

## The Problem of Evil: Finding God in our Pain

by David Orton

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*The Patient Job*, Gerard Seghers, 1591–1651

*"I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You"*

Job 42:5.

### The Problem of Evil.

From ancient Greece (e.g. Epicurus, 342-270 BC), to the Enlightenment (e.g. David Hume, AD 1711-76), up to the present day, philosophers and theologians alike have been baffled by the "problem of evil". Many consider it as the Achilles heel of Christianity.

The indiscriminate impact of evil on humanity is our source of greatest existential threat. Natural evil through earthquakes, tsunamis, and all manner of disasters and accidents ravage and traumatise us on a mass scale. Add to this the normal vicissitudes of life and death, of bereavement and grief. And moral evil in murder, rape, and every form of oppression, perpetrated by individuals and even states, causes untold human suffering.

In the midst of this suffering, especially when it touches us deeply and personally, the human heart spontaneously cries out for answers: Why me? What have I done to deserve this? Where is God in the face of this evil? How could he let this happen?

—Thus, the "*problem* of evil".

Compounding this existential problem is a logical one. As posed, it goes like this: How can an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good God exist in the face of evil? Surely they are contradictory? For evil to exist, God must therefore either be not all-good, or all-powerful, or all-knowing. In an attempt to satisfy this seemingly logical conundrum one must either claim: 1) that God, hoping all would go well, was in fact caught by surprise by evil; 2) that he did not have sufficient power to stop it; or, 3) that he is evil.

In addition to this logical argument, others add an evidential argument. All we need to do is look around us to see the prevalence of evil. However, some evils occur for a good purpose. For example, a child may suffer the pain of a needle for inoculation against a disease, and so on. And so, a "greater good" defence may be made. But then it asks whether there are other evils that occur in the world without justification.

In response, a recent book entitled, *God and Inscrutable Evil*, explores this, arguing that evil is impenetrable, incapable of being investigated or understood. There are evils without a 'God-justifying' reason, inexplicable by even reference to God. They are ultimately mysterious.

This whole dilemma has given rise to the development of *theodicy* (*theos* - God; *dike* - justice), a term coined by the German philosopher, Leibniz (AD 1646-1716), in his work, *Théodicée (Essays of Theodicy on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil)*. A *theodicy* is a defence that seeks to justify the goodness of God in the face of evil. Evil can only be fully explained if we understand God's reasons for it.

So, is this approach (i.e. *theodicy*) the answer? *First*, it must be recognised at the outset that in the light of the whole biblical revelation, from creation to fall to redemption, we have a sufficient – although not full – download as to the reason for evil, and *second*, nonetheless, we must understand what we know about why we don't know the full story.

### From Theodicy to Theophany

Let me explain. Rather than *God and Inscrutable Evil* it should be *The Inscrutable God and Evil*. The solution is not found in understanding the nature of evil but rather the nature of God. Even the logical argument above must admit the possibility of

something in the depths of God that might provide the explanation to evil.

So therefore, we move from *theodicy* to *theophany*—from a justification of God to the disclosure of God. A theophany is the appearance of God to a human.

Moses was minding his own business, tending his father-in-law's flock in the wilderness, when the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a burning bush (Ex 3).

We may note several salient characteristics of this theophany: *first*, it is sovereignly initiated and thus gracious—there is nothing in Moses that has earned it, or caused it; *second*, it is naturally supernatural—God manifests in creation but is independent of it (i.e. the bush burns but is not consumed); *third*, God speaks and calls Moses by name—it is personal, rational, and propositional; *fourth*, God declares himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the theophany is in the flow of the redemptive-historical purpose of God, Moses is on holy ground; *fifth*, God is moved by the suffering of his people, declaring that he has "come down" to deliver them, and send Moses to Pharaoh for that purpose.

But Moses replies, "Who am I that I should go...?" And, "If I come to the people and say the God of your fathers has sent me and they ask, 'What is his *name*?' what shall I say to them?" In other words they might ask what is his nature, what is this God like; 'name', in the Hebrew idiom, signifying the character and nature of the person.

God's reply and self-revelation is not only the backbone to the whole of Scripture but also, and more significantly, man's relationship to him. He declares, "I AM WHO I AM. ...Say this to them, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (v. 14).

At another time God reveals his name to Moses as "The LORD":

And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

Exodus 33:19 (cited Rom 9:15)

In other words, God is sovereign and independent. He is necessary (i.e. he cannot *not* exist) and therefore not contingent (i.e. he is not just a possibility). He is the self-existent, self-revealing, eternal, and infinite God who rules the time-space world. There never was a time when he did not exist:

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Psalms 90:2

There is no limit to his being, to his perfections—they are beyond finite apprehension:

Can you find out the deep things of God?  
Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?  
It is higher than heaven—what can you do?  
Deeper than Sheol—what can you know?  
Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea.

Job 11:7–9

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Ecclesiastes 3:11

then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

Ecclesiastes 8:17

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable.

Psalms 145:3

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

Romans 11:33

### **Job and God's Inscrutability**

And so, the inscrutability of God brings us to Job.

As you would know, Job was swiftly uprooted from his positioned and prosperous status by a series of inexplicable misfortunes, losing his family, his wealth, and his health. Only to be crowned by his wife's counsel to "curse God and die"—clearly she had married him for the benefits! And moreover, adding insult to injury, doubly crowned by the counsel of his friends: Job, you have obviously sinned and God is judging you.

In a series of dialogues, each of his 'comforters' delivers their take on Job's calamitous situation followed by his response. In brief, they argue that those who do right are blessed and prospered but those that sin are judged and wasted. Therefore misfortune does not see the light of day without soil in which to grow. Clearly Job has sinned and is experiencing God's retributive justice. Job replies by arguing his innocence, expressing his utter perplexity and anguish in the depth of his suffering.

In summary, in the face of evil and suffering, the comforters prosecute a case to justify God (Job 8:1; 13:7,8; 34:12) and Job, in turn, to justify himself (Job 4:17; 9:2; 12:4 [*dikaios*]; 13:3,18; 15:14; 19:25; 23:4; 25:4; 31:6 [*dikaios*]; 32:1 [*dikaios*]; 35:2 [*dikaios*]).

In fact, as indicated, the Septuagint (Greek OT) utilises *dikaios* for 'just' and 'righteous' in the Book of Job. This is significant in that it is also used in the NT for justification and righteousness, specifically the Romans teaching of "justification by faith"—the declaration of God that we are right in his sight. I will return to this momentarily.

God roundly rebukes both Job and the comforters, but for what?—The comforters for their theodicy, for the justification of God's goodness and justice. But in doing so they abstracted justice and goodness from the God who *is* just and good—the eternal 'I AM', who called Moses personally by name. His attributes had been divorced from his person, from the personal and intimate knowledge of God. To the comforters the universe was a mechanistic moral one of cause and effect, one that was not personally governed by the God who *is* just and good. This is not to deny that we live in a moral universe with consequences, but it is to say that God always administers his favour and judgements – his providence – intimately and personally, never facelessly or robotically. The comforters did not know the Lord; they only knew *about* him. They were formulistic religionists, in fact, Pharisees, separating the word of God from the God of the word.

Job, in turn though, was rebuked for his *self*-justification. Although he knew the Lord and walked before him, there was something deeper that God had determined in his eternal counsels to work into his life. Talk about inscrutability: without even the backstory that we are privy to – of Satan's appearance in the court of heaven to accuse Job and of God's permission to touch everything but his life – Job, like Jesus, was to "learn obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8), to walk not by sight but by faith. Moreover, his experience of suffering brought to the surface the congenital defect of Adam's sin: to be as God by self-justifying—that is, to be one's own ultimate reference point.

This then is the nub of theophany. When Moses asked as to how he would justify God before the people the answer was

simply, 'I AM'. In other words, I am the God who justifies himself, who declares, I am my own ultimate reference point. There is therefore no proof for his existence, nor explanation of his ways, apart from his self-revelation. To justify God through a theodicy is therefore presumptuous. It is to effectively raise autonomous reason above the revelation of God, defacing his image by inevitably diminishing his omnipotence, omniscience, or omnibenevolence.

Similarly, to justify ones self before God, as did Job, is to stand in judgement of God and his ways. This was the reality of Job's controversy with God. And again, autonomous reason is raised above the revelation of God.

Consequently, both Job and his comforters stood in judgement over God and his self-revelation, autonomously determining good and evil, thus becoming as God (Gen 3:5).

#### **The Final Resolution**

So, what is the final resolution to the problem of evil?

For Job, it was to surrender to the sovereignty and wisdom of God, to yield to him in the realisation that God's self-revelation is sufficient, and that in his wisdom – for sufficient reasons known only to him – he withholds the backstory to evil. And to yield by faith in reliance upon him to justify us.

Further, it was found in the confidence that the Lord is God, not we ourselves—that he is in control and that our lives have been "predestined according to the purpose of him who works *all things* according to the counsel of his will" (Eph 1:11); that he has therefore ordained every detail of our lives – the bitter and the sweet – without being the author of sin, for in him is light and "no variation or shadow due to change" (Jas 1:13,17; 1 Jn 1:5).

Every crisis, defeat, loss, and grief is in the grip of the God who is wholly good and wholly powerful.

Then Job answered the Lord and said:

"I know that you can do all things,  
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.  
'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'  
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.  
'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.'  
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you;  
therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Job 42:1–6

In conclusion, the ultimate resolution is in the God who heard the cry of his people and has "come down". From his eternal glory with the Father he has stepped down into the agony of the human condition. In the man Christ Jesus all the human suffering of the ages accumulated, bearing not only their pain but also the penalty for their authoring of sin.

And so, Job, in a prophetic spirit, looked to the day when evil – and death itself – would be conquered in the death of death; when Jesus would stand in the Resurrection as the Redeemer of the world:

For I know that my Redeemer lives,  
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.  
And after my skin has been thus destroyed,  
yet in my flesh I shall see God,  
whom I shall see for myself,  
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.  
My heart faints within me!

Job 19:25–27

**Reference**

K. Scott Oliphint, *Know Why You Believe* (KNOW Series), Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017

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