

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

VI. Evaluate common deficient explanations for the presence of evil

- A. Some sources offer one of three simple solutions to the problem of evil, each with problematic implications. These "solutions" each deny one of the three pillars of the problem of evil.
1. Deny that evil exists.
 2. Deny that God is omnipotent.
 3. Deny that God is good.
- B. M. Tinker well summarizes these three attempts to resolve the problem of evil.
1. "There are of course a number of simple solutions to the dilemma posed above which essentially involve the removal of one or more of the three elements which make up the triad so that it ceases to be a dilemma at all. Thus one could deny that evil or suffering exists, viewing them instead as some form of 'illusion'. Christian Science and Theravada Buddhism might qualify as amongst those beliefs which take this particular route. Alternatively, one might deny the omnipotence of God as does the process theologian David Griffin, who states quite unequivocally that his solution to the problem of evil is 'by denying the doctrine of omnipotence fundamental to it'. However, the theological price paid is rather high in that we are in effect left with a 'God' who is trying to do his best in bringing good out of evil, and with a little luck he might (but only might) succeed in the end. The other way out of the apparent impasse is to deny the goodness of God as expressed in Baudelaire's celebrated statement that: 'If there is a God he is the very devil'. . . . Nevertheless, the traditional Christian claim is that God is good, that he is almighty and that evil and suffering are realities to be reckoned with. The 'problem' therefore turns on how to relate these two articles of faith (the goodness and omnipotence of God) to the fact of suffering which is deemed evil, without compromising either of these tenets of faith or trivializing human suffering."
- C. Others suggest that free will is the key to explaining evil or one aspect of it.
1. The free will argument says that God included evil in his plan because he wanted human choice to have true moral freedom. Such freedom, it is argued, can only exist if people are equally free and able to choose good or evil. This, in turn, assigns responsibility for evil to human choice rather than to God.

2. This viewpoint is based on something called libertarian free will.
 - a) According to the *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (InterVarsity Press, 2002), libertarian free will is defined as “in ethics and metaphysics, the view that human beings sometimes can will more than one possibility. According to this view, a person who freely made a particular choice could have chosen differently, even if nothing about the past prior to the moment of choice had been different.”
 - b) One writer observes, “In the libertarian free will paradigm, the power of contrary choice reigns supreme. Without this ability to choose otherwise, libertarian free will proponents will claim that man cannot be held morally responsible for his actions.”
 - c) However, this notion must be set in perspective with the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God.
 - (1) God asserts ownership and authority over all the world.
 - (a) “The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” Psalm 24:1
 - (2) God assures that he will accomplish all that he wills.
 - (a) “Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, ¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’ Isaiah 46:8-10
 - (b) . . . all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?” Daniel 4:35
 - (3) Critics of absolute divine sovereignty say that it makes God a puppet master and humans nothing more than puppets under his full control. In theology this is called **hard determinism**.
 - (a) Some (L. Molina, W. L. Craig, A. Plantinga) have tried to unite libertarian free will and the absolute sovereignty of God by proposing something called “middle knowledge.” This view “teaches that God created a world out of the infinite number of worlds He had available to Him to create, and God chose that particular world in which free creatures made the very decisions that accomplished His will.”
 - (b) On balance Scripture presents a more nuanced understanding of God’s sovereignty and human agency.
 - (i) God includes the free choices of his creatures to accomplish his purposes. In theology, this is called **compatibilism** or soft determinism. “In this view, man makes real choices and

will be held responsible by God for those choices. The choices that man makes emanate from his desires. God grants the creature a certain amount of freedom, but that freedom always operates within the boundaries of God's sovereignty."

(c) Scripture records many examples of this interaction between God's sovereign will and human will.

(i) ⁴ So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷ And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Genesis 45:7, 8

(ii) ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. Genesis 50:19, 20

(iii) . . . this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. Acts 2:23

(iv) ²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. Acts 4:27, 28

(d) The Westminster Confession of Faith reflects this balanced understanding of Scripture.

(i) God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby **neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away**, but rather established. WCF III.1

(ii) God, the great Creator of all things, does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible fore-knowledge and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy. WCF V.1

(iii) Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, **yet** by the same providence he orders them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently. WCF V.2

(iv) God, in his ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure. WCF V.3

3. Two factors help us understand the relationship of the human will to the sovereign works of God.

a) The human will that began with complete freedom in the garden of Eden became corrupted and enslaved through the curse of sin.

(1) The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. 1 Corinthians 2:14

(2) ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. Romans 8:5-8

(3) ¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. Ephesians 2:1-3

b) God includes the willful acts of human agents in accomplishing his purposes.

(1) “When God ordains all things that come to pass (Psalm 33:11; Ephesians 1:11), He not only ordains the ends, but the means as well. God ordains that certain things will happen, and He also ordains how they will happen. Human choices are one of the means by which God accomplishes His will.”

(2) “The Bible emphatically affirms human responsibility for sin and God’s justice, but it also clearly rejects libertarian free will. Scripture clearly affirms that 1) God is sovereign over all affairs, including the affairs of man; and 2) man is responsible for his rebellion against a holy God. The fact that we cannot completely harmonize these two biblical truths should not cause us to reject either one. Things seem impossible to us often simply because we do not have the mind of God.”

- VII. Survey four popular but incomplete theodicies
- VIII. Explain and defend the “greater good theodicy” through three biblical case studies
- IX. Summarize the implicit balance Scripture reflects in the “greater good theodicy”
- X. Examine the Bible’s claim regarding the sovereignty of God over natural evil
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Exerpts from WCF statements on God’s Decree and Providence

The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God; who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin. WCF V.4

Summary of the Protective Guardrails of the WCF re: providence

The Confession carefully holds these truths together:

<u>Affirmed</u>	<u>Protected From</u>
God ordains all things	Open theism / randomness
God is not author of sin	Moral compromise of God
Human will is real	Deterministic fatalism
Providence uses secondary causes	Occasionalism
Suffering has fatherly purpose	Meaningless tragedy