

Statement: DH262

HANDLING CHRISTIANITY'S TOUGHEST CHALLENGE

by Lee Strobel

This article first appeared in the Volume 24 / Number 1 / 2001 issue of the *Christian Research Journal*. For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: www.equip.org

SYNOPSIS

The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks have highlighted the number one objection to Christianity: How can there be a loving God when the world is so corroded with evil and suffering? How would you respond? I take an approach that's built around the "three A's" — *Assess, Answer, and Assure*.

First, I *assess* what's behind the question. If the person is asking because of current pain, I choose action over answers by reaching out to him or her with compassion — listening, serving, and showing the love of Christ in practical ways.

Second, I *answer* the question with logic and biblical analysis — humbly and respectfully. I point out that (1) human suffering came about not because God wants to hurt people but because they abused their free will; (2) although suffering isn't good, God can use it to accomplish good. He does this by using it to pull people toward salvation, sharpen their character, and discipline them for their own good; and (3) the day is coming when suffering will cease and evil will be judged.

Third, I *assure* him or her that while there's suffering in this world, there's hope through Christ. This is an evangelistic message that Christians have hope (1) because of God's comforting presence; (2) because God will create something positive from the negatives of their lives; and (3) because their suffering will pale in comparison to what He has in store for them. This leads to a natural opportunity to present the Gospel.

Finally, I let the person know that, as a Christian, God will use him or her to be part of the solution to the suffering problem. It's Christians — their values having been revolutionized by Jesus — who are on the front lines of serving the sick, feeding the hungry, and caring for the poor.

A one-word question resounded across America on 11 September 2001: "Why?"

As the nation reeled from the heart-rending stories of personal tragedy caused by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, people wanted to know — no, they were *demanding* to know — how there could be so much evil and suffering in the world, if God is loving and all-powerful.

It's not a new question, but it was being asked with fresh intensity. After all, the terrorist attacks were just the latest and most spectacular example of the evil and heartache we have grown accustomed to seeing day after day. In a way, suffering has become part of the background noise of daily living.

Before the attack, I chose a copy of *The New York Times* at random so I could survey one day's litany of cruelty and anguish. Articles described how the Chinese government was tormenting religious leaders; how Japanese parents were mourning the deaths of their sons killed in an accident at sea; and how a driver chatting on a cell phone crashed her car, killing two teenagers.

Other stories described AIDS in South Africa; war crimes in Bosnia; a terrorist bombing in Kosovo; the search for two teenage murder suspects; an epidemic of the lethal Ebola virus in Uganda; the confession of a student to the slayings of two classmates; and a spattering of references to the Rwandan genocide and the ongoing strife in the Middle East.¹

That was just a sampling from one issue of one newspaper on one typical day.

Welcome to the world!

It's no wonder that when I commissioned pollster George Barna to ask a cross-section of Americans, "If you could ask God one question and knew he would give you an answer, what would you ask?" the top response (17 percent) was, "Why is there so much pain and suffering?"²

The problem of how a loving God can exist when there is so much pain in the world is perhaps the skeptic's most formidable broadside against theism in general and Christianity in particular. If you're actively sharing your faith, it's only a matter of time before someone will corner you with a species of this critique.

What will you say? Could you, at a moment's notice, provide a thoughtful response?

Plenty of philosophical tomes deal exhaustively with this subject from an academic perspective. While they serve an important purpose, my goal in this article is simply to equip you with a basic approach to dealing with this issue in a typical conversation with an unbeliever.

Personally, I use what I call the "three A's" strategy in responding to the evil and suffering challenge. The A's stand for *Assess*, *Answer*, and *Assure*. Taken together, they provide a field-proven approach to handling this most troubling of spiritual objections.

STEP ONE: ASSESS

Anxious to jump to arguments, evidence, and logic, some Christian apologists leap over this initial step in dealing with the problem of pain and suffering. I've learned it's essential to discern carefully at the outset whether skeptics are raising this issue (1) out of philosophical concern or (2) because they are personally going through painful circumstances.

If you discern that the abstract issue of pain and suffering is a roadblock to their spiritual journey, then it's fine to share answers with them on this topic. Many times, however, individuals are not raising this issue out of mere academic curiosity but because they are dealing with suffering themselves. They may have recently received bad medical news, lost their job, gone through a divorce, or experienced the death of a loved one.

While people in the throes of personal pain may ask why a loving God would allow suffering, most likely they are not really looking for verbal answers. In fact, if you coolly respond with a recitation of arguments, you may inadvertently alienate them. Instead, what they desperately need from you is the very real love, compassion, and comfort of Jesus.

When I sense people are raising the suffering question out of their own pain, I invite them to describe at length what's prompting their question, and then I listen with sincere concern. I acknowledge the depth of their pain and let them know I think it's legitimate and valid. I spend time with them, serve them, and encourage them. This can be the most persuasive apologetic of all — a person whose life has been transformed by Christ now reaching out with love to someone in desperate need.

Terry Muck describes how powerful this can be. He talks about a letter written by a man who used to have no spiritual interest. He lived next door to a Christian, and they had a casual friendship. Then the non-Christian's wife suddenly died. Here's part of a letter he wrote afterward:

I was in total despair. I went through the funeral preparations and the service like I was in a trance. And after the service I went to the path along the river and walked all night. But I did not walk alone. My neighbor — afraid for me, I guess — stayed with me all night.

He did not speak; he did not even walk beside me. He just followed me. When the sun finally arose over the river, he came over to me and said, "Let's go get some breakfast."

I go to church now. My neighbor's church. A religion that can produce the kind of caring and love my neighbor showed me is something I want to find out more about. I want to be like that. I want to love and be loved like that for the rest of my life.³ (emphasis added)

Can you imagine how this widower would have reacted if his Christian neighbor instead had tried to give him six philosophical reasons why he can believe in a loving God despite the painful loss of his wife? That might be appropriate material for a later conversation, but for now the Christian did exactly the right thing: he comforted his neighbor as Jesus would have done. In doing so, he gently taught him something very concrete — and quite profound — about God.

Whenever someone engages you in a conversation about pain and suffering, ask God to help you assess the reason behind the question. Look for clues in the person's voice, demeanor, and attitude. It's OK to say, "That's an important issue. May I ask why you're interested in it?"

If the person is looking for answers, go to the second step. If, however, that person is crying out for compassion, first be God's vessel of mercy.

STEP TWO: ANSWER

Peter tells us not only to provide answers to those with questions about Christianity but also to do so "with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15). This is especially important when dealing with such a volatile objection to Christianity as evil and human suffering.

My approach is to acknowledge that this is a difficult topic that defies simple answers. I admit it was a stumbling block for me when I was a spiritual seeker. By conceding the potency of the evil-and-suffering objection and identifying with their concerns up-front, I am often able to diffuse some of their vociferousness.

Sometimes I use philosopher Peter Kreeft's strategy of saying that even if we were to agree that the evil-and-suffering objection is one argument against the existence of God, 20 arguments point persuasively in the other direction toward His existence! "Atheists must answer all twenty arguments," Kreeft said. "Theists must only answer one."⁴ This tends to put the discussion into perspective.

He also points out that our moral indignation over suffering is actually evidence in *favor* of God's existence. That's because our indignation presupposes an objective moral standard of right and wrong — a standard that does not exist without God.⁵

After discussing these preliminaries, I go through a series of points to demonstrate consistency between a loving God and the existence of suffering. I might approach the matter differently if I were interacting with someone trained in philosophy, but I've found that for average spiritual conversations, these arguments generally are helpful.

Human suffering came about because people abused their free will, not because God wanted to hurt us. God decided to give free will to men and women because this is the only way we can enjoy the highest value in the universe, which is love. Jesus said, "The first and greatest commandment" is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and the second is "Love your neighbor as yourself" (see Matt. 22:37–39). Without free will, we could never love, because in order to love we must have the choice *not* to love. If God had forced us to love, this would be akin to programming a robot to say, "I love you." It could utter the words, but they would be meaningless because it has no choice but to say them.

"The classic defense of God against the problem of evil is that it's not logically possible to have free will and no possibility of moral evil," explains Kreeft, author of *Making Sense Out of Suffering*. "In other words, once God chose to create human beings with free will, then it was up to them, rather than to God, as to whether there was sin or not....It's a self-contradiction — a meaningless nothing — to have a world where there's real choice while at the same time no possibility of choosing evil. To ask why God didn't create such a world is like asking why God didn't create colorless color or round squares."⁶

When Adam and Eve exercised their free will to disobey God, this opened the door for *moral* and *natural* evil to plague humankind. Moral evil is when we make the choice to be hateful, abusive, and selfish, thus bringing suffering to ourselves and others.

Again, *we* make this decision. People starve in some parts of the world, but the problem isn't a shortage of food. Cliffe Knechtle points out that the world produces enough food for each person to consume 3,000 calories a day. The

problem is that corrupt governments and selfish individuals don't care enough to feed the hungry. "It is a cop-out to blame God for human irresponsibility," he says.⁷

Knechtle, who cut his apologetic teeth sparring with skeptical college students, observed that our hands can hold a gun that can inflict suffering or they can extend food to a hungry person. We make the choice; that is, we exercise our free will.⁸

Natural evil consists of earthquakes, tornadoes, droughts, and other disasters of nature that cause human suffering. Paul said, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Rom. 8:22).

How is this connected to the first decision to rebel against God? Knechtle explains, "When we human beings told God to shove off, he partially honored our request." Nature was adversely affected. Genetic breakdown, disease, pain, and death became part of the human experience. "We are born into a world made chaotic and unfair by a humanity in revolt against its Creator," Knechtle says.⁹

Though suffering isn't good, God can use it to accomplish good. God certainly would have been justified in scrapping the world once we abused our free will by rebelling against Him and harming each other. But in His mercy, God uses the pain of this world to bring about beneficial results for us.

For example, God can use suffering to pull people toward salvation in Christ. "For God can use sorrow in our lives to help us turn away from sin and seek salvation," Paul said. "We will never regret that kind of sorrow" (2 Cor. 7:10).¹⁰ C. S. Lewis observed, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."¹¹ Certainly, any suffering is worth it if it succeeds in bringing us to Christ and the eternal life He offers.

God can also use suffering to sharpen our character and help us become more like Christ. The writer of Hebrews made this point about Jesus: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (Heb. 5:8). If Jesus needed suffering to learn, why would we think it would be any different for us?

Ask Olympic athletes whether they merely traipsed to the top of their sport, or whether their training involved long, tortuous years of sacrifice and suffering. They'll tell you, "No pain, no gain." Similarly, God may allow a certain amount of suffering in our lives if He knows, in His omniscience, that the result will be the development of a more godly character.

In addition, God may use pain to lovingly discipline His children. The writer of Hebrews added, "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:10-11).

"Discipline" sounds harsh, but good parents know the worst thing they could do in raising their children would be to never discipline them. Do parents enjoy this task? Of course not. They do it because they love their children. They can look ahead and see that the momentary pain of discipline will reap a positive outcome in the end. Why would the same not be true in our relationship with our heavenly Father?

The day is coming when suffering will cease and evil will be judged. Can you imagine reading half of John Grisham's latest novel and complaining, "What a lousy author! He never tied up the loose ends of the plot! The bad guys never got what they deserved!"

Norman Geisler says it's similarly irrational to criticize God for failing to punish evil people. Because God hasn't done it yet doesn't mean He won't do it. Indeed, the Bible says the day of judgment and end of pain are coming (see 2 Pet. 3:7 and Rev. 21:4).

So what's holding up God? Nothing less than His compassion! "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness," said Peter. "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

These are some of the basic points I make in responding to the evil and suffering mystery. I'm not through, however, until I get to the third A, which is where the gospel shines through.

STEP THREE: ASSURE

Yes, I concede, evil and pain are major factors in this life. As we've seen, though, this is not inconsistent with the existence of a loving God. In fact, God loves us so much that He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the midst of our sin-scarred world. Jesus experienced more rejection, humiliation, and pain than any of us ever will, culminating in the excruciating torture of the cross — all to pay for our sins.

Consequently, I emphasize, we all have a choice to make when we face trials: we can run toward this Jesus who loves us so much, or we can flee the other way. Running away only brings more desperation, loneliness, and alienation, while receiving Christ as our forgiver and leader opens the door to hope. How?

Christians have hope because of Christ's comforting presence in their lives. Followers of Jesus don't face the struggles of life on their own. Christ can bring them courage and strength in the midst of whatever difficulties they are enduring. Jesus told His disciples, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world, you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, NASB).

Christians have hope because God will create something positive from the negatives in their lives. Paul said, "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" (Rom. 8:28).

This promise is reserved for true Christ-followers, and it doesn't mean God necessarily will make our suffering go away, but it does mean He will work for ultimate good even through our pain. Think of what Joseph told his brothers, who had sold him into slavery: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20).

Sometimes I meet people who have difficulty believing this promise. Their suffering has been so severe that they can't see any possible way God could accomplish anything good from it.

I point out that God was powerful enough to take the worst thing that has ever happened in the history of the world — *decide*, or the death of His one-and-only Son on the cross — and turn it into the very best thing that has ever happened in the history of the world: the opening of heaven to all who follow Him. If God can do that, why would we think He was somehow incapable of drawing good from our circumstances, no matter how dire?¹²

Christians have hope because our suffering will pale in comparison to what God has in store for us. The apostle Paul, no stranger to hardship, deprivation, and pain, said, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18).

The Bible paints a glorious picture of the heaven that awaits those who follow Jesus: "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4). In light of heaven, observed Teresa of Avila, a life of the worst suffering on earth will be seen to be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel!

To explain this, sometimes I use an admittedly imperfect but nevertheless helpful illustration. "Imagine," I say, "that on the first day of the year, you had a horrible time — you had a horrendous toothache, your stock portfolio plummeted, you crashed your new car. But then each and every one of the remaining 364 days of 2001 was filled with incredible joy. Your stocks rebounded and you made twenty million dollars; you had an idyllic vacation in Tahiti; you got the dream job you've always wanted; your daughter gave birth to your first grandchild and named the child after you; you were selected the state's Person of the Year. Each day is blissful and wonderful.

"Now, imagine that at the end of the year someone asks you, 'How was 2001 for you?' You'd undoubtedly reply, 'It was terrific!' The friend might ask, 'But didn't it start out bad?'

"You'd say, 'Yes, you're right. I can't deny that. But when I look at the totality of the year, putting everything into context, it's been great! The 364 wonderful days far outweighed the one bad day.'

“The same is true for heaven,” I say. “Even after a hard life, a life of struggles and difficulties, after the equivalent of 154,563,467 days of pure bliss in the presence of God Almighty in heaven — with infinite more days to come — if someone asked, ‘How has your existence been?’ you’d exclaim enthusiastically, ‘It has been absolutely wonderful!’

“If the person inquired, ‘But didn’t you have a tough time before you got to heaven?’ you’d reply, ‘Well, yes, that’s true. I can’t deny that. But when I put everything into context, in light of all God’s outpouring of goodness to me, those momentary bad days aren’t even worth comparing with the eternity of blessings and joy that I’ve experienced!’”

It’s at this point when I typically urge the individual to respond to the gospel. I might say, “I know the issue of pain is a concern for you. But now can you see that human beings are the ones who opened the door to it, not God? And can you see how he is offering to carry you through the hard times, to draw good from the bad in your life, and to take you to heaven when you die? What’s keeping you from receiving Him as your forgiver and leader right now?” Even if the person balks, at least he or she has been given much to think about.

There’s one more dimension I often save for the end. People who are aghast at the indifference and cruelty of the world need to understand that God wants His followers to be part of the solution.

As Christ transforms us, we become His ambassadors to a hurting world. We are His arms and legs in actively alleviating the suffering of others. Christians minister to the sick, relieve the loneliness of the imprisoned, feed the hungry, rescue the addicts, care for the orphans, and build homes and provide clothing for the poor.

Paul declared, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Cor. 1:3–4). Do you remember the parade of horrors I described in *The New York Times*? Well, that wasn’t all I found in that randomly selected edition. There also was a story about Christians in Los Angeles who are reaching out with compassion and practical assistance to drug addicts and street people. Having been redeemed and then changed by Christ, they are now devoting their time, talents, and treasures to helping relieve the suffering of others.

And do you remember my mention of the Ebola outbreak in Uganda? The focus of that article was Dr. Matthew Lukwiya of St. Mary’s Hospital in the remote Gulu District, who displayed breathtaking courage in saving the lives of as many villagers as he could. What motivated him to serve the sick at great personal risk? His faith in Jesus.

Finally, he, too, became infected. “Oh, God, I think I will die in my service,” he prayed. “If I die, let me be the last.” Then, in a strong voice, he sang, “Onward Christian Soldiers.”¹³

Dr. Lukwiya died saving the lives of others. It was something he learned from his Master.

Yes, pain and suffering and disease and disasters and cruelty and hate and injustice are everywhere in this world — not because of God, but because of us; yet, God is not a distant, detached, and disinterested deity. He personally reached out to save us at great cost, and He has dispatched an army of His followers to be light in a world darkened by sin and despair. The reason: He loves us so much.

Why would we all not want to embrace a God like that?

Lee Strobel is a teaching pastor at Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, CA, and author of the bestsellers *The Case for Christ*, *The Case for Faith*, and *God’s Outrageous Claims*.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Philip Yancey. *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.

C. S. Lewis. *The Problem of Pain*. New York: Macmillan, 1962.

Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Estes. *When God Weeps*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

Luis Palau. *Where Is God When Bad Things Happen?* New York: Doubleday, 1999.

Peter Kreeft. *Making Sense Out of Suffering*. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1986.

Lee Strobel. *The Case for Faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000.

NOTES

1. See *The New York Times*, 18 February 2001.
2. The OmniPoll was conducted by Barna Research Group, Ltd., January 1999.
3. Terry C. Muck, *Those Other Religions in Your Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 150–51.
4. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 33. For a summary of the 20 arguments for the existence of God, see Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994). Various arguments also are summarized in Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).
5. Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1986), 31.
6. Strobel, 37.
7. Cliffe Knechtle, *Give Me an Answer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 52.
8. *Ibid.*, 53.
9. *Ibid.*, 54.
10. New Living Translation.
11. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 93.
12. I derived this argument from Peter Kreeft in an interview published in my book, *The Case for Faith*, 39.
13. Blaine Harden, “Dr. Matthew’s Passion,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 18 February 2001, 26ff.