. Without question it is the strongest single argument against the belief in the existence of God. It has real teeth. We must consider the problems that it raises sensitively and very seriously.

⁵ Stated in a BBC Radio 4 interview in 2003.



In response to our questioner as to how we can believe in a powerful loving God when there is so much pain and suffering in the world, we have taken three initial steps:

Step 1: “Do you really want to know?”

- removing tension, creating a discussion rather than being defensive.

Step 2: “Yes, we really do have a problem!”

- admitting to the full extent and all-pervading horror of the problem.

Step 3: “This problem is everybody’s problem!”

- we are not alone, every human being has to find some satisfactory solution.

Having tried to set the scene, we will now attempt to give as honest and complete a response as possible. We will not be able to answer every possible question that is raised because of the complexity of the subject, added to this biblical revelation is silent about the origins of evil and the way it affects the material universe. But we believe we can begin to shape a response that gives significant confidence to faith.

MOVING TOWARDS A RESPONSE ⁶

Pieces of the puzzle

In responding to the challenges presented by the ‘problem of evil’ are going to use the analogy of a jigsaw puzzle. Each argument we use in reply should be viewed as a piece of the puzzle. Each one provides a portion of the overall picture and interconnects seamlessly with each of the other pieces. Carefully placed together they begin to reveal a picture.

Most puzzle enthusiasts usually like to view the picture on the box before they start to see what the finished scene will look like. Then they usually begin by selecting all the ‘straight bits’ and start by forming the frame to the whole picture, they then fill in the space with the remaining pieces. In our case, however, we must imagine that the box lid with the completed picture has been lost, further there are no ‘straight bits’, in fact quite a number of the pieces are missing! In reality all we have are a cluster of pieces that make up a portion of the centre of the picture, but enough at least to give us confidence about what the whole picture is probably like; but still leaving many questions.

Puzzle-Piece 1: *Problem of good*

We begin our reply on a very positive note, we come from an angle or trajectory that our challenger is least expecting. The truth is, that in the light of all the ways pain, suffering and evil manifest themselves in human experience and the world as a whole, the real problem is not so much trying to explain the problem of evil, but rather trying to explain the

⁶ The philosophical term that is used to refer to a Christian response to the challenge of the problem of evil is ‘theodicy’ – ‘the vindication of the justice of God in establishing a world in which evil exists’ (Chambers Dictionary). It is formed from the two Greek words *theos* (God) and *dike* (justice).



persistent presence of 'good' in an environment that has such a strong bias towards evil. The questions we have to grapple with are:

- Why does 'good' continue to survive?
- Why do people still hope for good against all the odds?
- Why is it that it is the people who practice 'good' that draw out the admiration of others, while those who practice evil provoke only disgust or disdain?
- Why do we find in the most horrific experiences of evil individuals whose actions shine like beacons of light?⁷
- Why has good not been swallowed up?
- Why don't people just give in and let evil engulf them, saying, "To hell with it all, let's just be evil!"

All this suggests, in the words of Augustine, that 'evil is the going wrong of something that is essentially good'. The honest person must ask, 'Where does good come from? Why does it exist? Why does it persist?' These questions are more searching than asking 'Why is there evil?' If these questions are honestly pursued to their source they have the ability to lead a person to a God who is good and has been revealed in Jesus.

Puzzle-Piece 2: *Dynamic universe*

Popular discussion on the problem of evil tends to focus on human moral evil, with all the horror this involves; while this may be understandable, this is not where we should begin. We need to set the conversation within a much wider frame.

An issue that troubles many people is the question of how a God of love can have created a world in which there are so many 'natural disasters'; such as earthquake, volcano, landslide, hurricane, storm, flood, fire, drought and famine. They are almost universally

⁷ Some powerful examples are:

- **Mother Maria** (Elizabeth Pilenko), was a Russian Orthodox nun who was imprisoned by the Nazis in Ravensbrück concentration camp because she had helped Jews. On Good Friday 1945 she saw a group of women shuffling towards the gas chamber when one of their number, an 18-year-old girl, realised what was happening and became hysterical. Mother Maria ran across to her and putting her arm around her with the words, "Don't be frightened. Look, I shall come in with you". She walked into the gas chamber and died with her. The Allies liberated the camp a few weeks later.
- **Maximilian Kolbe** was a Polish Roman Catholic priest imprisoned by the Nazis in Auschwitz for helping Jews. In July 1941 three prisoners escaped from the camp; as a reprisal ten men were randomly selected, they were to be starved to death in a bunker. On being selected one man broke down weeping. Maximilian stepped forward and took his place. In the days it took him to die without food or water he led the other prisoners in singing and prayers and smiling cheerfully and uncomplainingly at the SS guards who came to inspect them. He outlived the other prisoners and so was given an injection of carbolic acid to extinguish his flickering life. He was 47 years old and had been a missionary in the Far East and Russia; in 1930 he had helped found a monastery in Nagasaki, Japan.
- Jewish holocaust survivors (particularly women) tell numerous stories of deep sacrificial care shown between the inmates; holding, covering, warming, feeding encircling to give sustenance and protection amid the horrors they faced. See Melissa Raphael *'The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust'* Routledge 2003)

How do we explain such selfless love in the face of such evil? What is the source of such good?



spoken of in negative terms – they are sometimes even seen as expressing anger, destruction, turmoil, ferocity, and vengeance. Added to this they are widely referred to, and often viewed, as ‘acts of God’. We want to argue that this is a totally false perspective, which adds major distortion to what is already a very complex subject.

The earth, and of course the whole cosmos, has been created as a dynamic entity, not a static body. The earth is in a constant state of movement, development and change, which is part of its inherent beauty and character. Some of this is very slow (ie. geological time), other aspects are sudden and dramatic (ie. a tsunami). This is not only exactly how the earth is, it is its essential nature.

Added to this these natural forces of earth, wind, fire and water are essential to the very existence of life on earth, and provide it with its essential fertility. Lava from volcanoes stimulates verdant growth; there are seedpods on trees in some parts of the world that cannot germinate unless burnt by fire.

Added to this, Christians believe that this world, in its essence, is the best of all possible worlds, created by God and it is ‘very good’ (Gen 1:31). Having said this there are several difficult questions we will need to reflect on as our discussion continues:

- To what extent has some form of cosmic evil distorted and thrown many aspects of the earth out of kilter?
- To what extent is human behaviour (ecological vandalism) disrupting and destroying the rhythms of nature?

The answer to the first we will only be able to guess at, the answer to the second is a little clearer but the detail, while open to dispute, is almost certainly greater than most people are prepared to admit.

However apart from all this, it appears quite clear from a Christian perspective, that even in its most pristine state the earth was created to be a dynamic place, which by its very nature means it will often be dangerous. This is the true and ordained nature of things. This being so, the language implying and reinforcing the idea of ‘natural disasters’ can never be considered Christian language. Every time such phrases are used it simply emphasises the fact that as human beings we have developed cultures that are dislocated from the natural world. Nature is seen as hostile and something to be stood out against because it constantly threatens our existence. All this underlines the fact that we have all-but completely failed to learn how to live in harmony with the awesome reality of a dynamic world.

Puzzle-Piece 3: *Necessity of freedom*

For life to have meaning it is essential for human beings to have ‘freedom’. There can be no ‘morality’ without freedom. No act can be called ‘good’ if there had not also been the possibility that its opposite (evil) could have been done.

Only the free and spontaneous expression of love between persons says anything of value (eg. between child and parent; husband and wife; between friends). Coerced or ‘programmed’ behaviour has no ‘meaning’ or ‘value’ whatsoever. God wants people who will *freely* choose to love in return. Imagine a parent who forced their child to say, “I love



you”, at a fixed time every day and if they forgot they would be beaten; that would be hideous. Instead, parents wait for their children to express their love unbidden, even if they may sometimes choose to do so at inconvenient occasions!

It has been argued that God could have created ‘individuals’ who would have always chosen what was right and would thus have eliminated the possibility of evil actions. However, such a being would by every definition never have been ‘human’; it could never be more than an automaton or ‘robot’.

At the foundation of God’s purposes is the desire to have fellowship and relationship with ‘persons’, and for us to be able to enjoy an eternal relationship. This would be impossible with a ‘robotic’ being. Only a warped personality could find a relationship with an automaton satisfying.⁸ In contrast, the one of whom we speak is the eternal and living God of whom such ideas are unthinkable. Therefore God created people with true freedom:

- True freedom is an act of the ‘will’, and it is born out of ‘obedience’; only people who are free in thought, will and action can become children of the living God;
- True freedom is also marked by ‘responsibility’, the recognition that every act carries consequences that may be good or bad;
- True freedom involves a ‘choosing’ process, a ‘learning’ process and a ‘maturing’ process; there is therefore always the opportunity for everything to go right, but there is equally the possibility that things can go wrong.⁹

God chose to create a being whose love could be won, with whom an eternal relationship could be built. Of necessity ‘freedom’ is a foundation stone in the human personality. God took the risk that people might not love in return, in order that the love, which would eventually be won, would be true. There was no other option.

Puzzle-Piece 4: *Need for wisdom*

This ‘puzzle-piece’ brings together the challenge of living in a dynamic, and therefore potentially dangerous world with the necessity of human freedom, in a multitude of freedoms all interacting and interrelating. This is a huge and exciting subject:

▪ Wisdom challenge of a dynamic world

Our first requirement is to acknowledge the truth that, in its essential essence, this world is the best of all possible worlds. This being true we have a responsibility to learn how to live in harmony with the natural world, to be able to listen to and hear creation, and from this to develop lifestyles and rhythms of responding that are shaped by wisdom and maturity.¹⁰ The biblical understanding of true wisdom is the practical experience of living in harmony with the character of God and the natural world around us. This does

⁸ As in the original (1974) version of ‘The Stepford Wives’, the horrific film about male chauvinism.

⁹ Other aspects of ‘freedom’ are dealt with on the Workshop weekend entitled ‘Body & Soul’

¹⁰ Reports from the ‘Boxing Day 2004 Tsunami’ suggest that apart from some domestic animals, almost no wildlife died, birds and animals having a premonition sense and awareness of what was about to happen. The primal communities who inhabit the Andaman and Nicobar Islands off the coast of India, who live in sensitive contact with the animal world and the rhythms of nature, appear to have escaped unscathed. For more information see the major on-line news networks and especially www.nativeamericanchurch.com.



not mean that we have to return to a much more 'primitive' way of living, but it *does* mean that we need to challenge our culture at its most fundamental level. We do need to learn how to connect directly with nature, in a spiritual, emotional and relational way, to an extent that at the moment we know almost nothing about – this is a huge but thrilling challenge.

Consider again the wonderful eschatological promise of Revelation 7:16-17:

'They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more;
...and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes'

This is not implying that within the renewed heaven and earth this material universe will any less dynamic and potentially dangerous than it is already, not at all. That will remain the same. What it means is that the impact of evil within creation will be totally removed and we will know how to live with true maturity and wisdom.

▪ **Character challenge of a dynamic world**

This world is the divinely chosen place for 'choosing', 'growing', 'maturing' and 'learning'; it has been well described as 'a place of soul-making'.¹¹ Many of the restrictions, frustrations and difficulties of this life are in fact God ordained to shape us into the people God wants us to be:

- In childbirth there is a struggle but it is replaced by the joy of its outcome, so great that the preliminary hardship can seem insignificant;
- The pain of children cutting their teeth is part of their whole maturing process to become a full human person, the essential life-struggle.

God has written divine principles into the universe so that as we learn to live within it we are 'disciplined'¹² both to discover God and become divine. Through our experience of life we 'learn obedience', as Jesus did (Heb 5:8), and so become 'children of God'. God's purposes now and into eternity have 'character' at their heart.

Even pain serves as a 'guide' and 'protection' within the jungle of the material world. It is a check to danger, it warns us that we may damage our physical bodies; it keeps us safe. This is an important physical function that protects and guides us as we move within our God ordained environment.

The first stage of creation was the bringing into being of all things (Heb 11:3); this was potential rather than fulfillment. We are now involved in the second and hardest stage of creation, this is a process in which the potential of the original creation is being realised as the people of God join with God in drawing divine purposes to a conclusion. This provokes some tantalising questions:

¹¹ See especially J Hick '*Evil and the God of Love*' Macmillan 1966: 289-ff

¹² The word 'discipline' has a rather negative understanding in our popular culture, we need to remember that the word is formed from the Latin *discipulus* which simply means 'to learn'; of course our English word 'disciple' (one who learns) comes from it. It is used to translate the New Testament Greek word *mathetes*, which also means 'one who learns'



- “Was the whole of creation originally a perfect paradise?” - it was certainly ‘good’, but only embryonic, with enormous possibilities still to be realised.
- “Why do we have the image of a special ‘garden’ in which to place the first woman and man?” - was it a ‘microcosm’ of the paradise that God intended to encompass the earth as people discovered how to live in obedience to God?
- “What was the world outside the garden like?” Was it dangerous and only to be entered when we had learned how to live?

The truth is quite simple, yet profound, ‘As we discover God so we discover paradise’!

▪ **Spiritual challenge of a dynamic world**

The presence and experience of demanding natural phenomena, and the horror that can come in their wake, raises many powerful objections to the idea of a God who is good, and who created a good world. We shall discuss the possibility that satanic forces coupled with human rebellion may have prevented the world being able to develop, as it should, so destabilizing the natural order that certain disasters do result.

Nevertheless, we are arguing that the possibility of huge unexpected natural phenomena must also be considered as part of the way in which God has shaped the universe to operate, and is all fully embraced within the divine economy.

A dynamic and potentially dangerous world keeps us constantly aware of our dependence, a dependence ultimately upon God. It has a persistent humbling effect that is essential if we are to be the people with the character God requires. It is absolutely essential that people do not find their security in the natural order, but only in God. Imagine that the world was a perfectly safe place in which to live; we would soon take everything for granted, forget God, become self-orientated and self sufficient. We would become the ultimate humanists.

A dynamic world presents us with an essential spiritual challenge. Coping with the possibility of huge natural challenges, demands that we find wisdom and insight from God. Would we have it any other way? We have to learn to walk in faith and commitment.

▪ **Moral challenge of a dynamic world**

Having to cope with the effects of living in a dynamic world presents us with a great moral challenge. This again is essential for our development as spiritual people. This fact highlights a number of very important points:

- It draws from us compassion and love that shines as a light in the dark, and displays the character of God; we act as God’s agents;
- Pain and suffering can bring out the depths in people’s character, enabling them and demonstrating ‘good’ overcoming ‘evil’, though it can also crush and embitter people;
- The presence of ‘evil’ forces us to choose; it is an opportunity for good to triumph, a gift from God's hand, or a negative we respond to in anger.

Good has a cost in it. No values are free. It is born out of the womb of discipline and sacrifice. We have to learn to walk in love and compassion.



These observations, of course, raise many further questions for us to grapple with, but these do not have to present us with insurmountable philosophical and theological problems. Overall they do seem to point us towards an understanding that has a genuine ring of truth about it.

Puzzle-Piece 5: *Path towards the goal*

Almost every reflection or discussion about pain, suffering and evil has an assumption that an all loving all powerful God could have created a world in which these seemingly destructive and perverting forces could have been absent. That of course must be true, but such a world and such a universe would be completely different from what we actually experience, and would have been the less because of it.

Just as we saw when looking at human freedom, while freedom and choice make for dangerous possibilities, the alternative of God creating automatons and robots doesn't bear thinking about. In the same way the whole of creation must be vibrant and pulsating with energy and change, with all the danger that presents, because anything else will be impossible to achieve God's ultimate divine goal and purpose.

We must remind ourselves that from a biblical Christian perspective we are experiencing the world and the cosmos in the middle of a process of unfolding and developing, its final completion and *telos* has not been arrived at yet. The kind of world that was needed to be able to develop into the ultimate glory that will be the re-newed heaven and earth (cf Isa 66:22; 65:17; 2Pt 3:13; Rev 21:1) was one that had to have the possibility of death, pain, suffering and evil woven into it. It didn't have to unfold exactly the way it has done, but having done so it is still on path to achieve the divine goal.

Evolution, while it has suffering and death written into it, would seem to be an essential part of God's unfolding plan and purpose for all living things – unfolding, developing and adapting. We are dealing with a deep mystery here, all the elements of which we are quite incapable of understanding in full detail. Nevertheless, when we ponder it is thrilling and exciting. There is reason to believe that as God's final and complete salvation comes to its redemptive climax every aspect of the unfolding process, especially those areas that at present seem to have been a failure and come to nothing (an evolution is a good example here) will find complete and total meaning in God's final universal salvation.¹³ Jesus' command, "Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing may be lost" (Jn 6:12) seems to be a fundamental divine principle. God's salvation will be total and absolute.

We engage with pain, suffering, evil and death in the light of this hope. This truth does not lessen the horror of experiencing suffering and evil, but it helps to give perspective and understanding, pointing to something more beyond. This is no hideous 'pie in the sky when you die' mantra, but rather engaging in the struggle in the certain knowledge that it is an essential part of the journey towards the fullness of all things.

This understanding is picked up in a number of key biblical passages:

¹³ This theme is explored in much greater detail in C Southgate '*The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil*' Westminster John Knox 2008



'... we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden,
which God decreed before the ages for our glory
... as it is written,
"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him"
these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit;
for the Spirit searches everything even the depths of God'
(1Cor 2:7-10 cf Isa 64:4)

"For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us
for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison"
(2Cor 4:17)

"I consider the sufferings of this present time,
not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us"
(Rm 8:18)

"... for creation was subjected to futility,
not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it,
in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay"
(Rom 8:20)

Other biblical comments would give a similar perspective:

'Weeping endures for a night,
joy comes in the morning'
(Ps 30:5)

'Jesus ... who for the joy that was set before him Jesus endured the cross,
disregarding its shame'
(Heb 12:2)

Puzzle-Piece 6: *Fact of rebellion*

Human beings having been given physical and moral freedom have violated its beautiful potential with rebellion. Much of the evil within the world is the direct result of human rebellion against God. Wars, famine, disease, violence, injustice, despair, are the fruits of the moral evil of 'wickedness'. People have freely chosen to be wicked (Gen 3:6-7) and the chain reaction has made itself felt throughout the whole of human society:

'The Lord saw that human wickedness on the earth was great,
and that every imagination of the thoughts
of their hearts was only evil continually'
(Gen. 6:5)

'They have all gone astray,
they are all alike corrupt;
there is none that does good,
no, not one'
(Ps 14:3)



People were given the opportunity to freely build a living relationship with God through choosing obedience (Gen 2:16-17), but they refused. Much of the evil in the world springs from this rebellion alone (Rm 1:28-32; Gal 5:19-21 etc).

We were originally given 'dominion' as a gift from God (Gen 1:27). If we had initially responded in free obedience to God, we would have lifted ourselves, and the whole creation, to the very heights of heaven. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for 'dominion' is said to be capable of a possible 'inverted', and even 'perverted' sense, in contrast to its primary and obviously positive meaning. This implies that if people fail, or refuse, to rule as God desires they will plunge themselves into depths of unimagined depravity and drag the whole of creation down with them. The spectrum of potential is as low as it is high¹⁴.

Humanity has the capability of more evil than any other creature. This is well illustrated in history's innumerable acts of inhumanity (eg. seen in the racks of the Inquisition, the ovens of Auschwitz, the killing fields of Kampuchea), and so it continues. Violence, injustice, greed and so much more, flows in their wake and finds its source in the human heart and the freely chosen actions of people. So when someone shakes their angry finger at God over accusations about evil, they would do well to remember the Chinese proverb:

“The person who points an accusing finger at someone else
will do well to remember that
they have three other fingers are pointing at themselves”.

These rebellious choices have a powerfully destructive and perverted force on our minds, personalities and therefore our actions. When they become a pattern of our lifestyle they open us up even greater possibilities of evil¹⁵.

Puzzle-Piece 5: *Sovereignty of God*

Christians believe that history is held within the sovereign hand of God; God is the one bringing it into being and also drawing it to its final conclusion. Scripture is quite clear that the fulfillment of history will see life completely free from the ravages of evil:

'They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more;
...and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes'
(Rev 7:16-17)

It is in God's purposes that everything will reach a perfect conclusion and all evil will be banished.

¹⁴ The idea of 'dominion' is dealt with in more detail in the Workshop weekend 'Peace & Power' especially the session 'Companions with Creation'

¹⁵ A story that comes out of the Holocaust tells how a concentration camp commander hitched up an old rabbi to a cart and made him pull the officer around the camp, being beaten every time he stumbled. When eventually the commander tired of the activity the rabbi was untied and returned to the other inmates. They all gathered around saying, "How terrible for you!" To which the rabbi replied, "No, it would have been far more terrible if I had been the one driving the cart."



Talking about the relationship of God to the challenges of pain, suffering and evil is a huge and complex topic, and connects with every one of our responses. However, at this point we want to just make three important observations:

- Many Christians try to protect God from accusations of being responsible for creating the possibility that evil might manifest itself; but this quite simply will not do. We must never try to escape or side step the fact that God knowingly created the *possibility* of evil. In a startling statement in Isaiah 45:6-7, God makes it clear to the great Persian conqueror Cyrus (d. 530 BC), who was a Zoroastrian, that the good and evil, which he believed to be in eternal conflict, both came from Yahweh's sovereign hand:

'I am the Lord, and there is no other.
I form light and create darkness¹⁶,
I shape peace and create woe,
I am the Lord who does all these things'.

God's greatness is such that it embraces both good and evil within the divine economy. The possibility of evil was created because of the essential nature of the opportunity and necessity of good; which we discussed above. God makes it clear that evil is not out of control; in fact ultimately it will be seen to have played an unwitting part in God's purposes. Even 'human wrath' serves only to praise God (Ps 76:10). The fundamental truth is that God created the possibility of 'good' through 'obedience'. We were told to abstain from the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil' (Gen 2:17), and enjoying fellowship with God by feeding from the 'Tree of life' (Gen 3:22).

- Scripture does not see the human freedom and the sovereignty of God in conflict in any way. Yes, we are free, and yet God will still righteously draw everything to the divinely pre-ordained conclusion for all things. A limited, though helpful picture is that of a chess game. Imagine a novice of the game on one side, and a grand master on the other. Both have the freedom to move their pieces anywhere they choose, subject to the limits the game imposes. However, though they both have freedom and opportunity the outcome of the game is a foregone conclusion; the chess master will win! The same is true of evil. It may appear to be exploiting so many situations in life but all the time it is inexorably being moved towards an eschatological checkmate! The clear fact is that human beings certainly do have freedom; but God simply has more freedom than us, and the powers of darkness, and he will win. The answer to the problem of evil is rooted in the end-times, the final judgment of God's ultimate purposes.
- We must never forget that there is always a sense of impenetrable mystery about the ways of God, from a human perspective. God dwells in deep darkness, divine ways are past finding out. It is put very graphically by the psalmist:

'Your way was through the sea,
your path, through the mighty waters:
yet your footprints were unseen.'
(Ps 77:19)¹⁷

¹⁶ The phrase 'I form light and create darkness' clearly refers to the Zoroastrian belief in Ahura Mazda, 'the god of light (goodness)', and Ariman, 'the god of darkness (evil and destruction)'. Here Yahweh is making it clear that there are not different deities, but only one supreme being within whom all understanding of good and evil has to be understood.



This is very poignant in terms of the problem of evil when you remember that the sea in ancient Israelite thinking represented the universe in chaos and potentially out of control. All this keeps us humble and sensitive in the face of vast complexity.

Puzzle-Piece 8: *Hideous strength* ¹⁸

For all the beauty and good that is inherent in the world it is also very clear, for those with eyes to see, that a 'hideous strength' is abroad within creation. There is a satanic element, which has polluted the spiritual reservoir of the universe. It is an evil that is beyond any human control to change, and in fact it does much to fuel and maintain human rebellion against God. This diabolical and malicious purpose moves in aggressive opposition to the purposes of God, spawning evil, corruption and pain at every opportunity. It is here that cosmic evil finds its source, the full nature and extent of which we are unable to fully understand.

The early Christian letter to the Ephesians uses some very powerful images to express this understanding:

“... following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the children of disobedience”
(Eph 2:2)

“... against principalities and powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places”
(Eph 6:12)

The grip which this 'hideous strength' has upon creation is so extensive that it is now impossible to tell just how much life on earth has been, and still is being, warped by it. What the natural world would be like without this 'satanic element' is impossible to imagine; whether or not it would be idyllic, it would certainly be 'very good' (Gen 1:31). It is in this area that we must, at least to some extent, find an explanation for genetic failure, disease-inducing organisms,¹⁹ perhaps some natural disasters, but most certainly in the way in which nature is 'red in tooth and claw'. It expresses itself in deep fear and destructive passions.

This satanic impact appears to have affected the very physical structure of the universe. Paul makes some profound observations in Romans 8:20-23:

‘... for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the

¹⁷ Reading this verse in context, it is speaking about the Exodus and Yahweh leading the Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea. Listening to a BBC reporter doing a documentary on the fishing villages in the Outer Hebrides dealt with the tragedy of fishing crews being lost at sea. The words of this verse were engraved on the headstone of a young man drowned in a fishing accident, which I found utterly compelling.

¹⁸ It will be obvious that I have borrowed the title of this sub-section from '*That Hideous Strength*' (1945), the third volume of the 'Cosmic Trilogy' by CS Lewis published in 1945 by John Love (Bodley Head) Limited.

¹⁹ We must remember again that bacteria and viruses are not in themselves evil, but that an imbalance has taken place which has brought pain and suffering through their function.



children of God. We know that the whole of creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves...'

Creation is incarcerated in a cosmic prison house where there is 'futility', 'bondage to decay' and a 'groaning in labour pains'; and human rebellion is the lock on the door. Here we are touching a profound dimension of the mystery of existence and it leaves many questions unanswered. However, what is clear is that in spite of the manifestation of evil God is in control and allowing the subjection to continue that an even greater glory might ultimately be revealed. It is as God's end time purposes are brought to their final conclusion this malevolent strangle hold will be broken forever (Lk 10:18; Rev 20:10).

Puzzle-Piece 9: *Place of death*

For many individuals death appears to be the ultimate sadistic joke of existence, the 'ace card' of evil. It is usually cloaked in pain and brings to frustration any hope of either good or justice being able to win. Outside of an understanding of a God of love and justice, 'death' is the ultimate triumph of evil. This is expressed so powerfully in the words of the poet Dylan Thomas at the death of his father,

'Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.'²⁰

There have also always been those for whom life is random and meaningless, who treat death with indifference. An epitaph found on some ancient Mediterranean headstones ran:

"I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care"

However, within the embrace of God, 'death' has become a non-event; its sting is drawn. Within the spectrum of eternity and the resurrection life of Jesus, the experience of death evaporates into non-significance. Jesus has turned the question of death on its head. The physical experience of death is the end of nothing, but the opening out of new dimensions of existence:

'I am the resurrection and the life;
the one who believes in me,
though they die, yet shall they live,
and whoever lives and believes in me
shall never die'
(Jn 11:25)

Puzzle-Piece 10: *Work of Jesus*

When we are confronted with the reality of evil in a form that is overwhelming, it is quite understandable to cry out, "God, why don't you do something!" How can God, if there is a God, stand by and not intervene?

This has been the central question for the worldwide Jewish community following the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. There has been a range of responses:²¹

²⁰ See Walford Davies (Ed) '*Dylan Thomas: Selected Poems*' JM Dent & Sons, London, 1974



- It was a temporary eclipse of God, who mysteriously turns his face from human suffering; reflecting the heart of Psalm 10, where God's presence is discovered in God's absence.
- It was the price that has to be paid for human moral freedom; God cannot intervene without removing that freedom.
- It was a commandment to survive or die affirming their identity as Jews, giving the oppressor no victory by their capitulation from their faith or culture.
- It was proof that God did not exist; if he does then he is not all-good and all-powerful and therefore not worth worshipping – in the words of Spedal, 'God's only excuse (for inaction) is that he does not exist'.
- It was proof that the God we have imagined does not exist, we have held on to a flawed simplistic image – Jewish feminists have argued that God did act, but through the powerful weakness of the dignity, care and compassion revealed in relationships within the camps.

Another powerful response comes through a 'theology of protest' most eloquently presented in voice of Ellie Wiesel. Once a devout orthodox Jewish child, now a fifteen-year-old boy in Auschwitz, watching Jewish inmates celebrate Yom Kippur he says:

"This day I ceased to plead. I was no longer capable of lamentation. On the contrary I felt strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone – terribly alone in a world without God and without man. Without love or mercy. I had ceased to be anything but ashes, yet I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty, to whom my life had been tied so long. I stood amid that praying congregation observing it like a stranger."²²

God is the accused. God carries the final responsibility for all the evil in the world. Surveying post-Holocaust literature has led one person to ask the searching and deeply disturbing question:²³

"Can a human being atone for the sins of God?"

This question has great significance for Christian thinking. The God, who brought into being the possibility of the problem of evil, is fully responsible for that choice. However uncomfortable (and even offended) some people may feel about the phrase, 'the sins of God', it makes an important and extremely powerful point.

For the Christian all this takes us to the very heart of the issue. The God who did in fact create the possibility of moral evil has personally taken full responsibility for it. God has taken upon himself the full implications and consequences of evil, and has dealt with them within himself. This truth is the central cornerstone in the Christian argument with those who ask, "How can a good all-powerful God allow suffering?"

²¹ This is a brief summary of an understanding presented by Melissa Raphael (Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Gloucestershire) to Advanced Workshop in October 2005.

²² Ellie Wiesel *'Night'* Penguin 1981: 79

²³ This question was framed by Mark Ostrowicz as a possible subject for a degree dissertation



God becomes a fully human being. In the person of Jesus, God personally encounters the true impact of evil as a result of the incarnation. In his death and the work of the atonement, the power of evil that tried to overwhelm and destroy him was instead torn out by its roots and rendered powerless. Jesus took upon himself the full extent, weight and consequences of evil, broke its power and rose triumphant.

‘Surely he has borne our griefs (sicknesses)
and carried our sorrows (pains) ...
he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities,
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed’
(Isa. 53:4-5).

This is at the very hub of a Christian response to the problem of evil, in bringing together all the essential elements of the problem - the physical, spiritual, human and divine.

Puzzle-Piece 11: *Future hope*

We have already made a number of references to God’s plan and destiny for creation. It is important to place this hope, this ‘living hope’ central to our reflection. Of the many biblical texts a few snatches will have to suffice:

‘In the world you will have tribulation;
but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’
(Jn 16:33)

‘For behold I create new heavens and a new earth;
and the former things shall not be remembered’
(Isa 65:17)

‘They shall not hurt or destroy in my holy mountain’
(Isa 11:9)

‘They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; ...
and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes’
(Rev 7:16-17)

As we have said earlier. A Christian understanding of hope is not some ‘opium’ or ‘pie in the sky’ myth to try and anesthetize the pain of living now (in the way Karl Marx says religion always does). Hope should increase the rage against evil, suffering and pain and inspire us to ‘bind up the broken hearted’ (Isa 61:1) and ‘hunger and thirst after justice’ (Mt 5:6).

Puzzle-Piece 12: *Challenge of church*

If our arguments are truly leading us in the right direction, then in a world weeping in anguish from its experience of pain, suffering and evil, people should see a light of hope shining within the community of faith, the church, made up of the disciples of faith. Here is a body of people who by, both their understanding and living, should be able to demonstrate that there is an answer to the problem of evil. Not in some glib superficial way but in deep empathy.



So the church should not simply be a community that can hope to provide a profoundly helpful intellectual response to the problem of evil, but through the way they live in challenging evil, and supporting those overwhelmed by pain and suffering they are also a sign to the world that there is an answer that is far greater than mere philosophical debate. Radiating from its heart should be the sure and certain hope of the ultimate resolution of all things in justice and the biblical understanding of *shalom*.

There are many biblical texts that engage with this theme, here are just two of them:

‘But if your enemy is hungry feed them,
and if they are thirsty, give them a drink ...
Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good’
(Rom 12:20-21)

“Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you
so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven;
who makes the sun rise on the evil and the good,
and sends rain on the just and the unjust”
(Mat 5:44-45)

There is an ancient and moving Jewish Talmudic legend called the ‘Thirty-Six Righteous Ones’²⁴ (‘in Hebrew *Lamed Vav Tzadikim*’) ²⁵ that states, “In every generation there are thirty-six just people ²⁶ who share the pain of the world with God,²⁷ by virtue of whom the world exists and without whom the world could not continue, and whose presence prevents God’s heart from breaking.” They are marked by humility, they work secretly and hidden,²⁸ they would never acknowledge being one of the ‘*Lamed Vav Tzadikim*’ (and might not even know). It is said that the Messiah is probably among them. Their reward for their anonymous work is to experience directly the *Shekhinah* (the unique presence of God),

While the church is a community that should be bold and open in its engagement with pain, suffering and evil; unashamed in its approach and prepared to take on situations that need challenging. Nevertheless, there is something very powerful in this Jewish legend, which we also need to capture in the essence of our response.

²⁴ It is attributed to the teaching of one of the Babylonian Rabbi Abbaye – see Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 97b, Sukkot 45b

²⁵ In Hebrew script the letter *Lamed* = 30 and the letter *Vav* = 6, hence *Lamed Vav* = 36

²⁶ Why thirty-six, where does this number come from? In answer we move into the fascinating realm of Jewish spiritual interpretation and Kabbalic mysticism:

- Zechariah 11:12 mentions “thirty shekels of silver” as an allegory for godly people; God ensures there will always be thirty righteous people in every generation
- Isaiah 30:18 says “Blessed are all who wait for Him” (Heb: *ashrei kol h.okhei lo*), and the Hebrew word *lo* meaning “for Him,” is spelled Lamed-Vav (as we have seen) is numerically equal to 36
- The 360 degrees of the heavenly circle when divided into units of ten make the number 36
- The number 36 is twice 18 which in Hebrew letters spells *chai* which means ‘life’ or ‘living’ and 72 which is twice 36 makes up the Hebrew name for ‘God’

²⁷ The idea may have roots in the story of Abraham’s efforts to save Sodom (Gen. 18), where it becomes evident that any society must have a minimum number of decent people in order to survive

²⁸ They are also known as the *Tzadikim Nistarim*, ‘concealed’ or ‘hidden righteous’



Reflection

We have not answered every question and have probably raised many new ones. We hope that we have demonstrated that a belief in an all-loving all-powerful God is as intellectually authentic as any of the arguments that challenge that view. Further more, that in grappling with the question it leads us to a much deeper understanding and appreciation of the Christian faith. The challenge does not put us on the defensive but rather opens the door on creative insight and hope.

Questions

1. What would be your main emphasis in replying to criticisms of a good God in the face of evil?
2. What problem does the existence of evil still cause you?
3. The New Testament says, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rm 12:21). Must our response to the 'problem of evil' be limited to reasons and arguments? Can the actions of good people also challenge the idea that there is no good God? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach? In the light of your reflections how do you think the 'problem of evil' should affect both what the church says and how it acts in today's world?

Reading & Resources

J Bowker *'Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World'* Cambridge 1975
M Green *'I Believe in Satan's Downfall'* Hodder 1975
J Hick *'Evil and the God of Love'* Macmillan 1966
CS Lewis *'The Problem of Pain'* Collins 1941
M Scott Peck *'People of the Lie'* Rider 1983
E Schaeffer *'Affliction'* Hodder 1978
C Southgate *'The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil'*
Westminster John Knox Press 2008
A Walker *'Enemy Territory'* London 1987
JW Wenham *'The Enigma of Evil'* IVP 1985
W Wink *'Naming the Powers'* Fortress 1984
W Wink *'Unmasking the Powers'* Fortress 1986
W Wink *'Engaging the Powers'* Fortress 1992
N Wright *'A Theology of the Dark Side'* Paternoster 2003

