

Introduction

The reality of suffering is used as an argument against the existence of God, or against growing deeper in one's faith. We don't have to look far to find the brokenness in our own lives, the lives of others, and the world. Such an awareness can lead to doubts about God. This is known as the "problem of evil" or "problem of pain." It maintains,

1. If God were all-good, He would desire to end suffering.
2. If He were all-powerful, He would also be able to end it.
3. Therefore, because there is suffering, God must either be not good, not powerful, or possibly even not exist.

Even for believers, the reality of suffering can make faith difficult. We might think, "Why pray, when it doesn't seem to help my, or another's, suffering?" Or, "How can I follow this teaching of the Church when the obvious outcome will be suffering? Would God really want that?" The problem of evil and suffering is something that each person must grapple with. It's perhaps the single most difficult objection to Christianity, and so the Church always seeks to respond with clarity.

What is Suffering?

To begin the discussion of how God can exist despite the presence of human suffering, we must first ask, "What is suffering?" Suffering begins, first and foremost with physical suffering: that is, pain (physical injury, hunger, thirst, sickness). These are physical experiences biologically built into us to teach us to avoid that which could harm us; however, they must also sometimes be endured by the innocent in unjust situations.

Yet, suffering also runs deeper than that. Beyond physical pain, there is a type of "moral suffering," a suffering of the heart, as it deals with guilt, witnesses the suffering of others it cares about, or faces decisions that could lead to the suffering of itself or others. Beyond each of these, there also exists a type of existential suffering, that is, the question, "Why?" Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* (Salvific Suffering), writes:

"It is obvious that pain, especially physical pain, is widespread in the animal world, but only the suffering human being knows that he is suffering and wonders why; and he suffers in a human way, asking himself deeper way if he does not find a satisfactory answer. This is a *difficult question*, just as is a question closely akin to it, the question of evil. Why does God exist? Why is there evil in the world?" (par. 9)

From this, we see that suffering can be defined as an encounter with evil, that is, something disordered from the good, that is not as it should be. The problem of suffering, then, is the same question as, "Why is there evil in the world?"

The Problem of Evil

It is clear that evil exists in the world — from our own suffering and the suffering of others, to the abuse of power by those in authority, to the selfishness of individuals as they look towards themselves, over against those in greater need, to the violence and discord between individuals and nations. This can lead to the question, "Why did God create evil, if He is all good?" The immediate answer is that God did *not* create evil, He merely *permits* it as a consequence of the free will He gave to His creation.

In other words, God in His love for humanity does not bind us in slavery to do His good will, but rather gives us the free will to be able to choose. We either do His work, or follow our own selfishness. The result is that evil is created by man, not God. It is the individual who chooses to engage in activities such as, drug abuse, and various crimes, or a society that chooses to let its own go uneducated, untrained, or untrained. It is nations that choose to enter into war with each other. This is not God's will for us, but it is our will for ourselves.

Yet this answer is not enough for us. We think that perhaps God did not create evil and suffering, but nevertheless He could act to *stop* it. Not to stop the evil, but good people must suffer because of those who do. We think, "Why does God not protect them? Why does God not defend me? I choose the good; I work to end evil and suffering. But it's beyond my capability. It is too big for me alone. I need help. If God exists, why does He not do something to help us end this?"

The answer is that God *will* do something. In addition to continually calling us to the good, to follow Him and combat evil, and teaching us all the ways to do this, He ultimately sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to become man, live among us, die on the cross, and rise again. "But evil is still in the world; I still suffer. What good was sending Christ into the world?" To answer this, we must first explore the mystery that good can come from suffering.

The Value of Suffering

Initially, suffering seems to be something altogether bad, something that should be done away with. At a deeper glance, however, we can see that this is not so.

Indeed, suffering can be a good thing when matched with an adequate sense of meaning. We see this first and foremost in the case of two young lovers. The proverbial chivalrous knight proclaims the trials and triumphs he would endure to show his beloved his feelings for her, to win her heart. For the lover, the miles traveled to visit her, the sweat poured out while serving her, the loneliness without her, the fear of rejection, all become transformed into badges of triumph when he wins her hand.

What would on its own be meaningless suffering, when serving the purpose of communicating his heart, becomes a joyful and life-giving action. Even in relationship, the lovers long to find ways to express their love for each other, which can only be most effectively communicated through freely chosen sacrifice and suffering.

Taking this principle a step further, we see it present in daily life. A student does not look to pride upon a college degree, as a demonstration of an ability to triumph over a competition of difficult tasks, but to continue to grow. Yet, one that would a degree be if it were easy? If graduating from college were simple, pleasant, and required no sacrifice or suffering, would it not lose its meaning? If everyone could do it effortlessly, would it not become an entertaining pastime? As John F. Kennedy said, "[We do these things] not because they are easy, but because they are hard" (Rice University, Houston, TX, September 12, 1962). In its ability to experience and overcome difficulty, humanity finds its dignity and develops its strength of character.

Reflecting on this, we can see that some animals do not battle with suffering as humans do. Consider the life of a goat. Most goats do not have a difficult life, rather, they spend their days sleeping, eating, and continuing their species. As we reflect upon the problem of suffering, sometimes we inadvertently wish to become something less than human. Yet the human person is more than a goat. We have a dignity beyond mere survival. God's will for us is not to be numbed to and unaffected by the problems of evil, as some sterile android, but to rise to such a great dignity that these things can no longer affect us, for we have conquered them by giving them meaning.

To the question of suffering, therefore, we answer that God has done something, something profoundly powerful, not by taking away our free will or numbing us to reality, but preserving our dignity by giving suffering great meaning.

This, of course, raises the question, "How does Jesus Christ give suffering meaning?"

