

Overall Class Objective: To gain biblical perspective on the problem of evil for the purpose of strengthening personal faith and equipping believers to answer concerns of unbelievers.

Class Overview*

1. Clarify the categorization of the nature of evil
2. Understand the issues and scope of the problem of evil
3. Identify the biblical constraints regarding the problem of evil
4. Explore the two primary approaches to the problem of evil
5. Consider the various theories of theodicy
6. Describe the concept of inscrutability as applied to the problem of evil
7. Reflect on the biblical example of the greater good theodicy
8. Explain the licensing and limiting controls of greater good theodicy in the Bible
9. Delineate what the work of Christ teaches about the problem of evil
10. Note how eschatological events of the Bible give perspective to the problem of evil

*Acknowledgement: The general structure of this class is adapted from an essay by Greg Welty entitled, The Problem of Evil. This class is based on the belief that the Bible is true and accurate in what it says about God and the world.

Notes

- I. How should we categorize evil?
 - A. "Natural" evil
 1. Natural evil is a result of the effects of nature, directly or indirectly, upon people.
 - a) Examples of this aspect of evil are seen in disease, floods, drought, famine, hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis.
 - b) Related to this category could be human error or carelessness. These would involve actions through which suffering was directly or indirectly inflicted upon others without malicious intent.
 - B. Moral evil
 1. Moral evil pertains to the evil acts of human beings.
 2. Examples of moral evil would include assault, murder, rape, theft, injustice and dishonesty.
- II. What is the problem of evil?
 - A. The "problem of evil" is an argument against the existence of God based on these assumptions:
 1. A perfectly powerful being **can** prevent any evil.
 2. A perfectly good being **will** prevent evil as far as he can.
 3. God is perfectly powerful and good.
 4. Thus, if a perfectly powerful God exists, there will be no evil.
 5. There is evil.
 6. Therefore, God does not exist.

B. If it is maintained that God and evil co-exist, it is asserted that either God cannot be all-powerful (because is unable to prevent evil) or that he cannot be fully good (because he is unwilling to prevent evil) .

1. The problem of evil is further exacerbated by the belief that God is all-knowing (omniscient) since he would be aware of the presence of all evil and know beforehand all the evil effects of anything he created or allowed.

C. The problem of evil is generally viewed from two different perspectives, logical and evidential.

1. The **logical** problem of evil concludes that it is logically impossible for a omnipotent and benevolent God evil to coexist with evil.

2. The **evidential** problem of evil concludes that the scope and quantity of evil in the world makes the existence of a good and powerful God highly improbable.

D. The problem of evil is a problem for everyone not just those who believe the Bible.

1. It is common for unbelievers to refer to evil as tragic or horrible or some similar term.

2. However, if there is no God, one should expect such a world without seeing it as a problem.

3. C. S. Lewis well describes this difficulty: “My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.”

4. If God exists, we must explain why evil is present. But if God does not exist, the skeptic must explain why he finds evil objectionable.

III. What constraints does the Bible put on the problem of evil as described in the six points above?

A. We affirm premise #5. The Bible acknowledges, describes and records the presence of evil.

B. We affirm premise #1. The Bible presents God as omnipotent (all-powerful) and therefore could prevent evil.

C. We affirm premise #3. According to the Bible, God is perfect in power and goodness.

D. We cannot affirm premise #2. The Bible does not assert that God must prevent all evil. God may have justified reasons for using evil and such reasons do not compromise his goodness.

IV. What are the two primary approaches to addressing the problem of evil?

A. One approach is called theodicy (derived from the word for God and the word for justice). The idea of theodicy is to justify the character of God in view of the presence of evil.

1. Theodicy seeks to demonstrate that God has good reasons for permitting evil.

2. This approach sees premise #2 (that a good God would prevent evil) as false asserting that a good God will **not** always or necessarily prevent evil.

B. A second approach is called inscrutability.

1. Inscrutable is defined as “incapable of being investigated, analyzed, or scrutinized; impenetrable.”

2. This approach argues that premise #2 is unproven because no one can know enough to conclude that God does not have good reasons for permitting evil.

3. Due to the complexities of divine providence and the limitations of finite humanity it is to be expected that we will not be able to discover the purposes of God in allowing evil in his plan.

V. In what ways has theodicy been formatted?

A. Two approaches to theodicy are based on speculative logic and are not directly endorsed in Scripture.

1. Free will theodicy suggests that moral evil exists because it is a necessary correlate of freewill. In other words, to be truly free moral agents, we must have the option of making evil choices.

a) From this argument God is seen to be justified in permitting evil because it is necessary to provide the value of free will.

b) It could be noted that though God is a free moral agent, he does not have this option nor will the inhabitants of the new earth.

2. Natural law theodicy asserts that the laws of nature are necessary to a stable environment but allow for the possibility of natural disaster which, in turn, can lead to loss of life, livelihood and property.

a) That God allows natural evils to occur is justified because a world without natural laws would be a worse world. In other words, God's purpose in allowing natural evil is motivated by a greater good.

B. Four other proposed approaches to theodicy each have some biblical support.

1. The punishment theodicy argues that suffering is a result of God's punishment of evildoers.

a) Gen. 3:14-19; Rom. 1:24-32; 5:12; 6:23; 8:20-21; Isa. 29:5, 6; Ezek. 38:19 Rev. 6:1,2; 11:13; 16:18

2. The soul-building theodicy asserts that suffering leads us from self-centeredness to other-centeredness.

a) Heb. 12:5-11; Rom. 5:3-5; 2Cor. 4:17; Jas. 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:6, 7 cf. Prov. 10:13; 13:24; 22:15

3. The pain-as-God's megaphone theodicy says that pain is used by God to get the attention of unbelievers in a non-coercive ways in hopes of bringing about repentance.

a) Luke 13:1-5

4. The higher-order-of-good theodicy claims that some virtues cannot exist without the evils to which they are a response.

a) There is no courage without danger, no sympathy without pain, no forgiveness without sin, no atonement without suffering, no compassion without need, no patience without adversity.

b) Eph. 1:3-10; 1 Pet. 1:18-20

C. These six theodices all fall under the umbrella of what might be called the “greater good theodicy” (GGT).

1. A “greater good theodicy” argues that pain and suffering in the world play a necessary role in bringing about greater good that could not otherwise be realized.

VI. Arguments for a “greater good theodicy”

A. A suggested argument for a “greater good theodicy” can be formulated on three themes by combining both theodicy (reasons God may have for using evil) and inscrutability (limits on our ability to perceive his reasons).

1. God aims at great good (either for himself, or mankind, or both)
2. God often intends this great good to come about by way of evil means.
3. God sometimes leaves people unaware regarding the good he is seeking or how the good depends upon the use of evil.

B. Three biblical case studies.

1. The case of **Job**
 - a) God aims at great good.
 - b) God often intends this great good to come about by way of various evils.
 - c) God leaves created persons in unaware regarding the good he is seeking.
2. The case of **Joseph**
 - a) God aims at great good.
 - b) God often intends this great good to come about by way of various evils.
 - c) God leaves created persons in unaware regarding the good he is seeking.
3. The case of **Jesus**
 - a) God aims at great good.
 - b) God often intends this great good to come about by way of various evils.
 - c) God leaves created persons in unaware regarding the good he is seeking.
- 4.

Our argument here is that Scripture combines the ways of theodicy and inscrutability. The biblical accounts of Job, Joseph, and Jesus reveal the goodness of God in the midst of evil, weaving together these three themes:

Thus, the Bible seems to strongly suggest that the GGT (God's aiming at great goods by way of various evils) is in fact his modus operandi in providence, his "way of working." But this GGT is tempered by a good dose of divine inscrutability.

I. The Case of Job

In the case of Job God aims at a great good: his own vindication — in particular, the vindication of his worthiness to be served for who he is rather than for the earthly goods he supplies (Job 1:11 • 2:5). God intends the great good of the vindication of his own name to come to pass by way of various evils. These are a combination of moral evil and natural evil (Job 1:15, 16, 17, 19, 21-22; 2:7, 10; 42:11). God also leaves Job in the dark about what God is doing, for Job has no access to the story's prologue in chapter 1. And when God speaks to him "out of the whirlwind" he never reveals to Job why he suffered. Instead, Job's ignorance of the whole spectrum of created reality is exposed (Job 38:4-39:30; 40:6-41:34), and Job confesses his ignorance of both creation and providence (Job 40:3-5 • 42:1-6).

II. The Case of Joseph

In the case of Joseph we find the same. God aims at great goods: saving the broader Mediterranean world from a famine, preserving his people amid such danger, and (ultimately) bringing a Redeemer into the world descended from such Israelites (Matt 1:1-17 • Luke 3:23-38). God intends the great good of the preservation of his people from famine to come to pass by way of various evils (Gen 45:5 7 • Psa 105:16-17), including Joseph's betrayal, being sold into slavery, and suffering unjust accusation and imprisonment (Gen 37 39). Joseph sees these evils as the means of God's sovereign providence (Gen 50:20). But God leaves Joseph's brothers, the Midianite traders, Potiphar's wife, and the cupbearer in the dark. None of these people knew the role their blameworthy actions would play in preserving God's people in a time of danger. They had no clue which goods depended on which evils, or that the evils would even work toward any goods at all.

III. The Case of Jesus

And in the case of Jesus we see the same again. God aims at great goods: the redemption of his people by the atonement of Christ and the glorification of God in the display of his justice, love, grace, mercy, wisdom, and power. God intends the great good of atonement to come to pass by way of various evils: Jewish plots (Matt 26:3-4 14-15), Satan's promptings (John 13:21-30), Judas's betrayal (Matt 26:47-56 • 27:3-10 • Luke 22:22), Roman injustice (Matt 26:57-68), Pilate's cowardice (Matt 27:15—26), and the soldiers' brutality (Matt 27:27-44). But God leaves various created agents (human and demonic) in the dark, for it is clear that the Jewish leaders, Satan, Judas, Pilate, and the soldiers are all ignorant of the role they play in fulfilling the divinely prophesied redemptive purpose by the cross of Christ (Acts 2:23 3:18 4:25-29 • John 13:18 17:12 19:23-24).

Licensing and Limiting the GGT

In each narrative, the first two themes highlight the way of theodicy (God aiming at great goods by way of evils), while the third theme highlights the way of inscrutability (left to ourselves, we cannot discern what God's reasons are for any case of evil). By way of the first two themes Scripture repeatedly encourages the view that God has a justifying reason for permitting the evils of the world. That is what's right with the way of theodicy. But Scripture, by way of the third theme, repeatedly discourages the view that we can ever know what that reason is in any particular case of evil. That is what's right with the way of inscrutability. In contemporary philosophy, these are usually presented as two different ways to solve the problem of evil (theodicy and inscrutability). However, the Bible seems to combine these two ways when it speaks of God's relation to the evils in the world. That is, it licenses the greater good theodicy as an overall perspective on evil, but wisely limits that perspective in a way that is instructive for both Christians and non-Christians.

Licensing the GGT: God's Sovereignty over All Evil

IV. God's Sovereignty over Natural Evil

It is one thing to acknowledge God's sovereign and purposeful providence over the moral and natural evils mentioned in the Job, Joseph, and Jesus narratives. It is quite another to claim that God is sovereign over all moral and natural evils. But this is what the Bible repeatedly teaches. This takes us a considerable way towards licensing the GGT as a general approach to the problem of evil. The Bible presents multitudes of examples of God intentionally bringing about natural evils — famine, drought, rampaging wild animals, disease, birth defects such as blindness and deafness, and even death itself — rather than being someone who merely permits nature to 'do its thing' on its own. Here are some samples:

- Famine (Deut 32:23-24• 2Kgs 8:1; Psa 105:16• Isa 3:1• Ezek 4:16 5:16-17 14:13 14:21• Hos 2:9• Amos 9• Hag 2:17)
- Drought (Deut 28:22• 1Kgs 8:35; Isa 3:1• Hos 2:3• Amos 4:6-8• Hag 1:11)
- Rampaging wild animals (Lev 26:22• Num 21:6• Deut 32:23-24• 21<gs 17:25; Jer 8:17, Ezek 5:17 14:15 14:21 33:27)
- Disease (Lev 26:16 25• Num 14:12• Deut 28:21-22 28:27• 21<gs 15:5; 2Chron 21:14 26:19-20)
- Birth defects such as blindness and deafness (Exod 4:11 • John 9:1-3)
- Death itself (Deut 32:39• 1Sam 2:6-7)
- Ten Egyptian plagues (Exod 7:14-24, 8:1-15, 8:16-19, 8:20-32, 9:1-7, 9:8-12, 9:13-35, 10:1-20, 10:21-29, 11:4-10, 12:12-13 12:27-30)
- 'Impersonal' forces and objects (Psa 65:9-11, 77:18, 83:13-15, 97:4, 104:4, 104:10-24, 107:25, 29, 135:6-7, 147:8, 147:16-18, 148:7-8, Jonah Nah 1:3-4 Zech 7:14 Matt 5:45 Acts 14:17)

V. God's Sovereignty over Moral Evil

In addition, and perhaps surprisingly, the Bible presents God as having such meticulous control over the course of human history that a wide range of moral evils — murder, adultery, disobedience to parents, rejecting wise counsel, even human hatred — can be regarded as "of the Lord." Without erasing or suppressing the intentionality of creatures — and this includes their deliberations, their reasoning, their choosing between alternatives they consider and reflect upon — God's own intentionality stands above and behind the responsible choices of his creatures. Again, some samples:

- Eli's sons' disobedience (1Sam 2:23-25)
- Samson's desire for a foreign wife (Jdg 14:1-4)
- Absalom, Rehoboam, and Amaziah rejecting wise counsel (2Sam 17:14• 1Kgs 12:15; 2Chron 25:20)
- Assassination (2Chron 22:7 9 32:21-22)
- Adultery (2Sam 12:11-12 16:22)
- Human hatred (Psa 105:23-25• Exod 4:21• Deut 2:30 32• Josh 11:20• 11<gs 11:23, 25; 2Chron 21:16-17)

VI. God's Sovereignty over All Evil

So the Job, Joseph, and Jesus passages are not anomalies, but part and parcel of a more general view the Bible takes on the subject, with respect to both natural and moral evil. Indeed, in addition to this large swath of 'particular' texts about individual cases of evil, there are quite a few "universal" texts which seem to trace all calamities, all human decisionmaking, all events whatsoever, back to the will of God.

- God's sovereignty over all calamity ([Ecc 7:13-14](#)• [Isa 45:7](#)• [Lam 3:37-38](#)• [Amos 3:6](#))
- God's sovereignty over all human decision-making ([Prov 16:9 19:21 20:24 21:1](#)• [Jer 10:23](#))
- God's sovereignty over all events whatsoever ([Psa 115:3](#)• [Prov 16:33](#)• [Isa 46:9-10](#)• [Rom 8:28 11:36](#)• [Eph 1:11](#))

Limiting the GGT: The Inscrutability of God's Purposes

VII. Establishing the Burden of Proof

Of course, each specific theodicy mentioned earlier has significant limitations. For instance, the Bible frequently discourages the idea that the punishment theodicy can explain all evils in the world ([Job 1:1 1:8 2:3 42:7-8](#)• [John 9:13](#)• [Acts 28:1-6](#)). More generally, Christians can never know enough about a person's situation, or about God's purposes, to rule in a specific theodicy as being God's reason for permitting evil in a particular case. In fact, it would be entirely presumptuous to do so. But if he who affirms must prove, then the question in the problem of evil is not whether Christians know enough to "rule in" the applicability of a theodicy on any particular occasion, but whether critics know enough to "rule out" the applicability of any theodicy. But how could a critic reasonably claim to know that there is no reason that would justify God in permitting suffering? How could he know that premise (2) of the original argument is true? For why think that God's reasons for permitting particular cases of evil are the kinds of things that we would discern by our cognitive capacities, if such reasons were there?

VIII. Analogies for our Cognitive Limitations

It is widely recognized that we have cognitive limitations with respect to discerning goods and connections, at least in territories where we lack the relevant expertise, experience, or vantage point. Some examples:

- It doesn't seem to me that there is a perfectly spherical rock on the dark side of the moon right now, but that's no reason to conclude that such a rock isn't there.
- It didn't seem to any medievals that the theories of special relativity or quantum mechanics were true, but that was no reason to think they weren't true.
- It didn't seem to humans in earlier eras that fundamental human rights of one sort or another were in fact fundamental human rights, but that was no reason to think there weren't any such rights.
- It wouldn't seem to a non-Greek-speaker that spoken Greek sentences have any meaning, but that is no reason to think they don't have a meaning.
- It wouldn't seem to the musically uninitiated that Beethoven projected the 'sonata form' onto the symphony as a whole, giving the entire musical work a fundamental unity it would not otherwise have had. But it wouldn't follow from their ignorance that Beethoven didn't have such a purpose, much less that he was unsuccessful in executing it.

- It might not seem to my one-month-old son that I have a good reason for him to receive a painful series of shots at the doctor's office. But it wouldn't follow from his ignorance that there isn't a good reason.

God is omniscient, which means he not only knows everything that we are likely to guess at, but every truth whatsoever. This means that God knows things that we cannot even fathom. As the above analogies suggest, this is easily demonstrated for a huge range of cases. If the complexities of an infinite God's divine plan for the unfolding of the universe does involve God's recognizing either deep goods, or necessary connections between various evils and the realization of those goods, or both of these things, would our inability to discern these goods or connections give us a reason for thinking they aren't there? What would be the basis of such confidence? But without such confidence, we have little reason to accept premise (2) of the problem of evil. So we have little reason to accept its conclusion.