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ADDRESSING THE EMOTIONAL PROBLEM OF EVIL: Why Christians Hope

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After recently teaching an apologetics seminar on how to engage others in conversation, a gentleman from the audience pulled me aside and spoke with me about a family member. He said, “My son-in-law is angry with God. He doesn’t understand why God took our daughter, who was his beautiful, kind, and loving wife. He tells us that it should have been him, not her. Now he says he cannot believe in God because of this evil, this great loss of life. What should I say to him?” His question is one that I receive many times each year. What can we do when someone has suffered greatly, and out of that suffering is born disbelief or doubt?

Indeed, many of us can think back to a time when a family member or friend has suffered greatly and that sufferer began to doubt God’s existence or at least to question God. These are the times when I wished just one of my philosophical arguments could make everything better. Yet I know that even a great philosopher, if facing the practical outworking of the problem of evil, cannot cure his own suffering or speed his grieving.

C. S. Lewis faced this problem. He wrote a theodicy on evil in his book, *The Problem of Pain*, but then suffered greatly at the loss of his wife from cancer. After her death, he kept a journal, later titled *A Grief Observed*, through which we catch a glimpse of Lewis’s agony: “No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear. I am not afraid but the sensation is like being afraid.”¹

Since it is a safe generalization to say that every person who has ever lived has experienced evil in some form or fashion, including pain and suffering, answering the problem of evil is a formidable task. In his book, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, William Lane Craig asserts, “Undoubtedly the greatest intellectual obstacle to belief in God—for both the Christian and the non-Christian—is the so-called problem of evil.”² Due to the breadth and depth of the effects of evil, I believe the problem of evil is not only the number one *intellectual* obstacle to belief in God, but it also rules as the number one *emotional* obstacle to belief in God.³ The emotional problem of evil, an aversion to a God who would allow suffering and evil, is even more difficult for me to answer due to the power of the emotional objection.

Christian philosopher Dallas Willard describes the influence of our emotions: “Feelings live on the front row of our lives like unruly children clamoring for attention.”⁴ These feelings can ravage our ability to reason through a situation, especially when that situation devastatingly affects our lives. Though a logically coherent argument may be offered for why God allows evil, the person who is suffering may not be impressed by such an argument. They may reject God based solely on the existence or experience of suffering.⁵ But if it is true that the emotional response to the problem of evil is difficult to reach with solid apologetics, what then can be resolved in this matter? Actually, much can be resolved for both the intellectual and emotional aspects, for God is seemingly assumed in even addressing the very concept of evil. Without the absolute, objective moral standard found in God, evil would be impossible to define. In *Enrichidion*, Saint Augustine asserts, “There can be no evil where there is no good.”⁶ Augustine points out that evil is, in some sense, parasitically related to a standard of goodness.⁷ Professor Kenneth Samples further argues in the book, *Without a Doubt*, “The atheist, in effect, depends on the objective moral system of Christianity in order to raise moral objections against the Christian God.”⁸ Essentially, the answer to both the intellectual and emotional problem of evil, though sounding simplistic, is the Christian God. For this article, I will only briefly overview how apologetics can respond to the emotional problem of evil, leaving the full investigation of the intellectual problem (internal and external arguments) to another article.

RESPONDING APOLOGETICALLY

Whereas the intellectual problem of evil elicits a philosophical response with cold, hard facts and argumentation, the emotional problem requires a counselor’s response with a genuine concern for the skeptic’s suffering.⁹ Many times, we may hurt inside carrying anger with a God who would allow us or others to suffer. This problem may be one that momentarily undertakes no argumentation at all but requires a loving friend who will be a compassionate listener. However, this is also a time when apologetics and our study of the truth can make a striking impact, both for the sufferer and for the one grieving with him or her.

My friend, Christian apologist Neil Mammen,¹⁰ experienced the power of apologetics to address the emotional problem of evil first hand. Neil and his wife, Anna, gave birth prematurely to their daughter, Caroline, two weeks before her due date. While the baby appeared to be in good health at first, her condition rapidly deteriorated over the next couple of days. After only nine days, Caroline died in the hospital of several health complications. Anna recounts that day as “everything turning black and feeling like the bed was going to open up and swallow me. I felt my heart had been ripped from my chest and that I was free falling into the blackest abyss I could imagine. And I didn’t know what to do. I kept asking, “What do I do? I don’t know what to do? How can this happen?” Anna also remembers saying, “How will we go on? How will I raise Mary Katherine [their other daughter]?”

As mentioned previously, I’ve heard similar stories from others who, at this point in their story, relay how they began to question God. Out of hurt, anguish, and

sheer devastation, their whole worldview is shaken. Mere religion means nothing to them. Traditions have no purpose. They seem to be lost in a sea of uncertainty, pushed around by waves of emotion crashing down upon them. It was at this point of devastation that Anna's and Neil's emotional response was transformed by their apologetic, by their study of the truth about God.

Throughout Neil's and Anna's nine years of marriage, they had enjoyed discussions together on many of the toughest questions of life: "Is God good? Uninvolved? Indifferent?" "If God is good, why does He allow suffering in the world?" "Why do bad things happen to 'good' people?" "What about miracles? Who gets them and when and why? Are they only for the really good people? How does my faith play into miracles?" "Does God punish his people?" Together, they had fed themselves a steady diet of podcasts, readings, conferences, and discussions on these topics, deliberately working the discussions into their daily lives. When the "black abyss" hit Anna through the death of her daughter, Neil began to feed her the conclusions that they had already made in previous years of discussion: "She's not ours." "We don't deserve her." "This happens every day all over the world. We're not special." "We will go on. We will have more kids. We will not let this harden us." Anna knew that each phrase, though existentially difficult, was the result of years of searching for answers, providing her stabilization during great trauma. Her belief and faith were not based in traditions or emotions, but she "had faith that stood on reasonable evidence."

When Neil discusses his daughter's death, he explains that we will all come to a point of pain and suffering in our lives and will have to decide if what we believe is true. It is better to look into our beliefs before we have to cross that bridge. As an engineering scientist with an analytical mind, Neil wants to know what is true about God and the afterlife.¹¹ He does not want just a nice story or myth that makes him feel better for now. He wants to know that what he believes and what he is teaching his family is actually true, so that when he says, "My daughter will be healed. She will have a new body and we can't wait to see her again," he is not practicing wishful—yet delusional—thinking. Instead, he wants to know that he is practicing good, reasonable thinking. Over the years of studying his own reasons for belief in God and for the truth of the Scriptures, Neil has already come to that understanding. It is that truth of what he believes about God that provides his foundation for real hope. That foundation of hope guides and directs his emotional response to pain and suffering.¹² Instead of grieving "as others do who have no hope," as Paul states in 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-14, Neil demonstrated that "since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep" (ESV).

Can Neil and Anna's requirement for a logical response to their emotional suffering be met by other worldviews,¹³ such as materialistic naturalism? Remember that in addressing the emotional problem of evil, we are addressing an objection to the existence or experience of actual evil; so the evil must be objective (real) in order appropriately to view a person's suffering as "not good." This is an important point not to miss: for an objection to evil to make sense, it must be a response to real evil, not just a dislike of "the way things are" or a delusional objection.

Let us consider one major worldview option and its potential usefulness in counseling the sufferer with the understanding of truth at the core of its belief system. According to the materialistic variety of naturalism (atheism), everything in the universe is reducible to matter, and all social structure and morality is explainable through evolutionary processes. Since everything is reducible to matter, a transcendent, objective standard of what is good or evil does not exist in this view. A transcendent, objective standard would necessitate the existence of something “other than” the materialistic universe.

Proponents of this view have been known to trivialize even egregious evil by explaining it in terms of evolution. For example, Nancy Pearcey writes that authors Randy Thornhill of the University of New Mexico and Craig Palmer of the University of Colorado “advance the startling thesis that rape is not a pathology but an evolutionary adaptation—a strategy for maximizing reproductive success.”¹⁴ If an evil such as rape is an evolutionary adaptation, what is to be said to the one who is suffering from being raped? How would such a person be counseled on the matter? In accordance with the materialistic naturalist worldview, we could not acknowledge evil as an objective reality. The sufferer’s experience of the evil of rape, though personally devastating, is just a part of the overall evolutionary process. Therefore, though subjectively the person who was raped may view the rape as evil, objectively (as the world really is), nothing is evil, including rape. Once the person dies, her suffering will end—along with everything else in her life. That’s the most comfort her worldview can offer her. While no one with empathy would use such harsh verbiage in such a delicate situation, the underlying message is still true for this worldview. The materialistic naturalist cannot counsel the person suffering emotionally from the problem of evil with cogency; the best he or she can do is offer the utterly hopeless response that “that’s just the way it is.”

THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Unlike materialistic naturalism, the suffering sacrifice of Jesus Christ, if true, provides great resources in responding to the problem of evil in the lives of human beings. Not only does the Christian God acknowledge evil as a real problem and as a departure from the way life is supposed to be, but He also rightly deals with evil, as would be true of a perfectly just Creator.¹⁵ God takes on human flesh, lives a life unshielded from pain and suffering with us, offers Himself as the payment for human evil, and conquers the consequence of evil, which is death, through bodily resurrection. This action on our behalf by God is a solution to the very real problem of evil, and God’s solution provides resources to inform our emotional response to evil.

The New Testament declares over and over what an amazing *hope* Jesus’ sacrifice has given the world. First Peter 1:6–7 states, “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”¹⁶ In Romans 8:18, Paul discusses our suffering: “I consider that our

present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us,” and in Hebrews 12:2, we read, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

These truths ought to guide our response to the pain and devastation of suffering in this life. If Christ has truly risen from the dead, as Paul states he did in 1 Corinthians 15:20, then his resurrection is the model of the resurrection to come. His body is healed and He is present with God, giving hope to believers such as Neil and Anna that their loved ones’ bodies too will be raised and their souls even now are in the presence of God. Christians can demonstrate this hope by allowing the truth of God’s actions and promises to guide their own response to the problem of evil, helping others see that there can be real hope and, through it, healing.

ANSWERING THE QUESTION

So how would I answer the original question from the audience member? I would take multiple steps. First, we must learn to grieve with those who are grieving, acknowledging they have suffered from an experience with real evil. Paul tells us in Romans 12:15, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” Second, we must wait until the sufferer is ready to consider the philosophical arguments. This may be a long wait, so prepare yourself by entrusting the person to God. This is the time to remind ourselves of the sovereignty of the Lord. We do not change hearts and minds; only God can do this. However, it may be that a person already knows the answers, like Anna, and just needs a loving reminder of the conclusions she already reached. Third, when a person is ready to consider the philosophical arguments, I propose a look at the problem from different viewpoints: what is pain, suffering, and evil in a world without God? What are the counseling resources available in other worldviews to deal with the emotional response to evil?¹⁷

While there is no quick-and-easy multiple-step resolution to addressing the emotional problem of evil, we can take steps to handle the tough questions of life now, instead of waiting for a crisis (ours or others) to question what we believe and why we believe. It may seem odd to suggest that one studies apologetics as a means of preparing to work through pain, but that is exactly what I suggest. Though we can never really be one hundred percent ready for the emotional impact suffering brings into our lives, at least we can become familiar with, and perhaps even find a conclusion to, the argument from evil before a devastating blow strikes our lives. We can find and interact with the answers to “Is God good?” and “Why do bad things happen to good people?” In finding answers, we can also find deeper trust in God, which in turn can affect our emotional responses to evil. As Neil stated at his daughter’s memorial service, “Our apologetics verifies our theology. Our theology directs our hope and our hope guides our emotions.”

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NOTES

- 1 C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarpersCollins, 1961), 15.
- 2 William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 75.
- 3 William Lane Craig, "The Problem of Evil," Reasonable Faith, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5350>.
- 4 Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 117.
- 5 Craig, "The Problem of Evil."
- 6 Augustine, *Enrichidion*, chap. 13. Available at: <http://www.leaderu.com/cyber/books/augenchiridion/enchiridiontoc.html>.
- 7 *Kenneth Samples, Without a Doubt: Answering the Twenty Toughest Faith Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 247.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 245–46.
- 9 Craig, "The Problem of Evil."
- 10 Neil Mammen is an apologist, scientist, and author of the book *Jesus Is Involved in Politics! Why Aren't You? Why Isn't Your Church?* www.J3IP.com. He was born in Ghana, Africa, and raised in Ethiopia, Jamaica, Sudan, and Yemen. Neil has degrees in Solid State Physics and Electrical and Computer Engineering. His apologetics ministry is NoBlindFaith.com.
- 11 As do many other people; not just scientists. We should all desire what is true, and not just what is emotionally pleasurable.
- 12 To read Neil and Anna's full story about Caroline, visit Neil's blog at: www.j3ip.com/Caroline.html. For further questions for Neil, please email him at neil@noblindfaith.com.
- 13 In this article, we will only treat two worldviews: Christianity and materialistic naturalism.
- 14 Nancy R. Pearcey, *Darwin's Dirty Secret*, Leadership U, http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/arn/pearcey/np_world-rape0300.htm.
- 15 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 203.
- 16 All Scripture quotations are from the NIV.
- 17 A good resource to answer this question: James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2009).