Chapter 2 How Could a Good God Allow Suffering?

Either God is good but not powerful enough to stop evil, or else He’s powerful but He won’t stop evil, so He can’t be all good. How can an all good and all powerful God allow all the terrible things that go on in this world?! (For example, the 2004 Tsunami that killed some 268,000 people, ISIS beheadings, the Taliban massacre of 141 school children, child abuse, war crimes, etc.)

To many thinking people, evil and suffering in the world prove there must not be a God, at least not one like Christianity proposes. For centuries, philosophers have used this kind of argument to disprove God and keep people from faith. It is considered one of the greatest obstacles to Christian faith in the world. But is it?

Some see this as a philosophical argument, but for others, it is more personal, often because suffering has touched them or someone in their family personally. Watching a loved one die of cancer, die or suffer in a senseless act of violence or an accident, or otherwise suffer in life causes people to say, whether there is a God or not, I don’t care. I just know that if there is one, He/she/it can’t be trusted!

A philosopher named J.L. Mackie says, “If a good and powerful God exists, he would not allow pointless evil, but because there is much unjustifiable, pointless evil in the world, the traditional good and powerful God could not exist. Some other god or no god may exist, but not the traditional God.” (qtd. on pg. 23)

Keller presents two lines of reasoning to answer this argument. First, he asks, “how dare you, a finite human being, say that just because you can’t imagine a good reason for all the suffering, that there is no such reason?” He goes on to say that such thinking is “an enormous faith in one’s own cognitive faculties.” (pg. 23)

There is a common tendency with secular people today, with skeptics, and even with modern or postmodern, liberal Christianity – to place a higher value on human reasoning than on biblical revelation. Even though most people today are relativists who reject the idea of absolute truth, without recognizing it, they at the same time believe their own concepts of reality and what’s right are absolutely true and reliable, higher and better than what is taught in Christianity. They know things are just wrong in the universe. There’s evil and suffering, so there cannot possibly be a good God, because these things are meaningless. There’s no reason for them!

But just because we can’t see any reasons for suffering, however, doesn’t mean there aren’t any! Our finite minds simply cannot comprehend all that is going on, or see reasons for these things. But an infinite and omniscient God obviously can!

Keller mentions the story of Joseph in the Bible, how he suffered at the hands of his brothers and then was unjustly accused by Potiphar’s wife in Egypt. It must’ve seemed to him that this was all unjust and to no good purpose whatsoever. But by the end of the story, he came to see how God allowed the evil to be done to him for a number of very good purposes. First, all his sufferings seemed to change Joseph himself, making him more patient, more humble, and more concerned for others. But those sufferings also got Joseph into position in Egypt so that he was able to save his own family and many more besides. The same was true of Daniel some centuries after this, as well as countless others, including the apostles Peter and Paul.

In fact, there are many, many people who can attest to the fact that things they thought were terrible ended up bringing good to them in some way. As an example, Keller quotes a man on page 25 who actually lost his sight in a drug deal gone bad, but that terrible experience caused him to become a better person. I wonder, is there anyone who ever got saved when everything in their life was going well?!
Dr. D.A. Carson, in a quote I read somewhere but can no longer find, said something to the effect that he, as a finite human being, could think of many possible reasons why various bad things could happen, so it’s logical to suppose that the infinite God may be accomplishing hundreds or even millions of good things in any and every seemingly bad situation. For example, why does a 40 something mother have cancer? Maybe it is bringing her back to the Lord, or her husband or rebellious son, maybe it’s showing her the shortness and vanity of life, maybe she’s witnessing to the doctors or nurses, maybe she’s an encouragement to someone else who is suffering, maybe it is building perseverance in her, maybe it is working out the selfishness in her husband, teaching a doctor some new approach, etc., etc., etc. And any and every situation is like this, with countless possibilities we will never know about till we reach eternity.

Joseph got to see (eventually) why he had been allowed to suffer. God never did explain it to Job, but the book which tells his story has taught millions about what goes on behind the scenes of suffering. Exiled Israelites like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Mordecai and Esther, etc., testified to God and spread His word throughout the Middle East during their time of suffering, and through that, the magi were looking for Messiah when His star appeared in the east. A young Israelite girl, unnamed, was taken captive in a raid, and was able to tell the Syrian general, Naaman, about the prophet Elijah, so the man got healed. Norsemen came to Christ when they raided English territories and carried young Christian women captive to their homelands. John Walsh lost a son to a monstrous pervert, and worked to change laws, got a TV program (America’s Most Wanted) started to fight crime, etc. On and on we could go with this.

Keller’s second line of reasoning to refute these arguments is that, though suffering is a problem for the believer, it is also very definitely one for the unbeliever! This was a very brilliant point Keller made, one we do well to ponder and learn. In fact, he actually subtitles this section, “Evil and Suffering May Be (If Anything), Evidence for God.” I wonder how many of us may have thought this before?

First of all, it’s a problem that atheists even say something is “unjust” or “evil” or that people “shouldn’t have to suffer” in the first place. Says who? If you think the universe is cruel and unjust, where did you get that concept? If we are the products of blind chance, there is no such thing as cruelty or injustice! If everything is accidental, then it’s just as it is, period. There is no good or evil, justice or injustice. How could there be? Those concepts presuppose some kind of external, objective standard by which to evaluate, a way the universe “ought” to be. But only religions, a God or gods have such standards. This is inconsistent with atheism and unbelief. If the universe is simply a cosmic accident, it is what it is, period. Who’s to say what “ought” to be? Who’s to say something is cruel, evil, unjust? The universe doesn’t seem to agree with puny man about this, so if you’re an atheist, I gotta tell you, you must be wrong! You’re outvoted! What do you propose to do about that?

Not only is this so, but in addition, most non-believers today accept Darwinian evolution as the explanation for life on this earth. Darwin believed in “the survival of the fittest,” did he not? Well, as Keller points out, “The evolutionary mechanism of natural selection depends on death, destruction, and violence of the strong against the weak – these things are perfectly natural. On what basis then, does the atheist judge the natural world to be horrifyingly wrong, unfair, and unjust?” (pg. 26) It’s really a one-two punch! There is no concept of “ought” when you don’t believe in God, and the very theory most of you so devotedly believe would necessarily disprove what you’re saying! You think evil and suffering disproves God. But in reality, all it proves is that you believe in absolute truth “out there” somewhere (good and evil, justice), and you believe your concept of it is absolutely the only right one! What the Bible says, you don’t accept, because you know better than God!

So when a skeptic asks, How can there be a good God when there’s so much evil in the world?, we should just confidently answer such a question with our own question. What do you mean by evil? Evil as compared to what? Something can only be evil if there is something good with which to compare it! How do we know what good is? Good according to what or whom? There would have to be a standard of good and evil “out there”
someplace in the universe, for us to be able to say something was evil. Of course, atheists believe we all know this within ourselves, so the “standard” is just what we all intuitively “know” right?

Now Christians have a standard to measure by, because we believe in a good God. We think of Him as good because He has revealed Himself as such in scripture, through nature, and most of all, through the Incarnation. Jesus showed us what good is, because, “There is none good but God.” (Mat. 19:17) As Christians, we also believe we were created in the image of God which includes having a God-given conscience within us. Because of that conscience, we intuitively and instinctively know there is such a thing as good and evil. We believe most people (unless their conscience has been damaged or they’re pathological) just know within themselves what’s right and wrong. They know if something is evil. The conscience is not infallible, because it’s subjective, and subject to becoming hardened or calloused (the Bible says “seared,” 1 Tim. 4:2), but it is still a generally good guide for most people. We also have an explanation (free will and the Fall) for why things aren’t what we intuitively think they should be. We understand the world isn’t what it once was, or what it “ought” to be.

But the person who says there can be no God because there’s too much suffering and evil, their very argument is based on something that cannot really exist in their system! If there’s no God, then whence cometh the concept of good and evil? If there’s no God, there is no good or evil, there’s only whatever set of values individuals or societies decide on in their minds. It’s all subjective, culturally influenced, and relative. So then what the unbeliever is using as a proof there is no God is actually just as strong a proof that there is one, because we all instinctively know good and evil, right and wrong, which, to us, indicates there’s a God who built that into us! Also, if you say good and evil are just determined by human beings, well, 1) those “realities” seem to vary person to person and culture to culture, which makes it hard to settle on a consistent, universally accepted set of them, and 2) the universe doesn’t seem to agree that they are actually realities, because things aren’t as these people say they “ought” to be, so how do we explain that? Why do people think things “ought” to be different, if that’s not the way they are?

In addition, though Christianity doesn’t explain all pain and suffering, it does “provide deep resources for actually facing it with hope and courage rather than bitterness and despair” (pg. 27, 28). Let’s consider some of these resources. There are two aspects Keller explores which can be very helpful to us in suffering if we’ll take them to heart.

The first really important aspect to consider is the fact that Jesus came into this world and suffered with and for us. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He grew up very poor, in a country oppressed by a violent and cruel dictatorship. Suffering was all around Him and He experienced it during His whole earthly life. That was greatly intensified in Gethsemane, then during His arrest, trial, scourging, and crucifixion. He suffered anxiety, fear, and great stress before He was arrested, and then insults, humiliation, verbal and physical abuse of all sorts, and then terrible physical pain in a cruel scourging, and 6 horrendous hours dying slowly on the cross. He was mistreated terribly, and completely unjustly and undeservedly. His Father had to suffer too, to see Him go through that, and have to abandon Him to it. The most loving, compassionate, kind and righteous Person in the universe was turned over to corrupt, conniving, ruthless and brutal people, and they did their absolute worst to Him. When we suffer, we need to remember that He has suffered. He knows what it’s like.

It was interesting that Keller said Jesus didn’t seem as heroic in suffering as some of His followers. (pg. 28, 29) I personally had never thought such a thing! Keller explains that this was so because Jesus’ death was qualitatively different from any other death. (pg. 30) The deeper one’s relationship with another person, the more painful it is to suffer a breakdown in that relationship. Jesus was cut off from the relationship of total love He’d had for all eternity with His Father when He suffered on the cross, being made a sin offering for us and bearing the consequences of that. He was God-forsaken for the first and only time in all of eternity, which is why He cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mat. 27:46)
Again, God doesn’t always or even often explain why He allows us to suffer. But we can be sure of the fact that He knows what it’s like to suffer. He is not unfeeling and aloof. He cares. “If we again ask the question, ‘Why does God allow evil and suffering to continue?’ and we look at the cross of Jesus, we still do not know what the answer is. However, we now know what the answer isn’t. It can’t be that He doesn’t love us. It can’t be that He is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that He was willing to take it on Himself.” (pg. 30, 31) This is the first important aspect of the comfort we can find in Christ.

Keller says this is great, but it’s not enough. He says, “I think we need something more than knowing God is with us in our difficulties. We also need hope that our suffering is ‘not in vain.’” He proceeds to show us how Christianity certainly provides exactly that.

The second hugely important aspect of Christian faith that is a comfort to us in suffering is the totally different perspective we can have toward it because of what scripture promises us about the future. We know that God sees everything we go through. One day, in the final judgment, everything will be explained and we’ll finally understand why He let us go through all we suffered. There will be heavenly rewards for those who persevered under trials and tribulations. Every bad thing we went through will ultimately be redeemed, in the sense that, it will accomplish some good purpose, which will make eternity even more glorious for us. Every bad experience and inequity will be repaired, and the evil will actually end up making us more fully enjoy the good!

Keller shares about a nightmare he had, in which his whole family died. When he woke up and found it was just a dream, he actually loved and appreciated his family more for having “lost” them. He makes the point that somehow, in the resurrection and the new heavens and new earth, the nightmare of this life will be redeemed so that somehow, we’ll end up enjoying eternity more because of it. The resurrection and regeneration Christ has promised make everything different for us poor sufferers!

There are terrible, evil people, who seemed to have everything going for them in life. They enjoyed every sort of pleasure and life was easy for them. On the other side, there are good and godly people who on earth, had wretched lives. Nothing went their way. They didn’t even get to live long, and the few years they had were miserable. How unfair it would all be, if this life were all there was! But it’s not, and scripture teaches us that. Some people never had much happiness or peace or prosperity, but they lived for God, so when they enter eternity, everything will be more than made up for them, and they will appreciate it more than we could imagine. They will finally be able to do things they’ve always dreamed of doing. All the sadness and suffering will hardly even be remembered as eons of glory roll by. Eternity will be the great equalizer for everyone.

The unbelieving person on the other hand, faces suffering with no real sense of purpose for it. If they got a good hand “dealt” to them, wonderful. But if they didn’t, it’s just unfair and terrible, and that’s all there is to it. There’s no hope that things will one day be balanced out. No concept that suffering can accomplish anything worthwhile, like producing inner qualities (humility, patience, perseverance, compassion) that make us better people, and no sense that someday everything will turn out for the good, and all our suffering will have not been in vain. The Final Judgment and an eternal perspective make suffering and evil so different for believers!

What can unbelievers tell those who are suffering with no remedy? Buck up, it’ll soon be over? Sorry you got a bad deal. That’s just the way things are! It’s all in vain, it’s pointless, purposeless. It’s all unfair and unjust. There’s no one who can appreciate what you’re going through, no one who really cares, who sympathizes, who has compassion. There’s no source of strength you can turn to. You’re on your own! Get over it! Be an adult!

Not too comforting that, is it? The contrast between what unbelief offers and what Christ offers is enormous. Suffering is a problem for all of us, it’s true. But it is a far greater one for those who don’t know and trust the Lord!