

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW EVIL & SUFFERING?

DR. BRENT STRAWSBURG

DECEMBER 1, 2013

This morning I want to have a conversation about one of the great questions of our day, “Why Does God Allow Evil & Suffering?” I was reminded of the pressing nature of this question about 4 years ago when I got a phone call from my dad...the words were simple...

**“Tom Givens has ALS”**

What followed was a two year journey where my spiritual mentor slowly yet surely lost all control of his body & speech and ultimately his ability to breathe & survive. It was cruel, it was heart-wrenching...it was sad! Of course, it's not just me! George Barna, a Christian public-opinion pollster, asked a scientifically selected cross-section of adults this question:

***If you could ask God only one question and you knew He would give you an answer, what would you ask?***

The top response, “Why is there pain and suffering in the world?”

This question has perplexed thinkers and theologians for centuries...But it isn't simply an intellectual issue. One author described the problem of pain as “the question mark turned like a fishhook in the human heart”. This question has haunted people...

- We've seen horrific pain/suffering in the world...
- We've seen atrocities of unbelievable proportions...
- We've seen things in your own life that just seemed unbelievably cruel and unjust...
- We've experienced pain/suffering that has dropped us to our knees...

It shouldn't surprise anyone that millions of people are deeply distressed by the presence of evil and suffering in the world...so distressed that they routinely blame God and the Christian faith. Listen to one of biggest critics of the Christian faith, Charles Templeton...

*“A loving God could not possibly be the author of the horrors we have been describing—horrors that continue every day, have continued since time began, and will continue as long as life exists. It is an inconceivable tale of suffering and death, and because the tale is fact—is, in truth, the history of the world—it is obvious that there cannot be a loving God.”*

*Charles Templeton*

Last week...we looked at how this specifically impacts the Christian...we tried to gain some hope by looking at some of the “reasons” why God allows things to come into our life! This morning I would like to help you to defend our belief in a good & all-powerful God!

-----

Let me picture for you what is going to happen this morning. Imagine for a moment that you and your family were pulled over on **Thanksgiving Dinner for driving 90 mph!** A motorcycle officer says he saw you driving like a madman and everyone in your car was screaming, **“We want turkey and we want it now!”**

After you call a lawyer--what do you think you would start doing? **Build a Defense!** You weren't on the road at that time—you have a twin who likes to pretend they are you—you have a home video of your family enjoying turkey at the very time—things like this!

**That's what we must do—Build a Defense!** You see...People see all the evil/suffering in the world and they think that God is not fair—that He's not really good—that He's impotent! We must build a defense! This morning we will build a two-

part defense and then one-by-one we are going to have to answer the key questions that people ask! Make sense? Let's do it!

-----

Take a quick moment and look around the audience—what does everyone have in common? It's not how old we are or what we look like or what we wear or where we are from! Every person in this room has one thing in common...one thing that links all of us as uniquely human....

### -- FREE WILL--

In other words, in any given decision—we can choose to do anything we desire. After our service is over—

- Some of you will go directly home!
- Some of you will go out for a bite to eat!
- Some will watch God's sport—football!
- Some will take a nap!

No one compels you to do that—no one hypnotizes you to do a certain will—not even God! That's free will! God created a world full of people who possess free will. He didn't want a world of robots and He didn't want a world of machines that would only do what He said. He envisioned creatures who had the capacity to choose to enjoy & love Him.

The starting place for defending our belief in an all-powerful & all-loving God in the face of so much evil/suffering in the world is "Free-Will Defense".

### EXPLANATION #1...FREE-WILL DEFENSE

God has decided to create a world in which human beings were given the dignity of free will. In a world where free will is given to people...we should expect that some people will choose to do evil. Jesus clearly recognized this as He interacted with people in His public ministry. Listen to the following verse....

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, **but you were not willing.***  
Matt. 23:37 NIV

Think about this verse...Jesus the Son of God actually longed for the citizens of Jerusalem to respond to His message—but there was even something that Jesus couldn't do! Jesus could not make someone act against their own choice! The nation, willfully refused to turn to the Lord. Although we would like everyone to choose good, to choose virtue—the simple reality is that if you truly believe that every single person in the history of mankind is a free, autonomous being—within that capacity is the freedom to choose evil.

Folks...God does not tamper with our free will! He doesn't play mind-tricks with us—He doesn't hypnotize us! He gives us the dignity of free choice!

📖 Listen to the observation of one of the most brilliant philosophers & thinkers in the world—Christian or non-Christian...

*"To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so...The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness..."*  
Alvin C. Plantinga, God, Freedom, and Evil

Here's the simple reality--If God grants people genuine freedom to choose as they like, then it is impossible for him to guarantee what their choices will be.

- We end up with a world with people with great capacity to do good...**Mother Theresa & Billy Graham!**
- We end up with a world with people with great capacity to do evil....**Adolf Hitler & Usama Bin Laden!**

Although we are regularly overwhelmed by the immense evil in the world I don't think any of us would want to get rid of the good that has been done in our world. Throughout history--People have stopped slavery, stopped genocide, stopped ills of every description and accomplished great acts of kindness which has changed the face of humanity! **Free will is essential to being human!** Listen very careful to the thoughts of C.S. Lewis...

"God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go wrong or right. Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong, but I can't. If a thing is free to be good it's also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata -of creatures that worked like machines- would hardly be worth creating.

*C.S. Lewis, The Case for Christianity*

-----

As vital as the free-will defense it doesn't explain everything...there's a second part of Building a Defense!

🗺 Imagine you have been asked to create a world where your child or grandchild is required to become the best human being possible!

### **You're given all the power-the only constraint is free will!**

What kind of world would have the best chance to produce the best human beings? Do you want a world that is a playpen for pleasures & where you never hear no or face struggle or do you want a world where people will ultimately face challenges, trials, even difficulties & pain? I'm betting that if your child or grandchild never faced any kind of difficulty, challenge or struggle that they would never be the best! Philosophers & theologians call this the "soul-making defense"...

### **EXPLANATION #2...SOUL MAKING DEFENSE**

Scripture tells us the very same thing...listen...

*<sup>28</sup> And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son  
Romans 8:28,29 NIV*

Much of life is not good in and of itself, but Romans 8 reveals that God is able to use an imperfect world for a greater good—that good is to conform as many people as possible into the image of His Son! If God's aim is to create people "conformed to the likeness of His son"—then it makes sense that we live in our present kind of world! For God to produce people who are in the processing of being like God and who wish to be with God—an idealistic playpen is simply not the kind of world that achieves these goals! Think about it!

- Without danger, difficulty & temptation we would never achieve moral victories!
- Without these challenges you would not have the stories that inspire courage, faithfulness & strength!
- Without the hardships of this world we would not have heroes—we would not have faith!

I love how gifted poet John Keats recognized this truth when he made this observation...

***Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?"***

-John Keats

-----

☞ Let's return to our scene in the courtroom...the judge has asked us to give a defense and we did! We stood up before the judge and said,

**God decided to grant human beings with the dignity of free will—an opportunity to enjoy Him! Even though He knew that some would use this choice for evil--He placed us in this imperfect world to prepare us to live in His kingdom where we will fully know how to love & obey Him!**

This is the world that the God of the Universe had decided to make. I believe it is the only kind of world that any of us would truly want to be a part of. The mere thought of giving up our free will or being a robot or having God force us to do what He wants—doesn't really look too attractive!

However...that's not all!

**We've given our defense but now the prosecutor is asking us a handful of very difficult questions...good questions...questions that bother or disturb people or are just plain confusing!**

➤ **IF GOD IS ALL-POWERFUL, WHY COULDN'T HE CREATE A WORLD WITHOUT EVIL?**

If you were to take a poll of average people on the street and ask them to give you one quality about God what do you think they would say? I believe that one of the things that most people would say that God is all-powerful! It's not that surprising that when your typical unchurch family or friend thinks about the presence of evil their mind naturally gravitates to the power of God...

- If God was really all-powerful why couldn't He have just created a world without evil?
- If God was really all-powerful why didn't He stop this guy from doing bad?
- If God was really all-powerful why did He allow this or that?

It's important to remember that when we say that God is all-powerful...we don't mean that he can perform logical impossibilities...

- He can't make round square
- He can't make a rock so big that he can't move it
- He can't prevent someone who has the power of free choice to always do what He wants them to do....not unless you wish to destroy the very essence of "free will"...

In the same exact way—God's power is constrained in certain logical ways—there are certain things that He can't do not because He is somehow overwhelmed by the immensity of the task—it's simply a logical impossibility! Remember, creating people with free will creates the possibility that people will use free will for evil! God can't stop that—It's impossible!

C.S. Lewis described it this way,

*"If you choose to say 'God can give a creature free-will and at the same time withhold free-will from it,' you have not succeeded in saying anything about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire a meaning because we prefix to them the two other words: 'God can'....It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of his creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives, not because his power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense, even when we talk it about God.*

C.S. Lewis

-----

But there's another related question...

### ➤ **WHY DOESN'T GOD STOP EVIL?**

People sit back and observe the worst of the worst...the most horrible of situations and they ask out-loud why God could selectively intervene to stop evil...

- Why doesn't God stop the terrorist before he blows up something?
- Why doesn't God stop the murderer before callously takes the innocent life of someone?
- Why doesn't God stop the drunk driver before his car takes the life of another motorist?

Here's the irony of this question...it's usually asked by folks who either question God's existence or clearly don't want Him to interfere with any aspect of their life. Yet those same folks would like a God who selectively intervenes as it relates to minimizing the evil & suffering in the world. There's a lot of ways to answer this question but the most effective way is to suggest what would happen to our world if He tried to stop evil!

### **SCENARIO #1...IF HE DID, LIFE WOULD BE CRAZY!**

If God decided to intervene to stop evil, suffering & pain that life as we know it would be crazy!

- If God was to stop evil—which actions would he choose?
- If God was to stop evil...would he stop at the action or would He need to go after the thoughts of people?
- If God was to stop evil—how would we accomplish it without disrupting life as we know it?

Imagine what this would actually look like...with each scenario it gets crazier and crazier!

- If God was to stop evil...would He prevent the thought from coming into our head or simply freeze a person before they act?
- If God had to freeze someone...how long would they be paralyzed? When would they snap out of it? Would they remember? How about those who watched it...would they be frozen also?
- Think about this one for a moment! If God was to stop evil—isn't it possible that people would become even more empowered to try knowing that some divine force was going to reach down and attempt to stop it? You would have created a crazy world where all sorts of mad men would try to do things knowing or thinking that God might intervene—people jumping off buildings to kill themselves or trying to get their name in the paper by trying something horrific.

### **SCENARIO #2...IF HE DID, LIFE WOULD BE SCARY!**

Folks...we must remember that one of the biggest causes of the pain and suffering that comes into our world is also the source for most of the great satisfaction in our lives as humans...free will...the ability to freely choose how to live our lives!

In their hurt & pain a person may ask God to stop evil but what if God decides to intervene in things that you really don't want? What if God chooses to selectively remove things that you don't like!

*"If God were to stamp out evil today, he would do a complete job. His action would have to include our lies and personal impurities, our lack of love, and our failure to do good. Suppose God were to decree that at midnight tonight all evil would be removed from the universe -- who of us would still be here after midnight?"*

*Paul Little*

I totally understand that the average Joe or Jane on the street is either mad, frustrated or confused that God doesn't do more to intervene immediately with men like Hitler or Stalin, yet they can't imagine that God could or would deal with their sins the same way.

**If God chose to intervene and eliminate evil, life would be scary because it would remove the expression of free choice which brings so much good, joy & happiness in our lives and in our world.**

➤ **WHY CAN'T GOD IMMEDIATELY PLACE PEOPLE IN HEAVEN?**

People ask all the time, many times with great sincerity, "Why couldn't God have immediately made this place called heaven and put all of us there?" In fact, people often get very, very mad at God because earth is not heaven! But it's important to remember something—heaven is not the kind of place that you can simply place people in!

**Heaven is a place for perfected finite beings who want to be like God and to be near God.  
Our imperfect world prepares us to be that kind of person!**

The message of the Bible is that God has no intention to force people, against their free will, to inhabit a place where He dwells. God's designed heaven to be a place where only those people who choose to be there will get their wish. In a world inhabited by human beings with free will, entrance to the best possible world (heaven) must be gained through freedom of choice. Creating a world where all humans have free-will makes it possible

**For the most people to choose the greatest possible world (heaven) and the greatest good (living with God).**

1. Our present world is not the best of all worlds
2. But it is the best way to the best of all worlds
3. Entrance to the best possible world (heaven) must be gained through freedom of choice.

God's designed heaven to be a place where only those people who choose to want to be there will get their wish.

*"There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'"*  
C.S. Lewis

Heaven is not a world of its own...only a part of God's bigger plan to give people an opportunity to be in a perfect place in the presence of a perfect God! You can't simply ask God to immediately place people in heaven!

➤ **WHAT ABOUT NATURAL DISASTERS & OTHER TRAGEDIES?**

We've spent most of the morning talking about moral evil—the kind of evil that human beings choose as a result of their own free will. But there is another kind of evil—Natural evil occurs as a consequence of nature—earthquakes, tornadoes, floods and diseases. On the back of your message notes toward the bottom—I've given you some explanations for how "free-will" defense can explain some natural evil—you may find that helpful!

However, I would like to suggest that the best way to respond to the question of natural disasters and other tragedies is like this...

**Our world is run by certain natural processes that fit the human beings that He placed in this world. Sometimes these natural processes produce natural evils—if God were to remove these natural evils He would also have to remove the natural processes themselves!**

In his very helpful book entitled, The Many Faces of Evil, Dr. John Feinberg makes this observation,

*"because of the fall there are negative consequences for the natural order...in a fallen world people die as God said they would, and if they are going to die, they must die of something. One of the causes of death is disease. Some of these*

*diseases may be contracted early in life and others may arise only later. Some diseases may kill slowly while others kill quickly. Some diseases are genetically based, while other result from germs in our world.”*

Think through this with me...

**Genetic malfunction & disease**...all of us are troubled with the disease, illness or challenges that result from genetic malfunction! However, genetic malfunction is not the norm! It works well most of the time—why would we request God to stop a process which is nothing short of an on-going miracle! Just think of the miracle of human birth and all the DNA that is transmitted from two human beings to create a child! Should God remove all these micro-organisms? To protect the human race against every malfunction or mutation of micro-organisms would require us to be glorified human beings!

**Natural order of the world**...all of us have witnessed and been disturbed by the devastating effects of typhoons, hurricanes, floods or tornadoes. However, the earth and our atmosphere is made in such a way that any of the natural evils can occur.

- There is rain—therefore there is flooding.
- There is too little rain—therefore you have drought & famine.
- The earth’s crust can move—therefore there are earthquakes!
- The earth’s atmosphere produces conditions for rain & snow but those same conditions produce hurricanes, typhoons & tornadoes!

**Imagine what it would take for God to forestall or eliminate all the negative consequences of the natural order of the world?**

The amount of regular intervention necessary to removed all the natural evils the world would produce a world that we would not recognize or know how to react!

- Life with few natural laws & governed by divine intervention would be just as crazy or scary as the evidence given for moral evil. People would be unable to distinguish from regular or irregular natural law.
- Life run by miraculous intervention would create too much unpredictable for us to know enough to make informed free choices.
- Life would be crazy if God started to suspend the natural laws of gravity to protect someone from falling or a snowslide—what if people started to float off into space?

I think all of our protests really come down to the fact that people simply want an idyllic situation—we had that and we will have that—we just don’t have it now!

**God isn’t obligated to intervene to forestall the negative or ultimate consequences of living in a fallen world where we will ultimate face disease & death!**

-----

Allow me to finish this morning by looking at the unique viewpoint of Jesus of Nazareth. His words-- spoken almost 2000 years ago—still speak enormous truth & insight into these issues...in fact they leave us three simple, yet timeless insights...insights that serve to guide us as we speak to people about the issues of evil & suffering...

**INSIGHT #1...SUFFERING IS NOT A JUDGMENT ON THE GUILTY**

Jesus was once asked about a collapsed tower under which eighteen men were buried & killed. Apparently, this collapsed tower was a natural tragedy that was widely known and talked about in the city of Jerusalem. In the aftermath of this very clear example of suffering in the world...Jesus was asked His opinion! Listen to what he said,

*<sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”*  
*Luke 13:4,5 NIV*

Jesus used the incident to point out a very simple truth...you and I live in an imperfect world where evil, pain, suffering and injustice comes through the actions of others and from the reality of living in an imperfect world. Jesus was shocked that people would attempt to claim that they knew precisely what God's purposes were for this event. Jesus made it very clear

**Suffering is not a judgment on the guilty!**  
**We all live in an imperfect world—these events fall on the righteous and unrighteous alike!**  
**Our job is not to connect-the-dots with people's tragedy!**

-----

## **INSIGHT #2...DON'T LECTURE; DIALOGUE**

Jesus once encountered a woman with an incredibly diverse & sorted past. You couldn't find two more different people—the Samaritan woman and the Son of God. Listen as Jesus begins a genuine dialogue with this woman....

*<sup>7</sup> When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” <sup>8</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”*  
*John 4:7-10 NIV*

Jesus embarks on a series of questions and veiled statements so that the two of them could actually start the process of talking...you and I need to do the same thing!

Most of our unchurched or unsaved friends don't want to hear a lecture & most of us feel scared to even have a conversation! So why not just begin to ask questions. On the back side of your message notes I've written down some simple questions that you can ask your friends—questions that will begin a dialogue and show them that living in a world with free-will is still consistent with believing in God!

**I think it's much more effective to simply ask penetrating questions—it begins the process of dialogue!**

-----

## **INSIGHT #3... DON'T IGNORE THE EMOTIONAL PROBLEM OF EVIL**

In one of the most poignant moments in Jesus' public ministry he came to his dear friends Mary & Martha in the direct aftermath of the death of Lazarus. Listen...

*<sup>32</sup> When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” <sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.*  
*John 11:32-33 NIV*

Folks...there is a huge difference between stating an argument and understanding the hurt inside a human life! Jesus understood this. This is what is at stake in many of our conversations! The intellectual problem revolves around giving an explanation; the emotional problem revolves around understanding the emotional pain of people.

- Don't try to put an intellectual bandaid on an emotional hemorrhage.
- Don't immediately rush to try to answer a question without seeing why it's asked.
- Make sure they understand that you "feel" a person's hurt & loss.

**With a head full of questions and a heart full of empathy—  
God will use you to answer the biggest question of our day!**

**PRAYER**