

## QUESTION 1

# What Is at Stake in How We Respond to Suffering and Evil?

**W**hy spend time considering and answering the forty questions which compose this book? Suffering and evil are undoubtedly something to be endured, but why must they be seriously considered? Some people answer the questions in this book one way, and others answer differently, but why seek to offer answers at all? What difference does it make? *What is at stake* in responding to suffering and evil? Simply put, providing answers to these questions promotes Christian apologetics (defending the faith to a watching world), fosters Christian discipleship (equips Christians to persevere when tempted to apostasy), and reinforces the Great Commission (confirms the fundamental message of the gospel). Let us consider these points in turn.

### **Suffering and Evil Are a Challenge to Christian Apologetics**

First, Christians must offer answers to the questions in this book because by doing so we fulfill the basic Christian duty to offer a reasoned defense for distinctive Christian claims. The Greek word for “reasoned defense” is *apologia*, and it is chiefly found throughout the New Testament in two contexts: in Paul’s defense against the accusations of his enemies, and in Peter’s command for believers to give a defense for their hope.

As seen in the use of *apologia* in the book of Acts (22:1; 24:10 [*apologoumai*]; 25:8 [*apologoumenou*]; 16 [*apologias*]; 26:1 [*apelogeito*]; 2 [*apologesthai*]; 24 [*apologoumenou*]) and in the epistles (1 Cor. 9:3; Phil. 1:7, 16; 2 Tim. 4:16), Paul not only defended himself from the false accusations of unbelieving Jews and Gentiles, but he defended the claims of the gospel itself. Because Paul’s example was to be imitated as a norm for basic Christian life (Phil. 4:9), his pervasive commitment to “reasoned defense” (*apologia*) should convince Christians to have and make their own reasoned defense. Paul reasons, persuades, and disputes with Jews in the synagogue and with Greeks in

the marketplace day by day (Acts 17:1–4, 17). He is particularly anxious to answer their questions (Acts 17:18–19), and it is obvious to all that his ultimate goal is not only to defend himself from the charges made against him, but more importantly to persuade them of the gospel itself (Acts 26:27–29).

Given the first-century context of outright hostility to and persecution of those who named the name of Christ (2 Cor. 6:4–10; 11:22–33), the willingness of these early Christians to continually endure the suffering and evil inflicted by others against them must have provoked many questions from skeptical onlookers about *why* they were willing to do so. “Why voluntarily suffer the loss of social privileges, possessions, and even life itself, just to maintain loyalty to Jesus? Why not restore comfort and ease by simply abandoning your strange, new creed?” “Why worship a Jewish man who suffered and died at the hands of the Romans? Could such a man be worthy of worship? How could such a sufferer be God himself?” “How could God be for you when you face such painful consequences for remaining in his service?” Surely from the very beginning, Christian *apologia* was forced to reckon with multiple questions about suffering and evil, and such questions remain today. For this reason, about a third of the questions in this book occur in part 3, “Apologetic Questions About Suffering and Evil.”

In addition to the extended example of the apostle Paul, there is also the apostle Peter, whose first epistle is largely devoted to developing a theology of suffering and trial for Christians dispersed among hostile regions (1 Peter 1:6–7; 2:18–25; 3:8–22; 4:1–2, 12–19; 5:1, 9–11). It is while Peter is equipping them against the world’s evil that he gives his well-known command for Christians to “make a defense”:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, *always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you*; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil. (1 Peter 3:13–17)

In this brief passage, which contains the *locus classicus* for Christian apologetics in verse 15 (italicized above), the reality of suffering and evil is mentioned no less than eight times: “harm you,” “suffer for righteousness’ sake,” “fear,” “troubled,” “slandered,” “revile your good behavior in Christ,” “suffer for doing good,” and “suffer . . . for doing evil.” It therefore makes sense that the problem of evil ranks so high on the apologetic agenda, for Peter makes

clear that suffering and evil are *the* principal context in which Christian faith is challenged, whether intellectually or practically. So, if we are to obey Peter's command and follow Paul's example, we must equip ourselves and others with God-informed answers to questions about suffering and evil.

In fact, the so-called problem of evil is probably the number-one reason unbelievers give for rejecting the God of the Bible, or a good God of any sort (see Question 17). It is thus no surprise that Jesus anticipates and addresses his own disciples' questions about the evils inflicted by other people and the suffering produced by natural disasters (Luke 13:1–5). Nor is it a surprise that Paul's imaginary objector to the gospel raises a version of the problem of evil: How can God blame us for our evil if we cannot resist his sovereign plan (Rom. 9:19)? Given Paul's example and Peter's command, if the critic of God's existence has made an argument, then it is incumbent on the Christian to say *something* in response (rather than avoid unbelievers or merely pray for them).

This also follows from more general commands which God gives. For example: "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person" (Col. 4:5–6). We need divine "wisdom" to equip us for the wide range of questions "each person" can ask, for they "ought" to receive an "answer." Indeed, Jesus often took the time to listen to and then relevantly respond to the arguments of those who were opposed to his beliefs, and we see an extended account of this in Luke 20:27–40.

### **Suffering and Evil Are a Challenge to Living the Christian Life**

Second, Christians must offer answers to the questions in this book because this will equip Christians to persevere when they are tempted to abandon the faith. This point is related to the previous one, since unbelievers are not the only people who ask questions which need answering. Atheists widely claim that the suffering and evil in the world gives them good reason to reject God's existence, but that same suffering and evil gives many *Christians* great temptation to doubt God's existence (or at least his love, his power, or his wisdom). So "the problem of evil" is a question which has "intra-faith" application, which means that Christian answers must not only be directed to the world but to the church. The Scriptures are full of faithful believers who are genuinely perplexed by the evils that they or their community suffer. The psalmist cries out, "How long, O LORD?" (Ps. 13:1), the prophet is bewildered that God sets iniquity before him and fails to judge the wicked (Hab. 1), and the righteous man faces unexpected counsel to "curse God and die" because of the evil he has suffered (Job 2:9). What answers did they seek, and which did they find?

This issue is important because, as we will see in answer to Question 30, experiencing suffering and evil can unsettle our faith in God's promises, distort

our perception of God's character, weaken our loyalty to God's purposes, and harden our hearts so that we are bitter toward God and others. The repeated apostolic counsel that we should forgive each other (2 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13) presupposes that Christians can be the source of suffering and evil for other Christians, threatening to cause a "root of bitterness" to spring up, cause trouble, and defile many (Heb. 12:15). For the sake of perseverance in Christian discipleship, what should be our perspective on these evils which come our way? Our own hearts can whisper to us: "Does God care more about the free will of others than about my own well-being?" "Is he oblivious to my pain?" "Is he aware but apathetic?" "Is he a cosmic sadist?" "Does he have a moral code utterly alien to my own?" It is no secret that these questions genuinely torment Christians and tempt them to apostasy, and so suffering and evil forms an insidious internal threat to Christian existence. How shall Christians answer the forty questions in this book, not for the world but *for themselves*?

Biblically informed intellectual resources are needed here, as we remind one another of the character of God (Question 37), his works in history (Questions 38–39), and the relevance of the gospel (Question 40). The world would conform us to its unbelief, but we are to be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2), avoiding the darkened understanding and futile mindset that is caused by hardness of heart (Eph. 4:17–18), which if left unchallenged will further harden our own hearts. We are to "have mercy on those who doubt" (Jude 22) by helping them with the answers they need, rather than harshly dismissing them as unspiritual. And Christians are to think through these challenges ahead of time, putting on the whole armor of God before "the evil day" arrives (Eph. 6:13), storing up God's word in their heart so that they do not sin against him (Ps. 119:11). New Testament scholar D. A. Carson offers his excellent book on the problem of evil as "a book of preventative medicine" for Christians, and his advice here on *when* we should work out answers for ourselves is worth quoting in full:

One of the major causes of devastating grief and confusion among Christians is that our expectations are false. We do not give the subject of evil and suffering the thought it deserves until we ourselves are confronted with tragedy. If by that point our beliefs—not well thought out but deeply ingrained—are largely out of step with the God who has disclosed himself in the Bible and supremely in Jesus, then the pain from the personal tragedy may be multiplied many times over as we begin to question the very foundations of our faith.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. D. A. Carson, *How Long O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 12.

**Responding to Suffering and Evil Is at the Heart of the Christian Gospel**

Finally, seeking answers to the questions in this book not only promotes Christian apologetics and fosters Christian discipleship, but also reinforces our most important mission in life: bearing witness to the gospel message (Matt. 28:18–20). The *message* of the cross reveals to us the marvelous, unexpected way in which God confronts and overcomes the evil of our hearts: by sending Jesus, the one who lived the life we ought to have lived, and who died the death we ought to have died (Rom. 3:24–25; 5:6–11, 18–19; 1 Peter 2:24). But the *method* of the cross reveals to us that God’s overcoming the evil of our hearts rests upon God’s using the evils of the world to bring about the cross (because he uses the evil decisions of Satan, Judas, the Jewish leaders, Pilate, and the Roman soldiers, all of which resulted in the suffering of the cross; see Acts 2:23; 4:27–28). The message and method of the cross is in effect God’s double victory over evil, a double revelation of the powerful love of God in the midst of evil. Evil gets put in its place twice over, as God uses the evil of the world (the cross) to overcome the evil of our hearts (our sin).

This gospel perspective on how God relates to suffering and evil is central and not peripheral to the message of the Bible. The way God achieves victory over evil in the gospel affords us a fundamental insight into the *modus operandi* of divine providence, God’s “way of working,” since God’s plan to redeem the world through Jesus has deep roots in the Bible’s entire storyline, rather than being a side note in history. In the cross, God is a God who aims at great goods (as we shall see in later chapters, goods for us and for himself; see Question 7). In the cross, God aims at these great goods by way of suffering and evil. And in the cross, God works in ways that would be completely unknowable by us, if he had not specifically told us what he was doing (see Question 8). Future chapters will return to these gospel themes of divine goodness, sovereignty, and inscrutability again and again, as they provide a kind of model for what God is up to with respect to the rest of the suffering and evil in the world. (For instance, these same three themes come to the fore in the Job and Joseph narratives in the Old Testament, anticipating how God deals decisively with evil in the Jesus narrative; see Questions 7 and 8.)

Of course, it is also important not to overread gospel implications for matters of suffering and evil, as if John 3:16 gave us sufficient and precise answers to the full range of questions in this book. God gave us a whole Bible, and not simply John 3:16, and so the testimony of that whole Bible must be consulted. But as we seek to apply the fundamental wisdom of the Book to each of the questions in this book, we ought to be inspired, motivated, encouraged, and guided in our answers by the good news of God’s decisive victory over suffering and evil. The Christian gospel means that we cannot stand mute before the suffering in the world, offering no God-informed commentary and perspective on it, for we not only proclaim this message of how God

has responded (and will respond) to the world's suffering and evil, but we base our lives on that message.

### Summary

Providing answers to questions about suffering and evil promotes Christian apologetics (defending the faith to a watching world), fosters Christian discipleship (equips Christians to persevere when tempted to apostatize), and reinforces the Great Commission (confirms the fundamental message of the gospel). To meet these ends, this book provides biblically informed intellectual resources for answering significant questions about suffering and evil, while exposing readers to a wide range of important and influential views which have been articulated by many different Christians over the past two millennia.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree that Christians of equal piety can reasonably disagree over precisely how to answer the full range of questions about suffering and evil (see Introduction)? If so, why might God allow this to take place?
2. How important is it to be aware of “the historical conversation among our Christian peers” about suffering and evil (see Introduction)? Can you list any benefits to such awareness?
3. Are there other examples of “apologetics” in the Bible, broadly speaking, beyond the example of the apostle Paul? Does Scripture ever speak to our own character qualifications as we engage in this activity?
4. Is Carson correct about the need for Christians to have “preventative medicine” on this subject? Have you personally seen, in your life or in the lives of others, what happens in the absence of such medicine?
5. Where do you believe the contemporary church is weakest in addressing questions about suffering and evil: apologetics, discipleship, or gospel witness?