

Class Objective: To deepen our faith and understanding regarding the relationship of the character of God and the reality of evil.

Class Overview

1. Introductory thoughts on the problem of evil
2. Define categories of evil
3. Identify the five postulates that make up the rationale for the problem of evil
4. Explore which of the postulates above are true and which should be challenged
5. Consider the two primary approaches to address the problem of evil
6. Evaluate common deficient explanations for the presence of evil
7. Survey four popular but incomplete theodicies
8. Explain and defend the "greater good theodicy" through three biblical case studies
9. Summarize the implicit balance Scripture reflects in the "greater good theodicy"
10. Examine the Bible's claim regarding the sovereignty of God over natural evil
11. Examine the Bible's claim regarding the sovereignty of God over moral evil
12. Note the Bible's claim regarding the sovereignty of God over all evil
13. Discover the support for and force of the inscrutability argument

Notes

VII. Survey four popular but incomplete theodicies (Each of these affirm that some form of greater good can come from evil. They each have some support in biblical texts.)

- A. The punishment theodicy reasons that suffering is a result of God's just punishment of evil doers.
 1. In punishment God aims at the good of displaying his just judgment against evildoers. (Gen 3:14-19; Rom 1:24-32, 5:12, 6:23, 8:20-21; Is 29:5-6; Ezek 38:19; Rev 6:12; 11:13; 16:18)
- B. The soul-building theodicy argues that suffering leads us from self-centeredness to other-centeredness.
 1. In painful providences God aims at the good of displaying his goodness in shaping our character for good. (Heb 12:5-11; Rom 5:3-5; 2 Cor 4:17; Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-7; cf. Prov 10:13, 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-24, 29:15)
- C. The megaphone theodicy asserts that God uses pain or suffering to provoke sinners to turn toward him and find mercy.
 1. The idea here is that pain is God's way of getting the attention of unbelievers in a noncoercive way so that they might forget the vanities of earth, consider spiritual things instead, and perhaps even repent of sin (Luke 13:1-5). In pain God aims at the good of displaying his mercy that through such warnings we might be delivered from the wrath to come.
- D. Higher-order of good theodicy says that some goods can't exist apart from the evils to which they are a response.
 1. It is noted that there is no courage without danger, no sympathy without suffering, no compassion without need, no patience without adversity, no forgiveness without sin. God must often allow evils to make these goods a part of his world, given how these goods are defined (Eph 1:3-10; 1Pet 1:18-20).
 - a) ³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth in him. Ephesians 1:3-10

VIII. Explain and defend the “greater good theodicy” through three biblical case studies

A. A “greater good theodicy” (GGT) argues that the pain and suffering in God’s world play a necessary role in bringing about greater goods that could not be brought about otherwise. The following is a biblical support of the greater good theodicy. Adapted from G. Welty.

B. According to this view, Scripture seems to combine the two basic approaches to the problem of evil, theodicy and inscrutability. The biblical accounts of Job, Joseph and Jesus weave together three themes in revealing God’s goodness in his use of evil.

1. God aims at great goods (either for mankind, or for himself, or both).
2. God often intends these great goods to come about by way of various evils.
3. God leaves created persons in the dark (in the dark about *which* goods are indeed his reasons for the evils, and/or about *how* the goods depend on the evils).

C. 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.

1. The Case of Job

a) 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).

2. The Case of Joseph

a) 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; Ps 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.

3. The Case of Jesus

a) 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).

IX. Summarize the implicit balance Scripture reflects in the “greater good theodicy”

A. Affirming and Assessing the greater good approach

1. 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.

X. God is sovereign over all evil.

A. 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 affirming the GGT as a *general* approach to the problem of evil.

1. God’s sovereignty over natural 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:

- a) Famine (Deut 32:23-24; 2Kgs 8:1; Ps 105:16; Isa 3:1; Ezek 4:16, 5:16-17, 14:13, 14:21; Hos 2:9; Amos 4:6, 9; Hag 2:17)
- b) Drought (Deut 28:22; 1Kgs 8:35; Isa 3:1; Hos 2:3; Amos 4:6-8; Hag 1:11)
- c) Rampaging wild animals (Lev 26:22; Num 21:6; Deut 32:23-24; 2Kgs 17:25; Jer 8:17; Ezek 5:17, 14:15, 14:21, 33:27)
- d) Disease (Lev 26:16, 25; Num 14:12; Deut 28:21-22, 28:27; 2Kgs 15:5; 2Chron 21:14, 26:19-20)
- e) Birth defects such as blindness and deafness (Exod 4:11; John 9:1-3)
- f) Death itself (Deut 32:39; 1Sam 2:6-7)
- g) 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)
- h) ‘Impersonal’ forces and objects (Ps 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 1:4, Nah 1:3-4, Zech 7:14, Matt 5:45, Acts 14:17)

2. 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. Some samples include:

- a) Eli’s sons’ disobedience (1 Sam 2:23-25)
- b) Samson’s desire for a foreign wife (Jdg 14:1-4)

- c) Absalom, Rehoboam, and Amaziah rejecting wise counsel (2 Sam 17:14; 1 Kgs 12:15; 2 Chron 25:20)
- d) Assassination (2 Chron 22:7, 9, 32:21-22)
- e) Adultery (2 Sam 12:11-12, 16:22)
- f) 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)

3. 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 decision-making, all events whatsoever, back to the will of God.

- a) God's sovereignty over all calamity (Eccl 7:13-14; Is 45:7; Lam 3:37-38; Amos 3:6)
- b) God's sovereignty over all human decision-making (Prov 16:9, 19:21, 20:24, 21:1; Jer 10:23)
- c) 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)

XI. Exploring the counterbalance of inscrutability

A. The assessing the role of inscrutability with of the greater good theodicy

1. 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 9:1-3; 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.

2. The burden of proof lies with the critic.

- a) . . . 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. . . how could a critic reasonably claim to know that there is no reason that would justify God in permitting suffering? . . . 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?

B. Our cognitive limitations are both obvious and extensive in general and much more so in contrast with a God who knows all things real and possible.

1. 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.

2. Our perspective regarding any given evil is limited to our small knowledge or experience with that evil but does not include information as to how that evil may be connected to other events and/or to the overall plan of God for any individual or his world.

- a) It is proposed that from God's eternal perspective—the Author of the drama who sees 'the end from the beginning'—all creaturely decisions and responses freely made are woven in with all other events to serve his purpose. The individual actions made do have significance in that they go towards making up patterns within the drama of lasting importance; but they do not exert an ultimate significance: that is provided by the Sovereign God who places the decisions and actions of his creatures into an eternal context which alone affords ultimate meaning. . . . this means that within the immediate context of our experience some events *are* evil, including certain forms of suffering. But this is not the whole context for another perspective is available. It is when the evil event is related to the wider context of God's eternal purposes for his creation in general and each individual in particular that evil is transfigured and can be said to be redeemed. It is within that wider perspective—the primary context of God's action—that evil events are seen to contain good ends. The upshot of this argument is that evil has a real but temporary hold on reality. This does not take 'the evil out of evil' as might appear at first sight, but it does limit the significance of evil, assigning to it a certain relativity. *M. Tinker*

