

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, moral evil and all evil generally
11. Discover the support for and force of the inscrutability argument
12. Review the five elements on the problem of evil chart

#### Notes

XII. To put the problem of evil in proper perspective, it requires consideration of five elements, human freedom, dark spiritual forces, greater good, mystery and the suffering of Jesus. While no single line of argumentation is adequate to answer all the questions raised by the problem of evil, the cumulative effect of these five lines of consideration can at least answer many of the questions that arise. With the exception of dark spiritual forces, the previous notes of this class address each of these areas in greater detail.

A. **Human freedom** is contained within the bondage of human sinfulness but is nevertheless sometimes used by God (thus a second cause) to accomplish his purposes.

1. Absolute free will or libertarian free will is non-existent after the fall in Genesis 3.
2. Though humans are fully responsible for their choices, the Bible never explains the existence of evil as finally rooted in human choice.
3. Scripture repeatedly insists it is God who is ultimately responsible for all things that come to pass even as he uses the willing choices of people (this known as compatibilism).

B. **Dark spiritual forces** are also second causes employed by God in the providence of God.

1. At some point Satan rebelled against God. Details of this rebellion are not given in the Bible.
  - a) The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Luke 10:17, 18, cf. also Is. 14:12-15; Ezek. 28:12-17
2. Satan is the primary provocateur in the account of the first human sin.
  - a) Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" Genesis 3:1
  - b) But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. 2 Corinthians 11:3
3. The devil was also the agent of temptation for Jesus.
  - a) Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Matthew 4:1
4. Jesus comes to destroy the works of the devil.
  - a) <sup>8</sup>Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. 1 John 3:8

b) Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil. Hebrews 2:14

5. Unbelievers experience the influence of the devil.

a) <sup>1</sup> And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> 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. Ephesians 2:1, 2

b) <sup>3</sup> And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup> In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 2 Corinthians 4:3, 4

6. Believers also experience the assault of the devil.

a) <sup>11</sup> Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. <sup>12</sup> For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Ephesians 6:11, 12

b) Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 1 Peter 5:8

c) <sup>10</sup> And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. Revelation 12:10

7. The devil and his minions face eternal judgment.

a) Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. John 12:31, cf. John 14:30; 16:11

b) And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. Revelation 12:9

c) "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'" Matthew 25:41

C. **Greater good** arguments assert 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.

1. The illustration of a woven tapestry is often used to reflect the dynamics involved in our perceptions of the problem of evil and in particular, the question of possible good that could issue from it. Imagine a huge tapestry suspended before you. Only the back side of the tapestry is visible. You are standing very close to the tapestry almost touching it. What you see is a tangle of multicolored, knotted and frayed threads in no particular pattern. Its appearance is not beautiful but unattractive and chaotic. One would naturally wonder if this weaving could form anything of value. Several factors distort our perceptions: 1) the weaving is both massive and complex yet we can see only a most minuscule part of it, 2) it is only the backside of the tapestry that is visible to us and 3) much of what we can see is unsightly and even repulsive. Yet there is coming a day when the great tapestry of God's providential work in the world will be turned about and all of the suffering and evil that we have seen and experienced in the dark, convoluted threads of this world will not be "worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (Romans 8:18)

D. **Mystery** is a way of speaking of the inscrutability of the ways of an infinite God.

1. 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. 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?

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

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) Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:33–36).

4. 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.

E. **The suffering of Jesus** is the single most important component among the elements that help us reckon with the problem of evil.

1. Skeptics often invoke the notion that the presence of evil disproves the existence of a good God. Yet, the incarnation and atonement convincingly affirm that God is neither passive regarding the presence of evil nor indifferent to the suffering generated by it. Rather, from the earliest manifestation of evil God sets in motion the means of destroying evil and reversing its effects. (Genesis 3: 15) As well, the love of God for sinners is the motivating factor for sending his Son into the world (John 3:16, 17; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:4-7) so that the apostle could ask, ". . . if God is for us, who can be against us?" This deep love is so enduring as to be considered indelible for, "<sup>35</sup>Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? . . .<sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35, 37, 38)

a) The cross is the ultimate answer to the problem of evil. God came in the person of Jesus Christ not only to suffer alongside and for us but ultimately to destroy all evil. God didn't leave us alone in our suffering. The Christian gospel is the only one where a deity enters humanity's suffering to ultimately take it away. Other religions view God as detached from suffering, but Christianity says Jesus suffered on our behalf. He did this so the last enemy, death, might be defeated and justice might reign. Revelation says he did this so there might not be any more mourning, crying, or pain (21:1–4). *P. Schriener*