

A Good God and the Problem of Evil and Suffering

One of the biggest arguments I hear from Atheists and non-Christians is the issue of evil and suffering. They wonder how can a God of love allow evil and suffering to exist. This is an important question to respond to. It is not only important for us to answer it for the non-Christians, but we as Christians also need a valid response to it in our lives.

Let's first deal with the Atheist's objection.

And I deal with this first because I want to show that if there is no God, you cannot complain about Evil or Suffering.

The complaint goes as follows:

How can there be a God when there is so much evil and suffering in the world.

The idea is that if God exists, then he would not allow death and suffering and evil to exist.

When we look at this what they really are asking is: How can there be a **GOOD** God when there is so much evil in the World.

Well this means they say:

Either

a) He is UNABLE to stop the evil and suffering, meaning He isn't God

Or

b) He is UNWILLING to stop the evil and suffering, meaning He isn't good

But here's why this does not follow. I'll explain it with a flow chart as it will be easier to picture. So using the diagram below, starting from the **bottom** of the diagram at Block 1 and going backwards up the diagram.

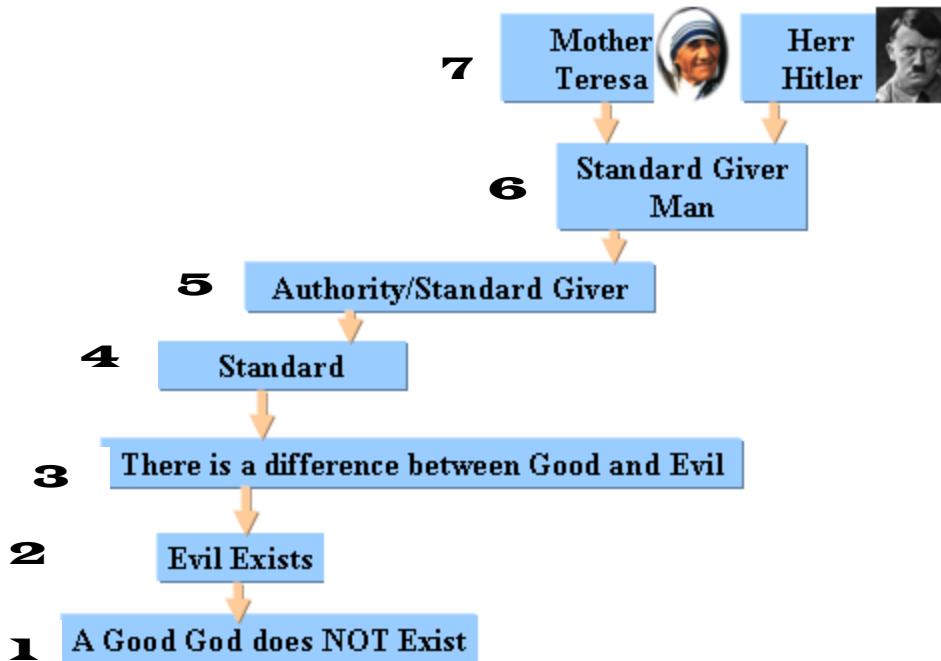


Diagram 1

Block 1. First you say: “A good God does NOT exist.”

Block 2. Because you claim that “Evil Exists” or you say Suffering exists and you claim that suffering is “bad” or wrong and that’s why a good God does not exist.

Block 3. But if you say Evil exists or suffering is bad then you have to admit that there exists a difference between good and evil, or between good and bad. That is that YOU know what is good and bad.

Block 4. But if there exists a difference between good and evil there must be a standard of good otherwise you can’t define any difference. You can’t define a quality unless you have standard on which to base that quality on. Ever been to Starbucks and wonder why their coffee cups start with a Tall. You can’t really say something is Tall unless there is something that it is compared to. Turns out that Starbucks HAS a short. They just don’t advertise it. Is the same way how can you say something is evil unless you have an idea of what it “should” be. (There more to be said about this that’ll we’ll postpone for now). But we can agree that there needs to be some sort of standard.

Block 5. But if there is a standard, it must have come from somewhere. Some authority must be the standard giver. You can’t have a standard that comes from nowhere.

Block 6. So does the standard come from other humans?

Block 7. But if it does then who sets the standard? Mother Teresa or Hitler?

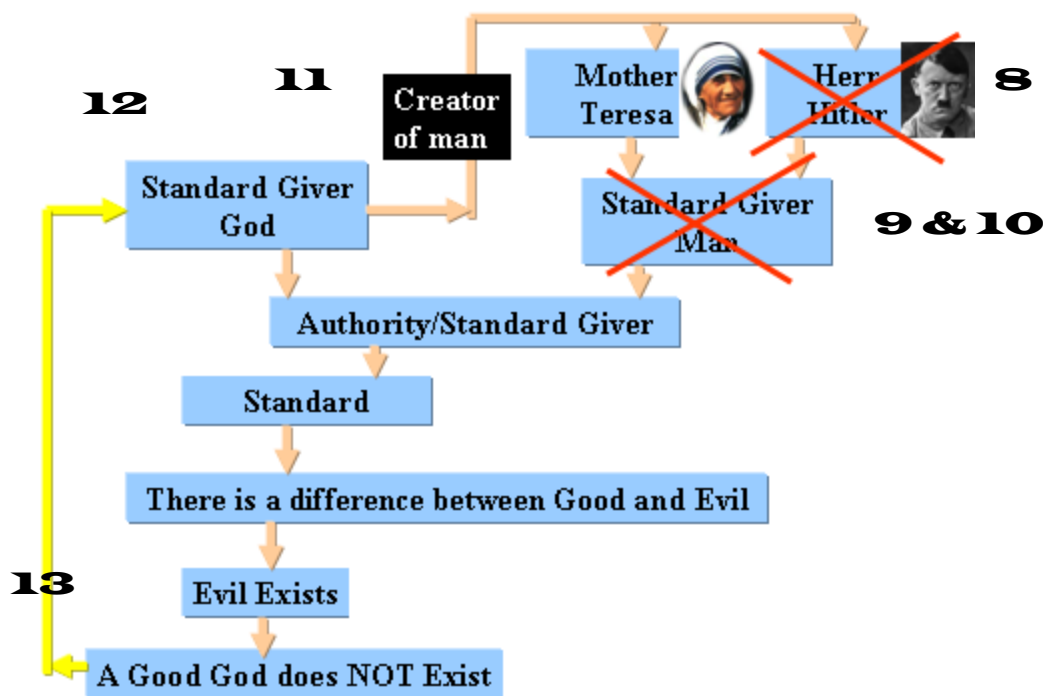


Diagram 2

Moving to Diagram 2 above. From the top right hand corner:

Block 8. So we can agree that the standard certainly does not come from Hitler. But why does it come from Mother Teresa? Who died and made her God? Why is Mother Teresa good and Hitler bad. Whose standard are you using for THAT judgment call? Hitler and lots of Nazis would have argued that Mother Teresa was bad because she let's the weak survive instead of dying off and improving the stock of mankind.

Block 9. How about if the standard comes from our society of men or from a majority vote of men?

But you can't say society sets the standard because, first the Nazis were a society and second if tomorrow society decides it's OK to torture babies for fun or that it's OK to enslave Africans, we'd still know that despite what they said, enslaving people or torturing babies for fun is NEVER "good". Remember too that prior to the 1800's, most civilizations said slavery was fine. That was a majority vote. Why didn't that count? Why was slavery ALWAYS wrong?

And in fact if you want to arbitrarily say there is no standard then what standard are you using to judge God with? You can't judge God by a standard that you yourself says doesn't exist. It merely becomes your personal preference.

You see it's only if there IS a moral standard that you can make a moral objection that evil and death and suffering is bad.

Block 10. So obviously, Mankind can't set the standard.

I like to put it this way:

If there is no absolute Morality, why was Hitler wrong?

If there IS an absolute morality why do YOU get to decide what it is and NOT Hitler?

Block 11. You see the standard can only come from someone who has the authority to set the standard for mankind. That has to be a Being that creates mankind.

Block 12. That means you are claiming that the standard giver has to be something who created man.

Block 13. But isn't that exactly what you are trying to disprove. Whoops... this leads us back to your statement that a good God can't exist.

So you've invalidated your very first premise. Do you see how this is a self defeating statement. The very fact that you claim that evil exists, means that ultimate good exists and it can only exist in an absolute moral giver. If not, all you have said is that your have a preference that people would stop doing the things you don't like. And that is a meaningless statement.

Let's summarize

Now that you have the gist of this complex argument, let me repeat it in a short concise manner: You said: How can God exist when there so much evil in the world. But when you say that there is no God, you are saying there is no absolute moral authority. But if there is no absolute moral authority, that means there can be no absolute moral standards. If there are no absolute moral standards, then there is no difference between good and evil. If there is no difference between good and evil, that means there is nothing like evil. If there is nothing like evil, then evil is nothing. But if evil is nothing, then your statement: "How can God exist when there so much evil in the world" becomes meaningless. It becomes "How can God exist there is so much nothing in the world¹." Is this what you really meant to ask?

So, your statement is self refuting and makes no sense. It's a suicide statement. The statement kills itself the minute you say it. Because the minute you say evil exists, you admit God exists.

So what this means is that there must be other reasons why Evil exists.

But then why *does* God allow evil.

Now that we've dealt with the fact that evil does not disprove God we are still left with some deep deep questions: What about when innocent people die? Why does God allow some people to suffer and others to not? What about natural disasters? What about genetic defects? What about the death of a young child?

Let's deal with death first.

Death is not our final Destiny

I was once having dinner with a group of engineers. One of them was a very vocal person who when he found out that I was a Christian, gave me the old: "I'm an atheist and I wonder how can you say God exists when innocent children are killed all the time."

I turned to him and said: "Let me ask you this, if there is a God, what happens when someone dies?"

He suddenly had a sheepish look on his face as if he'd never thought about it before. "I guess they go to be with this god of yours."

¹ Thanks to Ravi Zacharias for this brilliant example. Ravi Zacharias, Can Man Live Without God? (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1994), pg 182.

So I said: “If there is a God, then the death of a child is not a terrible thing is it? If there **isn’t** a God then death *is* a terrible thing. It’s only because there *is* a God that death *is* not a terrible thing. Death is simply a moving from a temporal 3 dimensional space into an eternal multidimensional space to be in the presence of the most beautiful Being in the world. It’s like me leaving a horrible suffering life to go live in the most luxurious of all palaces. Sure, you can be sad for the friends who are left behind, but you can’t complain about it being a terrible thing for the person who died.

In fact look at the starving kids in Africa, look at the poor raped refugee, she had a terrible life, was displaced from her home, lost her family, and finally was raped. If death is her final destiny, that would indeed be the worst thing ever. It’s precisely because there *is* a God who will right all wrongs, bring justice and takes us to a place of comfort, where there will be no pain, no sorrow, no tears, that we have hope. I’m not saying this proves that there is a God, but you certainly cannot use it to refute the existence of God.”

To my amazement he said: “I understand.”

We ended up being good friends.

So let’s summarize that:

1. You don’t have a Soul. You **ARE** a Soul. You **HAVE** a BODY. When your shell, i.e. the body dies, the soul doesn’t die. The soul lives forever.
2. Physical Death is merely a movement from one plane into another after casting off our body shell.
3. In God’s extra-dimensional existence, death is similar to moving from one continent to another after leaving our old broken down house behind.
4. That is: You don’t cease to exist. You just go somewhere else.
5. Death is the movement from the physical and temporal (short term) dimensions of Man into the SPIRITUAL and ETERNAL (long term) dimensions of God.
6. Death to you is merely a permanent move into God’s dimension.
7. Death is not a bad thing in God’s economy.

Note, we are not allowed to transport people against their will (i.e. kill them) but God is allowed to transport someone from one dimension into His presence.

Thus, the death of anybody is not an example of a BAD thing by God. So, if anyone ever asks how can God be good because he let someone die, remember to tell them that death maybe bad for you who was left behind, but it’s not bad for God. In fact, we can argue it’s a much better life for that person to be with God than to be on earth, especially if they were a Christ Follower.

Of course, they could argue about hell, but we’ll have to leave that discussion to another paper. If you are interested see www.NoBlindFaith.com and look up the sermon titled “Why Christ had to die and why God must Punish Sin”

OK but what about Suffering?

First, some background on the Nature of God.

Can God do anything? OK It’s actually a trick question. Because most people automatically say: Yes.

The correct answer is that God CAN’T do anything. Let me explain: God cannot SIN, God cannot stop being God. God cannot create another god (because that would make him not the God) and so on.

In addition, God cannot do what is actually impossible.

- a) He cannot make a Round Square in 2D space

- b) He cannot make $1+1 = 3$.
 - c) He cannot be illogical
 - d) He cannot be irrational
- Etc.

Some people ask: What about the miracles? But if you look at all the miracles, you'll notice that none of them were self contradictory or irrational. Each miracle would have been easily possible if someone had either advanced technology or the ability to manipulate matter and energy. None of the miracles require irrational occurrences. E.g. the water that became wine was really wine. God had changed it at a molecular level; it was not water and wine at the same time. Jesus was resurrected physically. He wasn't a dead man walking.

Why is this important? Well it is possible therefore, that God cannot create a world with free choices that would limit free agents from not sinning. That means if someone has a free will to sin he has to be able to use that free will or it's not freewill. Remember God can't be irrational.

In the same way, it is possible that God cannot create a habitable world like earth with wind (which we need) but no volcanoes or earthquakes. Why? Because then all the land would erode below the level of the sea.

Similarly, for Hurricanes and tornadoes, without these there would be no temperature equalization. Without floods, no nutrients in the soil would be replenished. Gravity pulls everything to the lowest level and you need something to bring those nutrients back up. And we need gravity or we'd all fling into space and out of orbit.

But you ask:

What about slow floods? Well it violates physical laws. And you certainly don't want to change the physical laws.

What about slow earthquakes? That also violates physical laws.

What about weak tornadoes? Well they would not work in sufficient time or have enough energy.

What about famines? Most of these are man made and man preventable.

What about diseases? Fortunately or unfortunately, most diseases are man preventable, for example we can prevent malaria with mosquito nets. But man made economic disasters ensure that people can't get enough nets.

So, at the end of the day man causes much of the real evil we see around us and the evil any one person does will affect others. E.g. your parents, Adam, Hitler.

Now think closely on this. The only way to stop a person from doing evil is to either destroy him (i.e. death) or restrain him.

But if God were to start eliminating or restraining all free agents who have sinful desires he would have to restrain or eliminate ME & YOU as well. Is this what we want? All of us living in a strait jacket world? Unable to choose freely the actions that we want? Or do we want a perpetual Nanny World where God acts like a parent to a 2 year old all our lives?

OK so Evil has to be allowed. But that doesn't make me feel good about it.

Evil seems to have a purpose

You can take some comfort because the Bible in numerous places show us how evil seems to serve a purpose. For example:

- 1) Romans 9 seems to indicate that without seeing the punishment of Evil in others we would never understand Mercy
- 2) Evil can be used to glorify God (Pharaoh)
- 3) What we intend for evil, God uses for good (Joseph and His brothers)
- 4) Seeing the consequences of evil can make men choose to turn to God for help or for redemption.

Now this does not mean that God is the author of evil, just that He uses it for good despite the fact that it is evil.

Again remember if God were to destroy all evil he'd have to destroy ALL of us.

Suffering and Pain can yield blessings.

We all know that pain can yield blessings. E.g Childbirth, Exercise, even trips to the dentist.

Pain is short term

Temporal Pain seems terrible, but it's only 80 years (our life time) vs. Eternal Pain which is forever. Put in eternal perspective, earthly pain or suffering isn't that terrible (yes I realize that is easy for me to say with my luxurious life). If temporal pain can lead some to avoid eternal pain, does not temporal pain have an eternal value?

Pain is necessary

Some people argued with me that God should remove all pain. This reminded me of an interview I read of a man suffering from Leprosy. Here's what he said:

1. Leprosy doesn't eat away at your skin. It just desensitizes it.
2. The problem is that I feel **no pain** in my extremities
3. So, by the time I realize that my fingers or legs are in danger it's too late and the damage is already done.
4. I need pain to know that I'm in danger.
5. You are lucky that you feel pain. It protects you. I am not protected.

Pain protects us from things that are worse.

But you may object, what about other sorts of warnings instead of pain. But these simply won't work. Let's look at a few:

1. What about using pleasant sensation as a warning? We would not pull back from it. E.g. Drinking or Drugs.
2. What about mental knowledge about danger? We would ignore it e.g. Speeding, drinking and driving.
3. What about a different sensation? We would ignore it just like the others.

So we can clearly see that pain has to hurt or it will not work as a warning. So pain is necessary.

What about removing all pain completely?

Then we are back to the nanny world. Where we have no real choices.

Let me explain. First, if you had the freewill to do bad things but you were never able to do bad things, then you never really had freewill. For instance, does a 4 year old have the free will to hit his 2

year old brother if mommy always stops him just before it happens? No. There are no consequences. As a supernatural nanny God could restrain us all constantly. We'd all be 4 year olds forever.

Second, the freewill to disobey God must allow that disobeying to have some consequences or it is meaningless to call it disobedience. That's like a mom saying: Don't run across the yard. The child does. Nothing happens. The mom says: Well that's because running across the yard has no consequences. Then it's meaningless to say that "you should not run across the yard." The mom is being capricious. The law has no meaning.

God only tells us not to do things because those things have bad consequences. He's not some capricious God who randomly thinks up things we should not do. All the laws in the Bible are laws to protect us from "bad" and "evil" consequences. If we do them and disobey God, evil, pain and suffering are the result. That's why he tells us not to disobey him.

So if God were to remove all pain and consequences completely that would mean he has removed all our freewill and our "disobedience" has no meaning and our freewill has no meaning.

Pain and suffering have a purpose

The Bible tells us some reasons why pain and suffering are useful.

- 1) To protect us
- 2) To refine us
- 3) To humble us
- 4) To perfect us
- 5) To teach us
- 6) To glorify God (e.g. the Blind Man in the Gospels)
- 7) To prove a point (the Disciples died claiming they'd **seen** Jesus rise from the dead and this is evidence that the resurrection was not a story they'd created to con people.)
- 8) To save us. Many people have turned to God due to their pain and suffering (yes it's true that many people have turned away from God for the same reason, but this is due to their choice and the sin nature of man). All this shows is that pain can be used this way.

But why do some people suffer more than others?

Some people suffer and others don't because of the seemingly random interaction of man. Yet, every action has a reaction and we bring a lot of this down on ourselves. Because we live in a community of humans, one person's bad actions will affect another.

Genetic Defects are caused by mutations due to increased radiation (the cloud cover and Noah). This is a consequence of the fall of man and a fallen world. One man's freewill affects everyone else.

But why doesn't God protect the innocent or act supernaturally to protect good people?

With Free Agents, it is not incumbent on God to intervene. If he did we'd be back to the Nanny World. Note in the end, God WILL intervene and we will all have to face up to our actions. So don't be too eager for justice now.

In Summary

- 1) The fact that you recognize evil and suffering is one evidence for God.
- 2) Natural disasters occur because the physical world requires catastrophes to renew itself.
- 3) Death is not a bad thing. Dead people are merely moved into the presence of God.
- 4) A world without pain is a world of more suffering or a world of no freewill.
- 5) Suffering has its uses and can be used to refine and protect and sometimes save us.

We've just scratched the surface on this and probably raised a number of new questions in your mind. So for more info see www.williamlanecraig.com or www.str.org and look up "evil and God."

In Conclusion:

We find purpose in work. We find pleasure in work. When we die God is not going to have us sit on a proverbial cloud playing the proverbial harp. How boring? No God is creating a New Earth. That's the place we will live for all eternity. But on this New Earth, God will have work for us to do. Work that gives us pleasure and joy, work that will take diligence and effort. Effort that will satisfy us. So it doesn't matter if you are sick, 90 years old or what. Keep learning, keep getting better at what you do. God will put your skill set to work in the New Earth. Whatever you learn now, will be used there. And you will gain great pleasure by doing it there for his Glory.

I was once chatting with a gal, I'd finished walking her through the evidence and all the apologetics and she'd returned to faith. She had just gotten out of the army after a number of years.

She asked me: "So why is there so much suffering in my life?"

Suddenly I had a thought. I asked her if she'd gone to Boot Camp. She laughed, "Yes every one goes to Boot Camp in the Army. You can't be in the Army unless you do."

"Was it easy" I asked.

She laughed again. "No it wasn't easy. It's not meant to be. "

We know that in Boot Camp you need to develop leadership, camaraderie, learn to trust you mates, learn to obey your commanders, and know how to respond instinctively. And you train in real tough conditions.

I asked her, "Did you get hurt?"

She looked at me disbelievingly. "Did I get hurt? Of course I got hurt."

"Did you get any scars" I asked? She nodded. "Lots, want to see them."

I said, "Would you give them up?"

"What" she asked "the scars?"

"Yes" I said, "would you give up the scars?"

She reacted defensively. "Never, they made me who I am. They are the reminder of what it took for me to get here. They are my branding."

I smiled. "This world" I said "maybe our Boot Camp. That suffering? Those are our scars. They are our branding."

She nodded. "They are, aren't they. I earned them."

Objections: Atheists also know the difference between good and bad. So how can you say there has to be a god to know the difference between good and bad?

Answer: Ah, but we never said that atheists don't **know** the difference between good and bad. In fact even though they don't believe the Bible is true, the Bible is self consistent in that it tells us that God has instilled a conscience in all humans. In other words, the Bible has explanatory power. All men know the difference, although they are able to overcome their conscience at times. Secondly there are and always has been whole lot more deists (believers in a creator) in the world than there are or have ever

been atheists, one would imagine that the atheists would realize that they would have been influenced by the deists.

And while the Bible has explanatory power, the question to the atheist is to ask them WHY they believe what is moral is in fact moral? And why wasn't Hitler moral? They can only point to preference for that.