

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

VII. Licensing and Limiting the GGT

A. In each narrative above, the first two themes highlight the way of theodicy (God aiming at great good 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).

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.

B. God's Sovereignty over **Natural** Evil (see previous notes)

C. God's Sovereignty over **Moral** Evil

1. 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. For example:

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

D. God's Sovereignty over **all evil**

1. 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 decision making, all events whatsoever, back to the will of God.
2. God's sovereignty over all calamity (Eccl. 7:13-14; Is. 45:7; Lam. 3:37-38; Amos 3:6)
3. God's sovereignty over all human decision-making (Prov. 16:9; 19:21; 20:24; 21:1; Jer. 10:23)
4. God's sovereignty over all events whatsoever (Ps. 115:3; Prov. 16:33; Is. 46:9-10; Rom. 8:28; 11:36; Eph. 1:11)

E. Limiting the GGT: The Inscrutability of God's Purposes

1. Establishing the Burden of Proof
 - a) 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, 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.
 - b) 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. (i.e. the one who affirms God's existence is disproved by the presence of evil must demonstrate that God could **not** have a good reason for permitting evil) 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 (a perfectly good being **will** prevent evil) 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?

2. Analogies for our Cognitive Limitations

a) It is widely recognized that we have cognitive limitations with respect to discerning good and possible connections between evil as a means to bring about good, at least in territories where we lack the relevant expertise, experience, or vantage point.

Some examples:

(1) 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.

(2) 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.

(3) 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.

3. God is omniscient, which means he not only knows everything that we are likely to guess at, which means 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 good, or necessary connections between various evils and the realization of good, or both of these things, would our inability to discern these good 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.

F. Biblical Argument for Divine Inscrutability

1. The theme of divine inscrutability is not only exceedingly defensible common sense. It also looms large in the Bible, having both pastoral and apologetic implications.

a) It closes the mouths of Christians who would insensitively offer "God's reasons" to those who suffer (when they don't know such reasons).

b) It closes the mouths of critics who would irrationally preclude divine reasons for the suffering. Imagine we were on the scene in the cases of Job (as his friend), Joseph (as his brother), and Jesus (as his tormentor). Would we have been able to guess at God's purpose for the suffering? Would we not instead have been wholly unaware of any such purpose? Does not a large part of the literary power of the Bible's narrative, and the spiritual encouragement it offers, rest upon this interplay between the ignorance of the human actors and the wisdom of divine providence?

2. According to Ecclesiastes, there is a moral fault-line (vanity) running throughout the created world in which we live and in the face of it human wisdom has its limitations. It is not possible to have a clear understanding of reality.

a) ¹⁶ Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. Eccl. 3:16

b) ¹⁴ There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. Eccl. 8:14

c) Also, he [God] has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. Eccl. 3:11

d) 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. Eccl. 8:17

e) ¹³ Consider the work of God:

who can make straight what he has made crooked?

¹⁴ In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him. Eccl. 7:13, 14

3. One of the most extended reflections in the New Testament on the problem of evil – in this case, the evil of Jewish apostasy – is Romans 9-11. Paul's concluding doxology blends together these twin themes of divine sovereignty over evil and divine inscrutability in the midst of evil:

a) ³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?"

³⁵ "Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?"

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.

Amen. Romans 11:33–36

b) To the extent that God has not spoken about a particular event in history, his judgments *are* unsearchable, and his paths *are* beyond tracing out. But that does not mean there is not a greater good which justifies God's purposing of that event.