

## **Sermon 17: The Problem of God and Suffering**

### **OUTLINE**

The problem stated  
The problem of good  
The problem solved

### **INTRODUCTION**

Today we begin the second half of our apologetics study where we handle objections to the faith. In the first part we laid out some of the most common ways to present the rationality of Christian belief. This was by no means an exhaustive survey. We presented the following list of arguments for God: the resurrection, the authority of Scripture, the unity of Scripture, the uniqueness of Scripture, the prophecies of Scripture, archeology and the Bible, and the manuscripts of the Bible. We looked at Jesus as an argument for God; the moral argument; the ontological argument; the cosmological argument; the teleological argument; the transcendental argument; and the arguments from desire and experience. If you have a grip on those arguments you have a good armoury for engaging in a conversation about God with our unbelieving generation. However, apologetics is not only about presenting the facts for God making a positive case; but also defending against objections, and that is what we are going to begin today. The objections are legion so we will have to limit ourselves to the most pertinent ones. The problem of evil; Christians are hypocrites; science and the Bible are incompatible; the Bible has errors; the problem of exclusivity are just a few of the most common ones. Today we begin with the most common, the problem of evil.

### **Stating the problem**

Many have stated the dilemma, but one of the earliest was the philosopher Epicurus. He was born in Greece in 341 BC. Epicurus believed that all things are made up of atoms. He denied the after life and any notion of the gods was one of distant and unconcerned deities. He tried to free men from fear and superstition. Here is how he lays out the problem of God and suffering: 'God either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or he is unable and unwilling; or he is neither willing nor able, or he is both willing and able.' This leads to what he thinks are the only four possibilities: 'if God is willing and unable, he is feeble.' 'If he is able but unwilling, he is wicked.' 'If he is neither willing nor able, he is not God.' 'If he is willing and able, then this leaves the problem of why evil still exists, why has he not removed it?' This dilemma has been developed and simplified to conclude that if evil exists then the good and powerful God of the Bible does not.

Here are the horns of the dilemma, if we say God is loving and good and does not will suffering, yet suffering exists, this must mean He is weak and not the God of the Bible who is portrayed as all powerful. If God is powerful enough to stop all evil, yet allows it, then He cannot be the good God the Bible portrays. It seems that either way you go you get run through by a horn of this dilemma. How do we solve this dilemma?

The various different worldviews offer different harmonisations for this problem. For the problem of evil is a problem for all worldviews to answer.

Zoroastrianism gives a dualistic answer teaching that there is a force for good-God, and an equal force for evil. The good comes from God but all the evil is attributable to another source. This view sees God as good but weak.

Plato had a good god, but he also accommodated an eternal and chaotic matter which was the source for all evil. This view errs on the side of seeing God as good but weak.

Aristotle had a more deistic concept of God where God is good but is not present to manage things and make them go right and so evil is present. This argument errs on the side of making God powerful but not good.

Eastern thought that sees evil as an illusion denies the problem, this would be the same with Christian science.

Naturalistic evolution also denies the problem in a way because the suffering in the natural and human realms is the by-product of the necessary steps of the evolutionary process in the survival of the fittest. They can only be descriptive and not prescriptive.

### **The problem of good**

Of special interest to us in NZ is the naturalistic and evolutionary view. We believe that all worldviews have to account for evil, including atheism and we believe they cannot. We see their arguments as being internally incoherent and incapable of giving a satisfocatory accounting for evil. Many make emotional arguments talking about the various evils that go on. There is often a lot of emotion involved in the discussion as people talk themselves into an anger against God and lay the blame for it all at His feet. I like Greg Bahnsen said, he thought it a good thing when atheists get angry and emotionally invested in the problem of evil, because they have greater problem with it than we do. 'The problem of evil ends up confirming the Christian outlook, rather than infirming it.' We have already addressed this issue in the moral argument where we demonstrated how the atheistic worldview is incapable of justifying their anger. They are haunted by the problem of good, or the problem of definitions. They have no basis upon which to call a thing good or evil. They do not have the necessary preconditions to substantiate their accusations.

Bahnsen examines the atheist's definitions of good and shows how all are bankrupt. There are 3 basic ways to define good and evil if you deny that God defines good and evil. Firstly, you can build your definition on public approval. Whatever the majority/society says is good or evil is good or evil. This makes morality a public construct. What is the problem with this view? Well firstly, we can never speak of societal evil because the majority is always right. It also ends up reducing ethics to statistics, to counting votes. And on top of that the definitions can change from day to day and in fact there is no reason for why they cannot swap places if the majority think it ok. So that what is good today can be evil tomorrow. Secondly, the atheist could claim that good and evil are determined by the individual, that is in my freedom and right to self-expression define my own reality and definitions of good and evil. This view fails the contradiction test because you can have two people with opposing views of good both being right. And secondly, if I create my own values then I can never be wrong, I am always right by chosen definition.

Thirdly, there is the view that bases its definitions on the outcome. Good and evil are defined by the greatest good for the greatest number. This view too runs into the problem of definitions. Which greatest good are we agreed is the desired outcome? This view also needs an omniscient view of the future to be able to determine whether a chosen good will in fact bring about the greatest benefit for all. This view assumes what it seeks to prove, it is circular.

This puts the atheist who objects to God on the basis of the problem of evil in a terrible position. The unbeliever who has no ability to define good and evil has to borrow and steal

this capital from the Christian worldview. Their moral anger is ungrounded and has no justification, moral outrage can only be vindicated in a worldview that admits to objective categories of good and evil. In any engagement on this issue we must not fear it but hold up the problem for the atheist in this issue. We will now show how Christianity is able to resolve this logical problem.

### **The problem solved**

This is how Bahnsen resolved the tension. He lays out the three premises and adds a fourth.

Firstly, God is good

Secondly, God is all powerful,

Thirdly, evil exists. This point leads the unbeliever to deny one of the foundational premises or that God exists at all. It should be noted that even if the atheists construction on this argument is true that argument does not irresistibly conclude that God does not exist, the best conclusion it could draw is that an all good and all powerful God could not exist.

But we need to add a fourth premise.

Fourthly, God has a morally sufficient reason for the evil that exists.

There are a number of issues we are going to have to assume and not pursue in order that we stay on the point. Firstly, we are assuming as the Bible teaches us that God is perfect, and is all good and all powerful. Secondly, that God has not revealed all of the reasons for why He has done things, there are many things that are unsubstantiated yet we do not doubt they have been perfectly done. Thirdly, and we won't have the time to prove these points but we are insisting on the biblical and traditional view of God's sovereignty whereby all things come to pass according to His will, yet God is not the author of evil but uses secondary means and ensures the free agency of the creatures in the permitting of evil.

We then go to the Bible and demonstrate from those instances where God has permitted evil, and the good that He has brought from it how it is reasonable to hold that God is all good and all powerful and is working all things together for good. We could look at the life of Joseph. Here was a young man sold into slavery and from the age of 17-30 was either a slave or a prisoner. He suffered injustice and evil, yet we see that God through this one servant suffering produced salvation for the nation of Egypt. The trials Joseph underwent uniquely fitted him to administer the stored bounty during times of famine. The other classic example is the murder of Christ, this is the greatest crime in human history yet it was done by the power and goodness of God to bring about the greatest good.

As Bahnsen says, the problem of evil is not a logical problem it is a psychological one. Logically we have a solution for the problem of evil. If God is good and all powerful should evil exist? We say that God can be good and powerful and evil exist because God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing evil to exist without being the author of evil. And we must rush to add evil will be brought to an end because God is all power and all good, just not yet. The intuition that an all good and powerful God should banish evil is a correct one, it is our timeline that is incorrect. And mercifully so. If God worked on our timeline human suffering would have ended with the punishment of Adam and Eve, but because of God's goodness and patience billions are saved from this catastrophic failure. And one day evil will come to an end with no recovery. This does not answer all questions but it answers the right questions that we can see there is no contradiction.

So now we have to submit our psychological reactions to the logic of scripture and believe that God does have good purposes in bad situations like with Joseph and Christ. We will

have to realise that though things feel like it would have felt for the disciples on Saturday after the crucifixion of Christ, there is a day coming when all wrongs will be righted. We will have to reason from the love of God clearly demonstrated on the cross when difficulties in our lives tempt us to conclude that God is not loving or good. We will have to learn to accept our finiteness and not demand to have all the answers to every curiosity. We have enough to worship and trust with and with this we can be content.

The cross is an incredible answer to the problem of evil because on the cross we see a God who is good, who is loving who seeks to save sinners, and is pure and holy, taking evil seriously and judging it, not in us but in Himself by taking the punishment for our crimes. He exerted His power to perform several impossibilities like God becoming man, the infinite one also being finite, the sinless one becoming sin, there are profound things here that God has done by His wisdom and power. And He has given us a guarantee of the perfect happily ever after by the resurrection of Christ. Jesus was raised into a body that cannot die or sin a body that you and I will receive one day, this is a firstfruit of a new creation where all evil will be punished and undone.

Christians can account for the problem of evil logically and come to grips with it psychologically, but the unbeliever cannot justify his moral outrage, his definition of evil, or offer a final solution and end to evil and suffering. The problem of evil is solved by God to the glory of God, the problem of evil is only a problem for those who reject God.