

# THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND SUFFERING

## INTRODUCTION: EVIL AND SUFFERING

As a human race we often have very different ideas about the world we live in, sometimes leading to full-scale disagreements. But one thing that many of us agree on is that there is too much evil and suffering in the world.

Whether we are talking about natural or moral evil, one thing is for certain; even with all our great leaps forward in science and medicine, evil and suffering have remained a constant in our world. But what are the different types of evil? Where causes all this suffering? And, how does the presence of evil and suffering in the world present a problem for believers?

## TWO TYPES OF EVIL

There are considered to be two types of evil in the world: natural and moral.

**NATURAL EVIL** refers to the suffering and pain which arises from, well... natural causes. Extreme weather, such as tornados, earthquakes, floods, droughts and famines would all be considered forms of natural evil. Diseases would also come into this category.



**MORAL EVIL** refers to the suffering and pain which is caused by human actions. This would include murder, war and abuse amongst many others.



It must be stated that these two are not mutually exclusive. Moral evil can be at the heart of natural evil, indirectly causing suffering through human actions. If we consider, for example, the effect of humans on the environment, along with the suffering this has brought on people, it is fair to ascribe at least some of the blame onto humans. Likewise, humans are the cause of their own diseases sometimes with their poor lifestyle choices. For example, lung cancer has been closely associated with smoking.

## THE PROBLEM

When you consider the amount of evil and suffering in the world, it is hardly surprising to hear that this is one of the main reasons people give for not believing in God.

The presence of evil and suffering in the world creates a difficult conundrum for believers. Indeed, the attempt to reconcile evil and suffering with an omnipotent and omni-benevolent God has been the theme of many philosophers and theologians down the centuries. The core of the problem is that:

1. Evil and suffering exist in the world.
2. Christians believe that God is omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (everywhere), omnipotent (all-powerful), and omni-benevolent (all-loving).

It has been said that these two things cannot possibly co-exist, raising serious questions:

- If God is omniscient then He must know about all the suffering, so why doesn't He help?
- If God is omnipresent then He must see all the suffering, so why doesn't He want to help people?
- If God is omnipotent then He must be powerful enough to stop the suffering, so why does He continue to let it happen?
- If God is omni-benevolent, He must love everyone enough to stop all the suffering, surely a loving God wouldn't want to see people suffering?

Despite God's nature, suffering still occurs. This inconsistency in God's nature alongside the evident existence of evil and suffering challenge the belief that God exists. After all, if God is not omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent and omnibenevolent, then how can He be said to be God? And how can we accept a God without these attributes.

## GOD UNDERSTANDS

A key Christian belief is that God understands the evil and suffering that humans experience. Why? *Because God has experienced it too.*

Christians believe that Jesus Christ is '*God incarnate*', that is, God in human-form. Jesus came to earth and experienced what it was to be human, including suffering in a most horrific way - being tortured and executed. His death was slow and agonising. God has seen and experienced suffering first-hand; He can empathise because He has been there too.

One of the overarching narratives in the Bible is that God created the world perfect, but because of the poor choices of humans, the world became corrupt and broken. The evil and suffering we experience is because of humanity rejecting God's perfect ways and choosing to follow our own selfish and proud pursuits. However, God does not leave humanity in that place of brokenness and suffering. In the final book of the Bible, Revelation, there is a description of God putting the world back together - making it perfect once more.

Although we may experience evil and suffering now, in the end, God is going to make the world right again with no more pain, no more suffering, no more hunger or poverty, no more illness, not even death. That is the promise that God gives to those who choose to seek and follow Him.

## TASKS

1. Explain and give examples of the two types of evil:
  - Natural
  - Moral
2. Explain how the natural and moral evil can be connected, with examples.
3. Define the following beliefs about God's nature:
  - Omnipotent
  - Omni-benevolent
  - Omniscient
  - Omnipresent
4. How does evil and suffering in the world present a problem to believers?