

Trusting God in Adversity

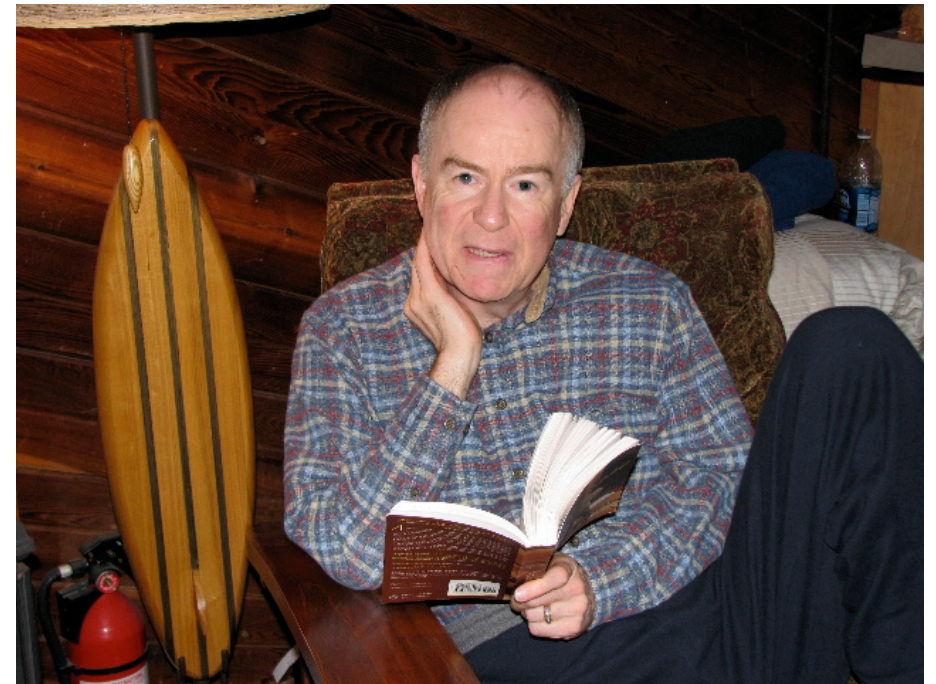


Introduction

Adversity may arrive at our door without warning, make himself at home, and remain with us much longer than we would ever hope. As an unwanted guest, he and his friends, Suffering and Pain, whom he has brought with him to alter our lives – sometimes permanently – have made us weary and sapped us of all strength and joy. Our closest friends openly observe that the light in our eyes has grown dim, leaving us with a recognizable, deep sadness. And as if these unwanted visitors were not enough to bear, we soon discover that they have invited others to come behind them to inflict further mischief: denial, discouragement, depression, sorrow, hopelessness, loneliness, feelings of abandonment, anger, anxiety, panic, and even disbelief.

Consider Mike Mason's Story

“A few years ago I went through a difficult time. Never mind what the problem was. It was nothing compared to the trials of Job. In fact, it was nothing at all compared to the sufferings of many of my neighbors right there on the quiet street where I lived. But pain is pain, and suffice it to say that my pain was enough to drive me to my knees, totally defeated, half-crazy at times, and crying out for relief.



Mike Mason

1952 -

Author, *The Gospel According to Job*



Mike Mason's Story

“Month after month the battles raged on, thick, dark, agonizing. I prayed, but somehow prayer did not ‘work.’ Usually nothing at all worked, except lying low and gritting my teeth until, for reasons entirely obscure to me, the straightjacket of oppression began to loosen a little – at least enough for me to get on with my life for another day or so before the screws tightened again. What else could I do? How was I to fight this? In retrospect I can see that a large part of my anguish was rooted in the fact that there really was *nothing I could do* to control what was happening to me. I was absolutely helpless, and it is this, perhaps, that is the soul of suffering, this terrifying impotence.”



Where Do We Find Answers to Suffering?

American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce espoused the doctrine of **Tychism**, that “objective account must be taken of the element of **chance** in (philosophical, cosmological, etc.) reasoning” (OED). Could this be the source of our sufferings – pure chance? Others posit **Fatalism**, “the doctrine that nothing anybody does can make any difference to the outcome.” And still others claim **Determinism**, the philosophical position that claims all events, including human action, are ultimately determined by causes external to the will. “The prevailing assumption of our day is that we live in a closed, mechanistic universe where events occur either by fixed, impersonal laws of impersonal forces – or merely by chance” (R.C. Sproul).



The Infection of Uncertainty

- Theologian J.I. Packer claims: “At no time, perhaps, since the Reformation have Protestant Christians as a body been so unsure, tentative and confused as to what they should believe and do. Certainty about the great issues of Christian faith and conduct is lacking all along the line.”
- In what has been called by many “the Achilles’ heel of the theistic worldview,” the problem of evil is now before us. While a difficult subject, we must not avoid it on our way to removing the confusion and discovering how we can trust God in the midst of adversity.

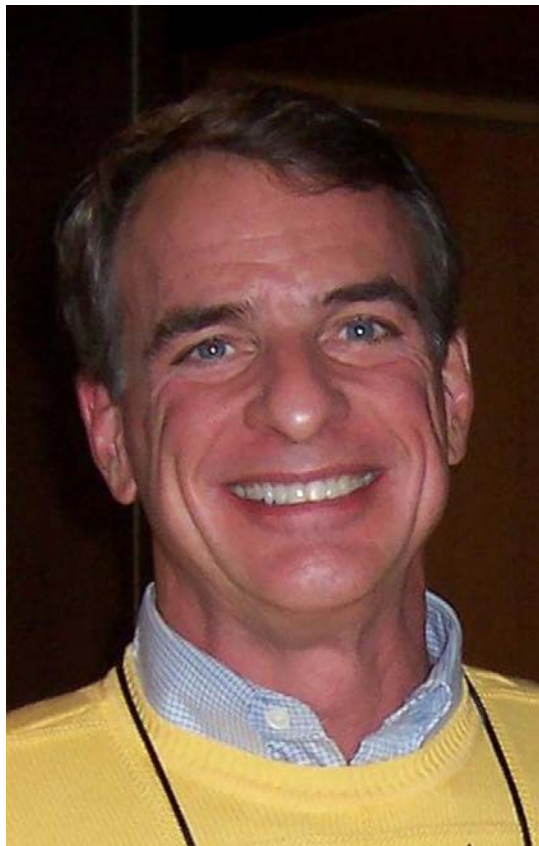
The Problem of Evil



John M. Frame, M.Phil., D.D.
J.D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“This is probably the most difficult problem in all of theology” and “is perhaps the most serious and cogent objection to Christian theism.”

William Lane Craig, Ph.D., D.Theol.



William Lane Craig
American Analytic Philosopher
and Christian Apologist

“The problem of evil is certainly the greatest obstacle to belief in the existence to God. When I ponder the extent and depth of suffering in the world, whether due to man’s inhumanity to man or to natural disasters, then I must confess that I find it hard to believe that God exists. No doubt many of you have felt the same way.”



Can the Problem of Evil Be Solved?

- “The problem of evil is not something we will ‘solve’ in the present world” (N.T. Wright, Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at St. Mary’s College, University of St. Andrews, Scotland).
- “Is there an answer to the problem? That depends on what you mean by an answer. If you are seeking an explanation that will vindicate God’s providence in every instance of evil, I certainly cannot supply that, and I doubt if anyone else can, either. Nor, I think, can we supply a totally satisfying theoretical reconciliation between divine sovereignty, goodness, and evil. The mystery of God’s relation to evil is one that will, I am convinced, never be completely dissolved in this life, and I am not sure whether it will be in the next” (John Frame).



Theodicy

- **Theodicy**, *n.*, “*The*, or *a*, vindication of the divine attributes, especially justice and holiness, in respect to the existence of evil; a writing, doctrine, or theory intended to ‘justify the ways of God to men’” (OED).
- Theodicy is the “answer to the question of why God permits evil” (Alvin Plantinga). The word *theodicy* derives from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *dike* (judgment). Theodicy literally means “justifying God.”
- “When a theist answers the question, ‘Why does God permit evil?’ he is giving a theodicy” (Plantinga).

The Problem of Evil Stated



Alvin C. Plantinga, PhD

1932 –

“America's leading orthodox Protestant philosopher of God” - *Time*

“If God is as benevolent as Christian theists claim, He must be just as appalled as we are at all this evil. But if He is also as powerful as they claim, then presumably He is in a position to do something about it. So why does He permit it? Why doesn't He arrange things so that these evils don't occur? That should have been easy enough for one as powerful as He.”

The Problem of Evil Summarized

1. If God is omnipotent, he is able to prevent evil.
2. If God is good, he wants to prevent evil.
3. But evil exists.
4. Conclusion: either God is not omnipotent, or he is not good.





The Logical Problem of Evil

The following is a summary of the logical problem of evil and William Lane Craig's response:

- **The Logical Problem:** If God exists, then evil cannot exist. Since evil exists, it follows that God does not exist.
- **Craig:** There is no *explicit* contradiction between them. If the atheist means there is some *implicit* contradiction between God and evil, then he must be assuming some hidden premises which bring out this implicit contradiction. However, no philosopher has ever been able to identify such premises. Therefore, the logical problem of evil fails to prove any inconsistency between God and evil.



An Example of an Explicit Contradiction

Paul is a good tennis player, and it's false that Paul is a good tennis player.

- Alvin Plantinga



The Logical Problem of Evil

- We can actually prove that God and evil *are* logically consistent.
- The atheist presupposes that God cannot have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evil in the world. But this assumption is not necessarily true.
- So long as it is even *possible* that God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil, it follows that God and evil are logically consistent.
- Craig: “I am very pleased to be able to report that it is widely agreed among contemporary philosophers that the logical problem of evil has been dissolved. The co-existence of God and evil is logically possible.”



God Offers No Explanations - Frame

Genesis 3: *Scene in the Garden of Eden*

- Where did the Serpent (Satan) come from?
- If he was originally good with the rest of the creation, how did he become evil?
- Why was he allowed into the Garden to tempt Eve?
- Why did a good God foreordain the entire event to take place?
- If God foreordained the response of Adam and Eve, by what right does he punish them?
- The passage does not answer these questions.

God Offers No Explanations - Frame

Genesis 22: Abraham Commanded to Sacrifice His Son Isaac

- How is this command compatible with God's goodness?
- Was this not a horrible trifling with a father's love?
- Abraham never raises the issue.
- God commends his quiet, unflinching obedience and faith.
- God claims his sovereign right to be trusted and believed.
- The Lord said to Moses: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (Ex. 33:19).

Bringing Charges Against God

- “The first thing I am going to ask God when I get to heaven is....”
- “How could God do a thing like this to me?”
- “Why did this have to happen to this innocent child?”
- “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!” (Psalm 130:1-2).
- “I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of my foes” (Psalm 6:-6-7).

Job Demands an Interview with God

“Today also my complaint is better; my hand is heavy on account of my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; he would pay attention to me. There an upright man could argue with him, and I would be acquitted forever by my judge” (Job 23: 1-7).



Mike Mason on Job's Complaint

“So impatient is Job for this process to begin that he dares to arraign the Lord in court. In effect, he wants to sue God for defamation of character!....By bringing the Lord to court, Job's ultimate aim is to see not only himself but his God vindicated. He wants the Lord's name cleared as much as his own....What Job does not fully realize at this point is that the great day in court for which he so ardently longs has already begun. What he cannot see is that his present 'trial' (in the sense of 'tribulation') is really a 'trial' in the formal legal sense....How precious is this trial to God!....His faithful witness will take the stand and, against enormous odds and intense opposition, publicly place his trust in exactly the prospect from which the rest of the world flees in terror: the judgment of Almighty God.”



God Answers Job

- “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon 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 38:2-7).
- “If Job is so ignorant concerning God’s works in the natural world, how can he expect to understand the workings of God’s mind in distributing good and evil?....Job confesses utter defeat” (Frame).

May Probe – but Not Accuse God



“Job never learns why he has had to endure suffering.”



Some Observations

- In the end, Job has nothing to say.
- The accuser and complainer is convicted of sin.
- The Book of Job provides no answers to the many questions he has about his suffering.
- We need to be cautious in probing the problem of evil and not turn our questions into accusations.
- When we demand answers for our suffering, we can expect a rebuke from God like the ones He gave to Job and to Adam.
- “Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?” (Ez. 18:25).

The Awesome Silences of Eternity

“For the self-revealing God, silence remains always a sovereign option.”



Carl F.H. Henry, PhD

1913-2003

Founding Editor, *Christianity Today*