

GOD, EVIL,
AND
SUFFERING

COMPACT EXPOSITORY PULPIT COMMENTARY SERIES

GOD, EVIL,
AND
SUFFERING

Understanding God's Role in Tragedies
and Atrocities

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Shepherd's Fire exists to proclaim the unsearchable
riches of Christ through mass communications for the
teaching ministry of Bible expositor David Harrell,
with a special emphasis in encouraging and strength-
ening pastors and church leaders.

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Introduction

As every Christian can affirm, Bible study groups can be frustrating. Whether in a traditional Sunday school setting or a friend's living room, studying Scripture can easily digress from a warm exchange of theological pleasantries into a spirited debate, then digress into heated disagreements. I remember such an occasion in a large Sunday school class I visited soon after I had graduated from seminary.

The teacher was a kind and gentle man, long on love but short on theological acumen. His method of teaching was typical of many well-meaning lay teachers. He was basically a group facilitator who relied heavily on the Sunday School curriculum notes supplied by his denomination that were carefully crafted to avoid anything that might be considered controversial. With no emphasis on exegetical or contextual considerations or any appeal to sound doctrine, the content was as shallow as water on a plate, a mixture of psychology, sociology, phi-

losophy, and anecdotes. The lesson writers had an uncanny ability to make the obvious even more obvious, causing the student to be comfortable, even smug, in his or her perceived theological prowess. It was yet another example of how to market the faith as if it were some cheap commodity for those who want a personalized spirituality rather than an accurate theology anchored in sound doctrine that would produce a genuine devotion to the glory of God and an ever-deepening love of the Lord whose “lovingkindness is better than life” (Ps. 63:3).

As the class enjoyed their coffee and doughnuts and bantered about various ideas, it was obvious no one had a firm grasp of Scripture. With the theological depth and accuracy of the average Facebook post, it was basically an opportunity for the people there to voice their opinions—each considered to be equally valid, no matter how strange, contradictory, or unbiblical. Not once did anyone refer to a passage of Scripture as the basis for his or her position. In fact, to my dismay, most of the class did not even have a Bible. They only had their lesson manual.

Eventually, to the consternation of the teacher, the ebb and flow of a very boring conversation drifted into the issue of God’s role in evil and suffering, and the origin of sin. Suddenly, like dowsing a bunch of sleepyheads with cold water, the whole class came

alive. But I truly felt sorry for the teacher. He unexpectedly found himself in a very uncomfortable position when one lady asked a question that went something like this: "If God is a loving God, if He is sovereign over everything, and if He hates sin, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world?"

It was obvious from the tone of her voice and the redness in her face that she was looking for a fight. She had more than a theological bee in her bonnet. Her question was clearly an expression of pent-up anger. I didn't know it at the time, but I later learned why. She and her husband had recently lost a child to terminal illness after several years of suffering, surgeries, and immeasurable heartache.

After a pregnant silence in the room, she added, "I just don't understand why a loving God would allow our innocent little boy to suffer for years, and then die." As if rehearsed, the rest of the class immediately nodded their heads and warmly grunted their shared concern with an uneasy sense of, "Gotcha!" Her question obviously struck a nerve. Although they did not express it, they were all starving for a way to make sense out of how a loving God who is supposedly in control of all things and knows all things can allow the daily tragedies and atrocities we all witness and even experience. Instantly the insipid conversation disappeared, and

the class was electrified with curiosity.

Caught off-guard and clueless, the teacher played the card many teachers have up their sleeve and answered professorially, "That's a great question!" Clearly at a loss for words he then added, "That's not part of our lesson today, but let's talk about that for a minute. How would you answer that? Anyone?" What happened next was nothing short of the pooling of ignorance. It was armchair theology at its very worst. It reminded me of the old adage, "Opinions are like noses: everyone's got one."

Sadly, all their opinions were offered as if they were seated in a courtroom and God was on trial for being unjust, impotent, both, or even outright indifferent. Worse yet, their arguments were based upon the assumption that man's happiness (rooted in his depraved human desires) is the center of gravity around which God must orbit. Fallen human wisdom, rather than God's revelation in Scripture, was their standard for divine justice and mercy. The idea that God is all-powerful and all-good, has the right to do whatever He pleases, has no need to defend His actions, places the blame of evil in the world on Satan and sinners, and calls sinful man to repentant faith in Christ as the only remedy for evil were concepts utterly foreign to the conversation.

While none of them (including the lay teacher)

had a biblical understanding of the issue, I did appreciate their desire to grapple with it. I remember thinking and praying earnestly that they would eventually understand that the solution to the existence of evil and suffering in the world must be *theocentric*, not *anthropocentric*, which is at the very heart of Paul's comforting statement: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose" (Rom. 8:28)—a passage I'm sure they all knew from memory, but obviously had no grasp of its ultimate meaning.

I found myself in an awkward position. I wanted to defend what I was convinced to be the truth found in Scripture. But being a visitor, I thought it might be presumptuous. So I bit my tongue—at least for a while. Finally, I could stand it no longer. So I held up my hand and asked if I could humbly offer another position for their consideration. Of course, the teacher kindly agreed. Knowing only a few of them had a Bible, I read to them Paul's words in Romans 9:23-24 and briefly explained what I will elaborate upon later in this book.

After admitting that I certainly did not claim to have all the answers, that indeed "the secret things belong to the LORD" (Deut. 29:29) and "[His] thoughts are not [our] thoughts, nor are [His] ways

[our] ways” (Isa. 55:8), I recall asking the class a series of questions that went something like this:

- Do you think it is possible that God actually ordained to allow evil to enter His perfect creation to put His glory on display in ways that could have never happened apart from the existence of evil?
- Is it possible that God ultimately uses evil for good? Isn't that what Romans 8:28 tells us?
- Is it possible that God is more concerned about His eternal glory than man's temporal happiness?
- Is it possible that God is more glorified with evil existing in the world, than if that were not the case? We know, for example, that according to Acts 4:27, God predetermined the murder of His beloved Son.

While my questions and very brief instruction were met with tepid enthusiasm, it did strike a chord with some, especially the teacher. As a result, he asked me to address the class at a future date to explain these matters more fully. In the providence of God, that happened several weeks later. In fact, the size of the class doubled (as word got around) and it led to several other subsequent mini-lectures on the subject.

I wish I could say that eventually everyone agreed and we all lived happily ever after, but that was not the case. However, through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and His Word, some were forever changed and remain thankful to this day for what they learned from Scripture. For indeed, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate; equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). For those I saw shaking their heads in disagreement, I suppose all I did was spit in their theological soup. While they may continue to enjoy their delicious concoction, I’m sure it never tasted as good as it once did.

God’s Right to be Trusted

Frankly, the very concept of evil is seldom considered, especially in our postmodern culture that rejects moral absolutes and has no understanding of right and wrong from God’s perspective. Therefore, to somehow *trust* God, even in the face of gratuitous evil is considered by most to be quite absurd. It was fascinating, however, to see how often the word “evil” was suddenly the dominant term used to describe the Islamic jihadist’s terrorist attacks on US soil on September 11, 2001. Unfortunately, but not

unexpectedly, since evil had no moral category in which to exist—and since it was politically incorrect to consider any people group to be “evil” —the term itself was gradually discarded. But what was really intriguing was the effect that that act of evil had upon the American perspective of the *goodness of God*. David Wells illustrates this well:

. . . one of the casualties of September 11 appears to have been God himself. Before the terrorist attacks, 72% of Americans affirmed their belief that God is omnipotent and in control of the world, but afterwards that figure dropped to 68%. And just before the attacks occurred, 38% affirmed their belief in moral absolutes which are true for all times and places and not determined by circumstance, but in the days immediately following the attack only 22% were willing to affirm that. The language of evil had become a verbal necessity after September 11, but it remained a cultural and conceptual difficulty. That this was the case was all too evident a year later when signs were popping up all over the cultural landscape suggesting that outrage over the attack was out of order. . . . Without moral absolutes, the business of making moral

judgments becomes impossible, although few seemed to see the anomaly that was at work: that those who take the position that judgments should not be rendered on behavior are, often unbeknownst to themselves, also taking a moral position.¹

Trusting God, come what may, is at the very heart of the Christian faith. But it goes against our nature, especially when we experience evil, whether it's physical or moral.

The account of Job portrays this struggle, even in a man who was considered to be the most righteous on earth—a man compared with Noah and Daniel (Ezek. 14:14-20); a man of whom God said, “For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil” (Job 1:8).

In that fascinating historical account revealed to us by the Spirit of God through His inspired author (perhaps Moses or Solomon), Satan refutes God's claims of Job's righteousness, insisting Job's faith and obedience were merely a manipulative ploy to gain divine blessings. But God knew otherwise. He knew that Job's righteousness was not that of his own, but a supernatural gift of God given to bring glory to Himself. Knowing how he had seduced

the holy angels to join his original rebellion (cf. Isa. 14:12ff.; Ezek. 28:11ff.; Rev. 12:4), Satan probably assumed he would have no problem doing the same with Job—or any other person who trusted God. No doubt he believed that if he could inflict enough suffering and pain, Job would “curse God and die!” (Job 2:9)—as his wife later counseled him to do.

So with the purpose of proving Satan wrong and thereby proving the unfailing power of genuine saving faith, He consented to allow Satan to test Job. While Job’s faith never failed (see 13:15), it did falter under the weight of unexplained, undeserved, and unbearable suffering and loss. As the pain and sorrow increased, Job repeatedly called God to court in order to verify his innocence. We see this, for example, in the following passages:

I loathe my own life;
I will give full vent to my complaint;
I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.
“I will say to God, ‘Do not condemn me;
Let me know why You contend with me.
‘Is it right for You indeed to oppress,
To reject the labor of Your hands,
And to look favorably on the schemes of the
wicked?
‘Have You eyes of flesh?

Or do You see as a man sees?
Are Your days as the days of a mortal,
Or Your years as man's years,
That You should seek for my guilt
And search after my sin?
According to Your knowledge I am indeed
not guilty,
Yet there is no deliverance from Your hand.
(Job 10:1-7)

Even today my complaint is rebellion;
His hand is heavy despite my groaning.
Oh that I knew where I might find Him,
That I might come to His seat!
I would present *my* case before Him
And fill my mouth with arguments.
I would learn the words *which* He would answer,
And perceive what He would say to me.
Would He contend with me by the greatness
of *His* power?
No, surely He would pay attention to me.
There the upright would reason with Him;
And I would be delivered forever from my
Judge.
(Job 23:1-7)

But what is truly fascinating is that never once did

God give Job an audience to present his case. Never once did God even explain how He had squared off with Satan to prove how saving faith cannot be destroyed, no matter how severe the tragedies and atrocities, and how he (Job) was the test case to forever substantiate His divine assertion. Never once did God allow Himself to be dragged into court by His sinful creatures. Instead, He responded to Job's demand for a judicial hearing by intimidating him with His glory! He began by saying,

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said,

"Who is this that darkens counsel
By words without knowledge?

"Now gird up your loins like a man,
And I will ask you, and you instruct Me!

"Where were you when I laid the foundation
of the earth?

Tell Me, if you have understanding,
Who set its measurements? Since you know.
Or who stretched the line on it?

"On what were its bases sunk?
Or who laid its cornerstone,
When the morning stars sang together
And all the sons of God shouted for joy?"

(Job 38:1-7)

The sheer force of God's intimidation and humiliation put Job in his place (as it does all of us). Job was forced to face the reality that no matter how severe and inexplicably unfair the trial, *God is never to be challenged. He is only to be trusted.* For He alone is the Creator, Sustainer, Controller, Redeemer, and Consummator of all things. Job learned that to even question such a transcendent, omniscient, omnipotent God was the height of folly, and he became deeply convicted that to be so presumptuous as to even insinuate that God is unfair was an act of high treason against the Most High.

Then, as expected, Job humbled himself before God, even though he had lost everything except his life, and he said this:

I know that You can do all things,
And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.

"Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?"

Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand,

Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

"Hear, now, and I will speak;

I will ask You, and You instruct me."

I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear;
But now my eye sees You;
Therefore I retract,
And I repent in dust and ashes.
(Job 42:2-6)

Though his circumstances had not changed, his perspective had changed drastically. His presumptuous pride and ignorance gave way to humility and wisdom. All the answers he and his friends concocted to explain God's reasons for inflicting so much suffering on him were worthless and mistaken, worthy only of God's rebuke (42:7). In fact, God never gave him an explanation—not only because He didn't owe him one, but also because Job couldn't understand it if He did. Why the innocent suffer is an inscrutable mystery known only to God who has ordained it for purposes that ultimately inure to His glory—a lesson we all must learn. The tragic consequences of living in a fallen, sin-cursed world are inevitable, albeit more severe for some than others—a reality that should cause every believer to hate sin all the more and rejoice in the certain hope that we will one day be delivered from every appearance and effect of evil.

Then, as if to demonstrate His unfailing love and compassion, God restored Job's health, fortunes,