

# 10. EVIL, SUFFERING, AND A GOD OF LOVE



**Focus:** If God is all-powerful, all-loving, and all-good, how do you explain and respond to the existence of so much suffering and evil in the world?

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## THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

*"Whatever the status of evil in the world, I know that the only God in whom I can believe will be a God found in the midst of evil rather than at a safe distance from it; suffering the evil rather than inflicting it."*

– Robert McAfee Brown

Ever ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" or "I wonder what she did to deserve that?" Perhaps you've heard someone claim that, "The poor are poor because they're lazy!" or "AIDS is a punishment from God" or "so-and-so is suffering because of...fill-in-the-blank." The problem is, no matter how many people repeat them, these statements are still false.

The truth is, life is hard. If we look at the way the world *really* is, we see that bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. That's just the way it is. And that's probably why struggling with the reality of evil and suffering in the world has been one of the foundational questions of existence from time immemorial.

If God is all-loving, all-good, and all-powerful, how can evil exist? For some, the reality of evil is the best argument *against* God's existence. "With all the evil in the world, how can you believe in God?" How can it be so? Libraries of books have been written on the problem of evil, the source of evil, and why the innocent suffer. Out of all this effort, one thing seems clear: God cannot be *all* of anything. As grating as this is to the spiritual sensibilities of many, perhaps it is time for a paradigm shift recognizing that which seems painfully obvious: rather than all-loving, all-good, and all-powerful, understanding the Divine simply as loving, good, and powerful will have to be enough.

The Greek word for evil, *kakos*, suggests a lack of something, of being not quite whole. Yet at times, evil seems to be anything but lacking. Even the most faithful have cried out in despair, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It's not evident when you're in the midst of the pain, struggle, and injustice how anything good could ever come of it. But time and again, the evidence suggests that often even the most horrific evil can be redeemed – even in some small way. Suffering is transformed into endurance, mourning into dancing, and darkness into light. But despite the glimmer of hope, the problem of evil endures. Each new disaster, abused spouse, or ruthless injustice brings with it the painful questions of God's absence in the midst of tragedy and why the innocent suffer.

## SUFFERING

In his book *Night*, Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, recounts life in the Auschwitz death camp.

*"One day when we came back from work, we saw three gallows rearing up in the assembly place, three black crows. Roll call. SS all around us, machine guns trained: the traditional ceremony. Three victims in chains – and one of them, the little servant, the sad-eyed angel. The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him. The three victims mounted together onto the chairs. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.*

*'Long live liberty!' cried the two adults. But the child was silent.*

*'Where is God? Where is He?' someone behind me asked.*

*At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over.*

*Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.*

*'Bare your heads!' yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous.*

*We were weeping. 'Cover your heads!'*

*Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive. . .*

*For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice within me answer him: 'Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging here on these gallows . . . .'*

Where is God at moments like this? Jeremiah discovered the answer in his own suffering, as he took on the suffering of his people, as he wept and cried out for them. Jesus discovered it in being faithful even to death. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel calls it "divine pathos." Derived from the Greek, "pathos" means "suffering." Combined with the prefix "sym" (meaning "with") we have the notion of *sympathy*, "to suffer with." The God of the Jews is understood to have suffered their ordeals *with* them, giving them strength and hope to endure. Alfred North Whitehead calls God the "fellow sufferer who understands."

The Psalmist sings:

*"Where can I go from your spirit?*

*Or where can I flee from your presence?*

*If I ascend to heaven, you are there;*

*if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." (139:7,8, NRSV).*

In the days of the Psalmist the Jews had no understanding of hell. However, they did speak of a place of the dead called Sheol. Yet the Psalm proclaims that even there one cannot escape God. Such spiritual convictions have bolstered the Jewish people through thousands of years of collective and individual suffering. Despite hatred, oppression, pogroms, and holocaust, they have endured.

While the concepts of pain and suffering are often lumped together, it's helpful to be aware of their distinctiveness: pain is something we can't escape and suffering is what we do about the pain. Suffering is the work we do with the pain. We don't know what the Apostle Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was. But when Paul prays to have this "thorn" removed, the divine response is, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Paul then was able to boast in his weaknesses: "I am content," he writes, "with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." Individually or collectively, the Divine experiences pain, suffers it, and out of the wreckage helps people rebuild their lives – even though things may never be the same as they once were.

## WHERE IS GOD WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN?

Rabbi Harold Kushner's son Aaron was born with progeria, a rare and incurable disease that causes rapid aging. When Aaron was three, the doctors explained to the Kushners that Aaron would never grow much beyond three feet in height, would have no hair on his head or body, would look like a little old man while he was still a child, and would die in his early teens. At the age of 14 Aaron died – of old age.

Aaron's illness and death forced Kushner to reconsider his view of God as an all-powerful force who controls everything with a master plan that humans simply don't understand. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* was Kushner's response, emerging with what was hailed as a new understanding of God but what was really ancient wisdom. Often misquoted as "*Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*" Kushner says he doesn't know why any more than the rest of us. Sometimes people make bad decisions. "Laws of nature and simple bad luck could also be the culprits," he says. There aren't always reasons why bad things happen.

There's no question that our choices have consequences – sometimes severe consequences. But are we to understand all consequences as God's punishment? And what are we to make of evil when clearly no one is to blame?

As Jesus and the disciples pass by the Pool of Siloam, they come upon a blind man. The disciples ask the standard question of conventional wisdom, "Who sinned, that this man was born blind?" Jesus answers that it was no one's fault. His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parents' sins. The parents were no more responsible

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for their son's blindness than the Kushners were for Aaron's condition. Bad things happen – often without explanation.

In Luke 13, two calamities had just occurred that were the talk of Jerusalem. The Roman governor Pilate had slaughtered a group of Galileans, and a tower near the same Pool of Siloam had collapsed, killing eighteen people. One, an atrocity, an act of political violence. The other, a tragedy, a whim of fate (what insurance companies call an "act of God"). Were those killed at the hands of Pilate worse sinners than all other Galileans? Were those who perished in the tower catastrophe worse sinners than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? Jesus essentially says, "Look, they were in the wrong place at the wrong time." Bad things happen – often without explanation.

In December 1982, the 21-year-old son of William Sloan Coffin, then pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, drove off a bridge into Boston harbor and drowned. Trying to comfort him, a woman said to Coffin, "I just don't understand God's will." Angry, Coffin shouted back at her, "I'll say you don't understand God's will, lady. Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper, that Alex was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that Alex had probably had too much to drink? Do you think it is God's will there are no street lights along that stretch of road, no guard rail separating the road and Boston Harbor?"

Coffin later commented, "For some reason I can't get it through people's heads that God doesn't run around the world pulling trigger fingers, clenching knives, turning steering wheels. God is dead set against all kinds of unnatural deaths. This is not to say there are no unnatural deaths. There are. But the one thing that should never be said about any violent death like Alex's death is that it is the will of God. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex died – but that when the waves closed in over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all hearts to break."

As the waves receded from 2004's South Asian tsunami, leaving hundreds of thousands of dead, religious leaders of all faiths struggled to speak to the "why" of such incomprehensible disaster. American television evangelists voiced repugnant and arrogant opinions from, "God was punishing those Muslims and Hindus for the way they treat Christians in their countries" to "God was using the tsunami to warn the rest of us to mend our ways or else." Likewise, 2005's Hurricane Katrina inspired Billy Graham's son, Franklin, to claim that God targeted New Orleans because of its being a "wicked city" full of sexual perversion and satanic worship.

These shockingly offensive attempts to offer superficial answers in light of catastrophes of such magnitude made it clear to many that in order not to be declared "dead," any post-tsunami, post-Katrina, post-any natural disaster God was going to need to be understood differently.

Rev. Glynn Cardy of New Zealand wrote that to suggest that God intentionally held

back, “allowing the (tsunami) in order to teach a moral lesson, makes God a monster.” (www.stmatthews.org.nz) He’s not the only one to suggest that the time has come and is long-since past to change metaphors. In the aftermath of the tsunami, the idea that God is “in control” is so troublesome as to be utterly useless. But to think of the Divine as that power called love, the one who “suffers with” and comforts the afflicted regardless of the outcome, has spiritual integrity born of real life experience.

In another Kushner book, *The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm*, the rabbi notes that “in times of trouble, God does not explain, God comforts.” Through grace, suffering makes compassion possible, and what is more central to the life of faith than striving to be more compassionate?

Since 9/11, Americans have joined the rest of the world in trying to deal with the pain of confronting random evil on a massive scale. Within days of the attacks, some church leaders and websites were celebrating the story of Stanley Praitnath, the man who was allegedly saved because his Bible was sitting on the desk under which he sought shelter. “See? God will protect you!” was the message. However, his story may have been manipulated by naïve (or unscrupulous?) religious people. What he really thought was:

*“So here I am, running, screaming, like everybody else. And here I am, got delivered, and I'm angry. Angry because all of these good people who were there, the firefighters, the cops, the EMS workers, all of these good people who were left in this building..., that couldn't come down from the 81st or 82nd floor because of all of this debris. They perished. So I'm angry.”*

(Frontline: Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero: PBS transcript – [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/faith/questions/911.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/faith/questions/911.html))

Where is God amidst suffering and death – especially the death of the virtuous? In Psalm 23, the psalmist suggests that God is our strength and our comfort. “It doesn’t say I will fear no evil because evil only happens to bad people,” Kushner relates. “It says there is a lot of evil out there, but I can handle it because God is [with me].”

There are those who continue to blame people with AIDS for their own predicament. “It’s their own fault. They shouldn’t have messed around or they shouldn’t have shared a needle.” Before actor Anthony Perkins died of AIDS-related complications, he said, “I believe AIDS was sent to teach people how to love and understand and have compassion for each other.” “I know their sufferings,” God declares in Exodus 3:7. In all their affliction, God was afflicted.

So, where is God? There, as an adolescent child dies of old age. There, broken-hearted, as a child of yours drowns. There, as the victims of terrorism perish in violent deaths. There, as hundreds of thousands are overwhelmed by the waves of a tsunami. There, as the messenger dies on a cross.

There's a lot of pain and suffering in the world – and the Divine is there. Our call as compassionate people of faith is to work toward overcoming evil and injustice in whatever forms they manifest themselves and to be there as witnesses to the presence of God. As we do all we can to facilitate healing and reconciliation, offering comfort in a hurting world, we become the embodiment of an answer to the question, "Where is God when bad things happen?"

*"The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it."*

– Albert Einstein

## SATAN GETS A BUM RAP

Martin Luther mocked him, Milton immortalized him in *Paradise Lost*, and Dana Carvey's "Church Lady" taunted him on Saturday Night Live. To Saint Paul, he was "the god of this world," who, along with his helpers, figure in the New Testament nearly twice as often as the Holy Spirit. He is the Devil, Beelzebub, Mephistopheles, Satan – next to Jesus the most familiar figure in Christian lore (and despite efforts at using inclusive language for God, the effort to refer to the embodiment of evil as anything other than male has been sorely lacking).

Although Christianity has made "Satan" the proper name for the archenemy of God and the personification of evil, the character only appears in all of Hebrew scripture a few times in just four books. In fact, the Hebrew word "satan" is not a pronoun but appears with the definite article "ha." The phrase "ha satan" (like the earth creature "ha adam" in Genesis 2) can be more faithfully translated into English as "the adversary" and can be used to refer to anyone playing an opposing role. When Jesus calls Peter, "Satan," he's not suggesting that Peter is possessed by Satan or influenced by Satan, but calling Peter what he is – his adversary.

In what is probably the oldest book in the Bible, Job characterizes "ha satan" as a legitimate member of God's council. After the opening two chapters, "ha satan" is never mentioned again. Although the snake in the garden is often referred to as Satan, it's just theological "spin." The snake is simply a clever creature that generations of theologians have associated with the devil. Likewise, nowhere in the Bible is Satan cast down into the fiery pit for rising up against God. The "lucifer" or "day star" that is cast down (i.e., put out of power) in Isaiah is the ruler of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. The angels that disobey are not sent to "hell" but to Sheol, a place understood in Hebrew as simply "nothingness." Satan's supposed dominion over a place called hell is not Biblical, but Greek mythology and medieval fantasy woven together by Dante, Milton, and others.

The idea of demons and Satan entering into human beings to incite evil deeds was developed by New Testament authors. They even cast the radical monotheist Jesus as a dualist, operating as though there were a secondary "evil" god in opposition to the

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“good” God. Luke’s Jesus is said to have claimed seeing Satan descend like a lightning bolt (Luke 10:18). But when read in context, it is clear that Jesus is simply referring metaphorically to the work the disciples are doing casting out demons. This Satanification of the New Testament reached its zenith when the author of Revelation merged ancient dragon and beast myths with the Christian story in order to achieve a memorable finale to his story.

Satan is one of the most misunderstood concepts in our culture. The Enlightenment made it possible to begin explaining evil in ways that didn’t include a mythological being – but the imagery and concept is so primal and powerful, that the idea of battling a literal Satan is still one of the primary motivating factors for many Christians today.

Evil is. But it has no unique identity shaping and defining it, it is only the embodiment of choices for the not-good over the good. The Devil, Satan, or demons are not objects, things, or persons. They are *conditions* of hatred, spirits of injustice, attitudes of jealousy, structures of destruction. Little demons with pitchfork tails running around are not necessary to explain evil. The power of the demonic is the power of us – the power to reject God and to thwart the emergence of life, love, and what is possible.

*“If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the dividing line between good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being...”*

– Alexander Solzhenitsyn

The "Lord's Prayer" specifically asks God to "deliver us from evil," but what that deliverance looks like depends on us. Not just an individualistic deliverance from pious notions of holiness, but an awareness of our complicity with the complex systems of the world and the evil and suffering they cause as a matter of course. In the midst of the pain and suffering in the world, Christians remember the pain inflicted on a man of compassion, truth, and integrity. In his suffering we see our call as people of faith to work toward having the strength to resist evil and injustice in whatever forms they manifest themselves. Wherever and whenever we can, our call is to do all we can to help alleviate suffering and pain and to not stand idly by. And there, in the midst of real life, we may not find the “why,” but instead see “what to do next” while juggling evil and suffering with a God of love.

*"We are called to fight evil, but we are also called to know how to fight it. Evil is not effectively resisted with hatred and with guns. Evil cannot be defeated with evil, negation with negation, terror with terror, missile with missile. The process of negation must be reversed. Only affirmation can overcome negation; evil can be integrated only by good; hatred can be laid to rest only by love. The only response to evil that has ever worked is the response of Jesus, and that is to*

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*lead a life of love. That means what it has always meant: visiting the sick, giving to the poor, helping those who need help."*

– Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Prince of Darkness*

*"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."* – Paul, *Romans 12:21*

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## DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*(note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)*

### **DVD Chapter 2:**

Describe the characteristics of the “conventional wisdom” or the “domestication of reality” represented in Deuteronomy and Proverbs.

Describe the characteristics of the voice of protest found in the book of Job and Ecclesiastes.

What can you say about the “wildness and the splendor and utter magnificence of undomesticated reality?”

Varghese says for one to claim the “luck of the world – wealth, prosperity, comfort, power” as a sign of God’s love is profoundly heretical. Explain.

What is the “price of good” that Cobb describes?

**DVD Chapter 3:**

According to Brueggemann, what is the “metaphorical benefit” of 9/11?

In what ways might our organizations – the principalities and powers – be compromised by a tendency to expediency?

“Han” can be relieved through a variety of practices. Explain.

Reflect on Brueggemann’s statement: “Voiced pain becomes a public fact that requires the re-arrangement of social power.”

Parker says that God is “the power of life, the power of creativity, the power of the Spirit in community, the power of justice...”. To what end?

**SPIRITPRACTICE:**

“Journaling” with G. Lynn Nelson

With inspiring stories of spiritual growth and personal transformation through journaling, Dr. Nelson shows how writing can heal the past, claim the present and chart the future in *Writing and Being: Embracing Your Life through Creative Journaling* G. Lynn Nelson (2004: Inner Ocean Publishing, Inc.). ISBN# 1880913615.

**Questions for Personal Reflection:**

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material in this session?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

**Consider the following questions as a group:**

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

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**PRACTICAL APPLICATION:**

Reclaim the ancient roots celebrating All Hallow's Eve in your faith community. Many churches have sworn off Halloween as the "Devil's holiday" and made it a bully pulpit from which to condemn a manufactured Satanism and the occult. People are whipped into a frenzy of fear that has them seeing demons behind every bush. Raising well-balanced, whole, thinking children is made virtually impossible when they're taught that "the devil is everywhere and his demons are waiting to pounce on you and ruin your life at any moment!" It creates unnecessary anxiety and stress and gives credence to something that isn't there. While often effective in the short-term, using fear to manipulate and "scare" people into believing in God seldom makes for a healthy long-term relationship with the Divine.

**Be sure to follow up on this session's theme with Session 10's *Living it Out:* "Haiku Trilogy," distributed by your facilitator.**