

Podcast Companion

The Problem of Evil & Suffering

In today's session of the podcast we looked at continuing our study on the problem of suffering and evil, and this week we've looked at the second and last implicit assumption made in the standard intellectual problem of evil – namely, that God would prefer a world in which there is no suffering.

On the face of it, I'll admit that this seems plausible. If something loves another something unconditionally, then they wouldn't want the object of their love to suffer. Seems reasonable, doesn't it?

Until we start to really think about it. We always think of suffering as this terrible evil that causes nothing but damage to someone, but is that the case? Is there just no good to be found in seemingly trivial or meaningless suffering?

C.S. Lewis once said "what do people mean when they say, 'I am not afraid of God because I know that He is good'? Haven't they ever been to a dentist?"

What Lewis is getting at here is that something that is seemingly painful, for example a root canal at the dentist, is definitely for our good – if we didn't have that procedure then rot and pain would be the result, which would lead to more suffering, worse suffering. More than that, the agent permitting or even seemingly causing the suffering has sufficient reason for it.

You all know this; we've been talking about this loads lately!

Suffering isn't always bad – there are good outcomes of suffering. Something as trivial as the dentist is a good example of this. Another is being a parent! You don't always do the thing that makes your children happy, because it's not always good. It would make a child happier to never be disciplined when they do something unacceptable! But that wouldn't be in the best interest of the child though, would it? Jordan Peterson once wisely said "sometimes your job as a parent is to make your child less happy".

This has a great parallel to our own experience and recent studies – after all, who is God? Abba, Father! God is the ultimate parent. Any parent would *love* to be able to see exactly what their child would do in every single situation and be able to engineer a world in which the absolute best would happen for them! Or even just to be able to know what the best is! But we're fallible and limited, so we do the best we can without that knowledge. God, however, has that knowledge! He knows what you would do given any circumstance and knows the absolute best result for you, and can perfectly address your suffering with subsequent goodness!

If you're not 100% on how God can know this, please read the companion piece from last week's episode – it covers all sorts of things, like God's natural/middle/free knowledge, His understanding of possible and feasible worlds, and His actualisation of this world.

So, I don't think there's any reason to believe that if God is all-loving, then He would rather a world in which there is no suffering, based purely on the fact that suffering often leads to more goodness!

Perhaps, then, we would rather say that an all-loving God would rather a world in which there is no *needless* suffering. That seems more agreeable, doesn't it?

Well, how do we define *needless* suffering? You could say that it's suffering from which there is no

good, and that's fine... but how do we know there's no good that comes from any suffering? I don't think, given our limited scope and ability to comprehend the world and long-term consequences of our actions, that we can ever say we know certain suffering has no good at the end of it.

Also, what the world sees as good and what God sees as good are both very different. The world values happiness, but God values holiness.

The absolute best thing that can happen in any human's life is that they come to know God through the saving work of Jesus Christ, repent of and turn from their previous sin, and disciple themselves as followers of the one true God, thus inheriting eternal life and happiness. That's it, that's the Endgame.

Furthermore, because there doesn't seem any good that may come to the individual at the end of their suffering, how do we know there isn't a greater good that comes for *others* as a result of the person's suffering?

All of this is to say that we have no way to know if suffering is needless, on a worldly level.

On a Godly level, however, we can actually say that there is no needless suffering, because as we know – when eternal life and happiness is on the table suffering now to inherit later is well worth it! This is the topic of next week's podcast and companion, so look forward to that in order to best understand it.

You also need to consider that, without suffering and evil, good doesn't ever get realised. There is no good without evil, one is meaningless without the other – when evil occurs it makes good things valuable, when good exists it makes suffering relevant as it's a noticeable deviation from good times. Hopefully that makes sense.

To help clear this up, let me quote Augustine, from his work *Enchiridion*:

"From this it follows that there is nothing to be called evil if there is nothing good. A good that wholly lacks an evil aspect is entirely good. Where there is some evil in a thing, its good is defective or defectible. Thus, there can be no evil where there is no good."

I'm not sure I would necessarily recommend reading that work of Augustine, as even the paragraph I took that from had me reading it a few times to fully grasp it, but consider taking some time to read a bit about him and his work as he was a hugely important and influential Christian philosopher.

There's one more factor to this part of the argument, however, and that is our free will!

As we said earlier and previously, it's impossible for God to make someone do something freely. That means that God works, through His own choice, to work *with* our decisions, rather than *against* them or to simply create them. This in and of itself is a massive goodness afforded to us by God! So, given our free will, God might not be able to feasibly create a world in which we all have the good of growing as people and learning of and following Jesus without suffering. We might just cause our own suffering through our own decisions, and God lovingly uses it all for our ultimate good.

That should be mind-bogglingly massive for us – God can use, without causing, our own free choices, to ensure we get to the ultimate goal of salvation, that He intends, before our choices are made.

God can preserve both His sovereignty and our free will, which is simply *awesome*.

Now, when I have talked about this with people in the past, there often follows a conversation where people ask how God can use something or know something, prior to it happening, without causing it. Whilst I covered this off last week in the companion, just in case you didn't read it or missed it, let me give you an admittedly imperfect analogy to help you understand this:

Imagine a barometer. If you're not sure, a barometer essentially predicts or forecasts the weather. Now, imagine this barometer is infallible – it literally cannot be wrong.

This means, it perfectly predicts every single weather event and weather change, without fail. It

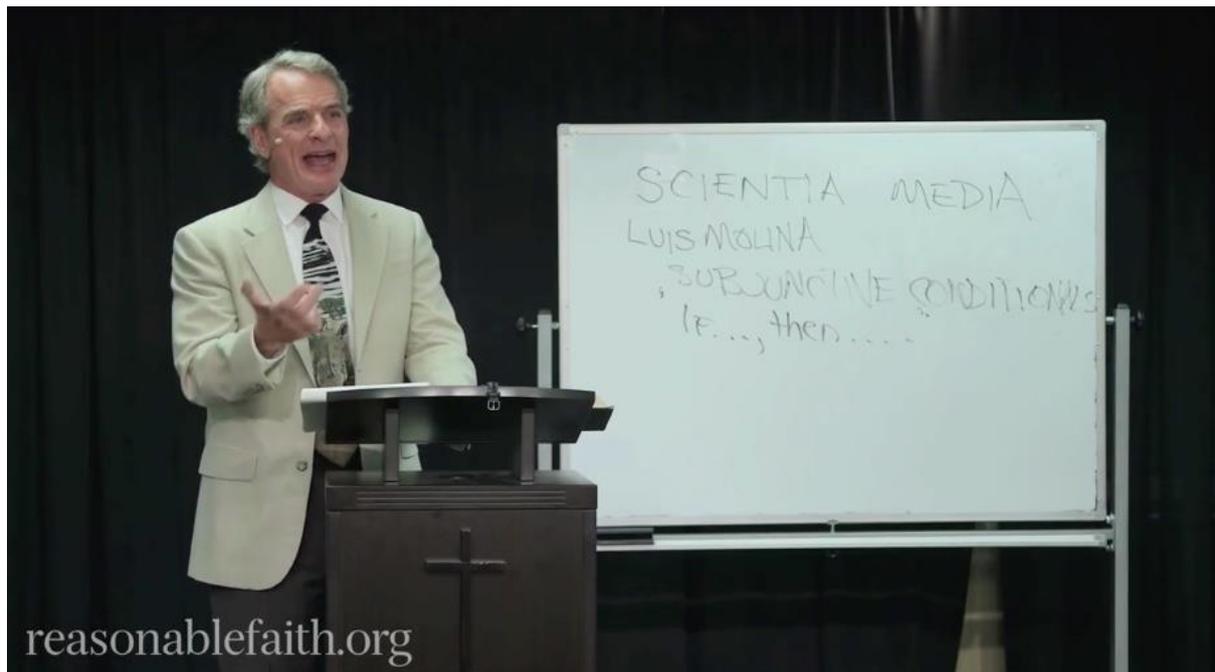
does this prior to anyone being able to see or experience the weather.

Does this mean the barometer causes the weather? Not even a little bit, it simply perfectly predicts it.

That's the most basic explanation of God's ability to know our decisions prior to our taking them without causing them as I can give.

If you would like to know more about middle knowledge and how God interacts with time, and you're willing to look at something super technical, I can recommend [this article](#) on Reasonable Faith, which deals with these issues.

Otherwise, for a slightly more surface-level, introductory and accessible understanding of this, you can check out this video of William Lane Craig in his Defenders class:



So, let's summarise then what we've looked at today:

- Suffering isn't always a bad thing without any purpose or meaning
- God has created a world in which it is reasonable to believe some suffering was unavoidable
- God's sovereignty, in addition to His natural, middle and free knowledge, allows Him to create a world in which free will and His purposes are combined
- God therefore has morally permissible reasons to allow some suffering
- God doesn't cause or determine our actions and suffering but rather works out our choices within His purpose

I'm hoping that helps to show that implicit assumption B, that God would prefer a world without suffering, is *not* necessarily true! Thus, the intellectual argument of suffering & evil as we looked at previously does not work!

Let's remind ourselves of the argument:

P1. It is logically impossible that an all-loving & all-powerful God and evil can co-exist

P2. Suffering & evil exist

C1. Therefore, God does not exist

And we discussed the implicit assumptions of these explicit premises – namely, that in order for it to work you have to assume two things:

- A. If God is all powerful, then He can create any world that He wants
- B. If God is all loving, He prefers a world in which there is no suffering

We know from last week that the implicit assumption A is null and void as God cannot create any world He wants, and we know from this week that God has morally permissible reasons for allowing suffering to take place.

Therefore, the intellectual argument of evil & suffering is a non-starter!

Congratulations, you have officially taken your first steps into the world of apologetics!

Now, as usual, here's our scripture of the week! Romans 5:3-5 – *“More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”*

So, why is this important?

Well, when we discuss evil & suffering, as we have been doing, it's important to take time to rest in the promises of God.

Here we have the eternal perspective of suffering I keep banging on about – Paul is saying we should rejoice in suffering because of the long-term benefits to the believer! We grow as people and Christians when we suffer, or go through hard times, we learn to endure (we become less weak when faced with trials), we have greater character (our strengths and weaknesses are rounded out and developed), we gain hope (because we have seen the promises of God in action before or rest in their coming). Isn't that amazing? All of this, we're reminded, comes via the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

Finally, here's our question of the week:

What is *your* hope for the future? How is God growing you in this time to prepare you for it?

I really hope you've enjoyed this, and I hope it's practical, useful knowledge to both undergird and strengthen your own faith, but also to inform you for helping and loving others.

As always guys don't be afraid to get in the youth group chat on WhatsApp and let us know how you're doing and what you're thinking. Make sure you have your prayer requests ready for our Bible studies on Thursdays so we can make sure we're all in this together. You can also interact with some stuff on Instagram @chawnyouth.

See you next week!