

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 two 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

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**Notes**

- I. Introductory thoughts on the problem of evil
  - A. More than any other reason, the problem of evil is cited as the basis for many people not believing in God.
  - B. The problem of evil is a problem for everyone regardless of one's belief or absence of belief.
    1. If God exists, the believer must explain why evil is here?
    2. If God does not exist, the skeptic must explain why evil is objectionable?
  - C. Evil is a universal reality affecting all people.
  - D. The problem of evil is both a logical-intellectual-philosophical problem (not resolved through empirical evidence) as well as an emotional-existential problem (raising questions about life's meaning).
    1. "In his A Preface to Christian Theology, John Mackay illustrates two distinct, though not entirely unrelated, kinds of approach to Christian matters by picturing a group of people sitting on the high balcony of a Spanish house watching travellers pass by on the road below. Those on the balcony can overhear the travellers' talk and often chat with them. They comment critically upon the way the travellers walk, discuss questions about the road—how it can exist and where it might lead. By way of contrast, the travellers face problems which are essentially of a practical nature, although they too have a theoretical aspect to them. Thus while both the 'observers' and the 'travellers' might express interest over areas of common concern, the immediate nature of their problems differs. On the question of evil for instance, one can envisage the observers wrestling with the theoretical problem of how to reconcile a belief in an omnipotent God who has loving purposes with the existence of evil; while the travellers grapple with the existential problem of trying to overcome evil by bringing good out of it. Now clearly the Scriptures were written primarily for the latter, a book for travellers composed by fellow travellers under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit." M. Tinker

E. The inherent human struggle with the problem of evil suggests that we have an intrinsic sense of justice.

1. C. S. Lewis gave classic expression to 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.”*

F. No single approach to the problem of evil is adequate to answer all the questions that arise from this issue. At least five concepts each provide some light on the issue.

1. Jesus’ suffering
2. Human freedom
3. Dark spiritual forces
4. The principle of the greater good
5. Mystery

II. Define categories of evil

A. Evil is generally categorized as moral (willfully brought about by human agency such as murder, adultery, theft, rape, etc.) or natural (harm caused by impersonal forces in the natural world such as earthquakes, tornadoes, plague, etc.).

B. Evil is the absence of good as darkness is the absence of light and cold is the absence of heat. Evil is a corruption and or deprivation of good.

III. Six postulates that make up the rationale for the problem of evil

- A. (1) A perfectly powerful God can prevent evil.
- B. (2) A perfectly good being will prevent evil as far as he can.
- C. (3) God is perfectly powerful and good.
- D. (4) So, if a perfectly powerful and good God exists, there will be no evil.
- E. (5) There is evil.
- F. (6) Therefore, God doesn’t exist.

1. A. MacLeish, in his play based on Job, has condensed these points into two brief sentences. *“If he [God] is God, he is not good. If he is good, he is not God.”*

IV. Explore which of the postulates above are true and which should be challenged

A. In an effort to solve the problem of evil some have questioned part of postulate #3 asserting that God is good but not all powerful and therefore cannot prevent evil.

1. This was the view of Harold Kushner in his best-selling book *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981).

2. Greg Boyd in support of Open Theism arrived at this conclusion by, in part, arguing that God does not know the future.

a) Oliver Crisp summarizes Boyd’s view: “[Boyd] makes several important philosophical assumptions. The first is the belief that all human agents have libertarian free will. We are the ultimate explanation of our actions, not God. Second, God’s

sovereignty is limited. For free choices to be really free, God must take risks in creating this world. . . . where there are ‘might’ counterfactuals. That is, there are things I might, or might not do, of which God has no certain knowledge. Thus, I have the power, as Satan and all other agents have the power, to frustrate the plans of God (albeit in a limited capacity). Third, and as a result of this, Boyd believes that God does not have a reason for all things, especially evil things, because he does not ordain all things, and does not even know whether some things will occur or not. In fact, God is sometimes genuinely surprised by the things we do, things he could not have foreseen. This also explains why there are some evils God cannot prevent from happening and is powerless to undo.”

3. Nevertheless, postulate #3 is true. God is both perfectly powerful and good.

B. Postulate #5 is true. The reality of evil is the very presumption of the Gospel! Evil requires divine judgment which was absorbed by Jesus in the place of sinners.

C. Postulate #2 is not true! God, though perfectly good, will not necessarily prevent all evil. God may have good reasons to employ evil for his purposes.

1. Because we cannot think of a reason that God would include evil in his plan, does not mean there is isn’t one. Tim Keller, in his book, *The Reason for God*, illustrates the fallacious nature of such reasoning.

a) “Again we see lurking within the hard-nosed skepticism an enormous faith in one’s own cognitive faculties. If our minds can’t plumb the depths of the universe for good answers to suffering, well, then, there can’t be any! This is blind faith of a high order. The fallacy at the heart of this argument has been illustrated by the “no-see-ums” illustration of Alvin Plantinga. If you look into your pup tent for a St. Bernard, and you don’t see one, it is reasonable to assume that there is not St. Bernard in you tent. But if you look into your pup tent for a “no-see-um” (an extremely small insect with a bite out of all proportion to its size) and you don’t see any, it is not reasonable to assume they aren’t there. Because, after all, no one can see ‘em. Many assume that if there were good reasons for the existence of evil, they would be accessible to our minds, more like St. Bernards than like no-see-ums, but why should that be the case.”

D. If postulate #2 is false and #3 is true then postulate #4 and #6 are not true.

V. Consider the two primary approaches to address the problem of evil

A. One approach is called **theodicy** coming from two words meaning to justify God. It is the attempt to explain why it is just of God to include evil in his plan.

B. A second approach is called **inscrutability**, meaning “impossible to understand or interpret.” This is the effort to describe the mystery of God’s use of evil by recognizing our intellectual limitations.

1. “The way of inscrutability argues, more modestly, that no one knows that premise (2) is true because no one can know enough to conclude that God doesn’t have good reason for permitting evil. We just cannot grasp God’s knowledge, the complexity of his plans, or the deep nature of the good he aims at in providence. And there is no proof that God does not have good reasons for allowing evil, but because he is good we can only assume that he does. Here we don’t have to come up with ‘theodicies’ to defend God against the problem of evil. Rather, the way of inscrutability shows that it is entirely to be expected that creatures like us can’t come up with God’s reasons, given who God is and who we are.” G. Welty