

# The Problem of Evil

AN ESSAY BY  
**Greg Welty**

## DEFINITION

“The problem of evil” is one of the most discussed objections to the existence of God and is a top reason many unbelievers give for their unbelief. These objectors argue that since there are so many cases of significant pain and suffering in the world that God could easily prevent, the fact that all this evil was *not* prevented means it is very unlikely (if not impossible) that God exists.

## SUMMARY

“The problem of evil” appeals to the phenomenon of evil (significant cases of pain and suffering) as evidence against the existence of God. For many, this evidence appears decisive, because if God existed, he would be *powerful* enough to prevent such evil, and *good* enough to want to prevent such evil. Since there *is* evil, no such powerful and good being exists. For the past two millennia Christians have typically urged two points in reply: theodicy and inscrutability. First, God may very well have a *good reason* for allowing the evil he does allow – a reason compatible with his holy and good character – and the way of theodicy goes on to list a number of these reasons. Second, the fact that unbelievers may not be able to *discern or correctly guess at* God’s justifying reason for allowing evil is no good reason to think he doesn’t *have* a reason. Given the infinity of God’s omniscience, the complexity of his providence, the depth of the goods he aims at, and our own substantial cognitive limitations, we shouldn’t *expect* to guess God’s reasons.

---

# What Is the Problem of Evil?

The so-called “problem of evil” is an argument against the existence of God that reasons along these lines:

1. A perfectly powerful being *can* prevent any evil.
2. A perfectly good being *will* prevent evil as far as he can.
3. God is perfectly powerful and good.
4. So, if a perfectly powerful and good God exists, there will be no evil.
5. There is evil.
6. Therefore, God doesn’t exist.

“Evil,” here is understood as any significant case of pain and suffering in the world, whether “moral” (evil willfully caused by human beings such as murder, adultery, theft, rape, etc.) or “natural” evil (harm caused by impersonal forces of nature such as earthquakes, tornadoes, plague, etc.).

## Responding to the Problem of Evil

### ***Nonstarters***

A Christian must be truthful and face the question honestly. It will not do to deny that evil exists (#5 above), for evil is the very presumption of the gospel. Nor can we deny that God could prevent evil (#1 above) or that he is perfect in power and goodness (#3). However, we can (and should) question the second premise above – that a perfectly good God must prevent all evil – for it doesn’t necessarily follow from God’s perfect goodness that he will prevent every evil he can prevent. Perhaps God has a *good reason* for permitting evil rather than preventing it; if so, then his permission of evil is justified and doesn’t militate against his goodness.

### ***The Ways of Theodicy and Inscrutability***

Our response the problem of evil, then, may take either of two approaches. We may argue that the second premise above is *false* and seek to demonstrate that it is false by showing God’s reasons for permitting evil – the way of “theodicy.” Or we could argue that the second premise is *unproven* because unbelievers *can’t rule out* God’s having a good reason for permitting evil – the way of “inscrutability.”

The way of ***theodicy*** (from the Greek *theos*, “God,” and *dikaio*s, “just”; hence, a justification of the ways of God in his dealings with men) seeks to demonstrate God’s reasons for permitting evil. The idea is that by allowing evil God attains greater good than possible apart from evil. The way of theodicy shows that premise (2) is false, arguing that God *wouldn’t* prevent every evil he could prevent.

The way of *inscrutability* argues, more modestly, that *no one knows that premise (2) is true* because no one can know enough to conclude that God *doesn't* have good reason for permitting evil. We just cannot grasp God's knowledge, the complexity of his plans, or the deep nature of the good he aims at in providence. And there is no proof that God does *not* have good reasons for allowing evil, but because he is good we can only assume that he does. Here we don't have to come up with 'theodicies' to defend God against the problem of evil. Rather, the way of inscrutability shows that it is entirely to be expected that creatures like us *can't* come up with God's reasons, given who God is and who we are.

## **The Way of Theodicy**

### ***Two popular theodicies that have no biblical basis.***

Some theodicies that have been offered lack solid biblical grounding. *The free will theodicy*, for example, argues that moral evil is due to human abuse of free will. The value of free will is a great good: the possibility of morally good choice and of human beings imaging God by way of these choices. But free will has the unfortunate consequence of allowing for the possibility of moral evil. In response to this we might ask, if free will of this sort is so valuable then why doesn't God have it, and why won't we have it in heaven?

*The natural law theodicy* argues that natural evil is due to the laws of nature. The value of laws of nature is a great good: a stable environment needed for making rational choices of any sort. But laws of nature have the unfortunate consequence of allowing for the possibility of natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes, etc.). In response to this we might ask, if a stable environment *requires* the possibility of natural evil by requiring laws of nature then why isn't there any natural evil in the pre-fall Garden of Eden or in the new heavens and the new earth?

### ***Four popular theodicies have some biblical basis***

By contrast, at least four theodicies have been offered that have some biblical basis. *The punishment theodicy* argues that suffering is a result of God's just punishment of evildoers (Gen 3:14-19; Rom 1:24-32, 5:12, 6:23, 8:20-21; Isa 29:5-6; Ezek 38:19; Rev 6:12, 11:13, 16:18). In punishment God aims at the good of displaying his judgment against sin. *The soul-building theodicy* argues that suffering leads us from self-centeredness to other-centeredness (Heb 12:5-11; Rom 5:3-5; 2Cor 4:17; Jas 1:2-4; 1Pet 1:6-7; cf. Prov 10:13, 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-24, 29:15). In painful providences God aims at the good of displaying his goodness in shaping our character for good. *The pain as God's megaphone theodicy* argues that pain is God's way of getting the attention of unbelievers in a noncoercive way so that they might forget the vanities of earth, consider spiritual things instead, and perhaps even repent of sin (Luke 13:1-5). In pain God aims at the good of displaying his mercy that through such warnings we might be delivered from the wrath to come. *The higher-order goods theodicy* says that some goods can't exist apart from the evils to which they are a response. There is no courage without danger, no sympathy without suffering, no forgiveness without sin, no atonement without suffering, no compassion without need, no patience without adversity. God must often allow lots of evils to make *these* goods a part of his world, given how these goods are defined (Eph 1:3-10; 1Pet 1:18-20).

### ***These theodicies fall under the umbrella of the “greater good theodicy.”***

A “greater good theodicy” (GGT) argues that the pain and suffering in God's world play a necessary role in bringing about greater goods that could not be brought about otherwise. The question that remains, then, is just this: does the Bible really teach that God aims at great goods by way of various evils?

## **Constructing the “Greater Good Theodicy”: a Three-Fold Argument for Three Biblical Themes**

Our argument here is that *Scripture combines the ways of theodicy and inscrutability*. The biblical accounts of Job, Joseph, and Jesus reveal the goodness of God in the midst of evil, weaving together these three themes:

1. God aims at *great goods* (either for mankind, or for himself, or both).
2. God often intends these great goods to come about *by way of various evils*.
3. God leaves created persons *in the dark* (in the dark about *which* goods are indeed his reasons for the evils, or about *how* the goods depend on the evils).

Thus, the Bible seems to strongly suggest that the GGT (God's aiming at great goods by way of various evils) is in fact his *modus operandi* in providence, his “way of working.” But this GGT is tempered by a good dose of divine inscrutability.

## ***The Case of Job***

In the case of Job *God aims at a great good*: his own vindication – in particular, the vindication of his worthiness to be served for who he is rather than for the earthly goods he supplies (Job 1:11; 2:5). God intends the great good of the vindication of his own name to come to pass *by way of various evils*. These are a combination of moral evil and natural evil (Job 1:15, 16, 17, 19, 21-22; 2:7, 10; 42:11). *God also leaves Job in the dark about what God is doing*, for Job has no access to the story's prologue in chapter 1. And when God speaks to him “out of the whirlwind” he never reveals to Job *why* he suffered. Instead, Job's ignorance of the whole spectrum of created reality is exposed (Job 38:4-39:30; 40:6-41:34), and Job confesses his ignorance of both creation and providence (Job 40:3-5; 42:1-6).

## ***The Case of Joseph***

In the case of Joseph we find the same. *God aims at great goods*: saving the broader Mediterranean world from a famine, preserving his people amid such danger, and (ultimately) bringing a Redeemer into the world descended from such Israelites (Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38). God intends the great good of the preservation of his people from famine to come to pass *by way of various evils* (Gen 45:5, 7; Psa 105:16-17), including Joseph's betrayal, being sold into slavery, and suffering unjust accusation and imprisonment (Gen 37, 39). Joseph sees these evils as the means of God's sovereign providence (Gen 50:20). But God leaves Joseph's brothers, the Midianite traders, Potiphar's wife, and the cupbearer *in the dark*. None of these people knew the role their blameworthy actions would play in preserving God's people in a time of danger. They had no clue *which* goods depended on which evils, or that the evils would even work toward *any* goods at all.

## ***The Case of Jesus***

And in the case of Jesus we see the same again. *God aims at great goods*: the redemption of his people by the atonement of Christ and the glorification of God in the display of his justice, love, grace, mercy, wisdom, and power. God intends the great good of atonement to come to pass *by way of various evils*: Jewish plots (Matt 26:3-4, 14-15), Satan's promptings (John 13:21-30), Judas's betrayal (Matt 26:47-56; 27:3-10; Luke 22:22), Roman injustice (Matt 26:57-68), Pilate's cowardice (Matt 27:15-26), and the soldiers' brutality (Matt 27:27-44). But God leaves various created agents (human and demonic) *in the dark*, for it is clear that the Jewish leaders, Satan, Judas, Pilate, and the soldiers are all ignorant of the role they play in fulfilling the divinely prophesied redemptive purpose by the cross of Christ (Acts 2:23, 3:18, 4:25-29; John 13:18, 17:12, 19:23-24).

## ***Licensing and Limiting the GGT***

In each narrative, the first two themes highlight *the way of theodicy* (God aiming at great goods by way of evils), while the third theme highlights *the way of inscrutability* (left to ourselves, we cannot discern what God's reasons are for any case of evil). By way of the first two themes Scripture repeatedly encourages the view that God *has* a justifying reason for permitting the evils of the world. That is what's right with the way of theodicy. But Scripture, by way of the third theme, repeatedly discourages the view that we can ever *know* what that reason is in any particular case of evil. That is what's right with the way of inscrutability. In contemporary philosophy, these are usually presented as two different ways to solve the problem of evil (theodicy and inscrutability). However, the Bible seems to combine these two ways when it speaks of God's relation to the evils in the world. That is, it licenses the greater good theodicy as an overall perspective on evil, but wisely limits that perspective in a way that is instructive for both Christians and non-Christians.

## **Licensing the GGT: God's Sovereignty over *All* Evil**

### ***God's Sovereignty over Natural Evil***

It is one thing to acknowledge God's sovereign and purposeful providence over the moral and natural evils mentioned in the Job, Joseph, and Jesus narratives. It is quite another to claim that God is sovereign over *all* moral and natural evils. But this is what the Bible repeatedly teaches. This takes us a considerable way towards licensing the GGT as a *general* approach to the problem of evil. The Bible presents multitudes of examples of God intentionally bringing about natural evils – famine, drought, rampaging wild animals, disease, birth defects such as blindness and deafness, and even death itself – rather than being someone who merely permits nature to 'do its thing' on its own. Here are some samples:

- Famine (Deut 32:23-24; 2Kgs 8:1; Psa 105:16; Isa 3:1; Ezek 4:16, 5:16-17, 14:13, 14:21; Hos 2:9; Amos 4:6, 9; Hag 2:17)
- Drought (Deut 28:22; 1Kgs 8:35; Isa 3:1; Hos 2:3; Amos 4:6-8; Hag 1:11)
- Rampaging wild animals (Lev 26:22; Num 21:6; Deut 32:23-24; 2Kgs 17:25; Jer 8:17; Ezek 5:17, 14:15, 14:21, 33:27)
- Disease (Lev 26:16, 25; Num 14:12; Deut 28:21-22, 28:27; 2Kgs 15:5; 2Chron 21:14, 26:19-20)
- Birth defects such as blindness and deafness (Exod 4:11; John 9:1-3)
- Death itself (Deut 32:39; 1Sam 2:6-7)
- Ten Egyptian plagues (Exod 7:14-24, 8:1-15, 8:16-19, 8:20-32, 9:1-7, 9:8-12, 9:13-35, 10:1-20, 10:21-29, 11:4-10, 12:12-13, 12:27-30)
- 'Impersonal' forces and objects (Psa 65:9-11, 77:18, 83:13-15, 97:4, 104:4, 104:10-24, 107:25, 29, 135:6-7, 147:8, 147:16-18, 148:7-8, Jonah 1:4, Nah 1:3-4, Zech 7:14, Matt 5:45, Acts 14:17)

## ***God's Sovereignty over Moral Evil***

In addition, and perhaps surprisingly, the Bible presents God as having such meticulous control over the course of human history that a wide range of moral evils – murder, adultery, disobedience to parents, rejecting wise counsel, even human hatred – can be regarded as “of the Lord.” Without erasing or suppressing the intentionality of creatures – and this includes their deliberations, their reasoning, their choosing between alternatives they consider and reflect upon – God’s own intentionality stands above and behind the responsible choices of his creatures. Again, some samples:

- Eli’s sons’ disobedience ([1Sam 2:23-25](#))
- Samson’s desire for a foreign wife ([Jdg 14:1-4](#))
- Absalom, Rehoboam, and Amaziah rejecting wise counsel ([2Sam 17:14](#); [1Kgs 12:15](#); [2Chron 25:20](#))
- Assassination ([2Chron 22:7, 9](#), [32:21-22](#))
- Adultery ([2Sam 12:11-12](#), [16:22](#))
- Human hatred ([Psa 105:23-25](#); [Exod 4:21](#); [Deut 2:30, 32](#); [Josh 11:20](#); [1Kgs 11:23, 25](#); [2Chron 21:16-17](#))

## ***God's Sovereignty over All Evil***

So the Job, Joseph, and Jesus passages are not anomalies, but part and parcel of a more general view the Bible takes on the subject, with respect to both natural and moral evil. Indeed, in addition to this large swath of ‘particular’ texts about individual cases of evil, there are quite a few “universal” texts which seem to trace all calamities, all human decision-making, all events whatsoever, back to the will of God.

- God’s sovereignty over all calamity ([Ecc 7:13-14](#); [Isa 45:7](#); [Lam 3:37-38](#); [Amos 3:6](#))
- God’s sovereignty over all human decision-making ([Prov 16:9, 19:21, 20:24, 21:1](#); [Jer 10:23](#))
- God’s sovereignty over all events whatsoever ([Psa 115:3](#); [Prov 16:33](#); [Isa 46:9-10](#); [Rom 8:28, 11:36](#); [Eph 1:11](#))

## **Limiting the GGT: The Inscrutability of God’s Purposes**

### ***Establishing the Burden of Proof***

Of course, each specific theodicy mentioned earlier has significant limitations. For instance, the Bible frequently discourages the idea that the punishment theodicy can explain *all* evils in the world (Job 1:1, 1:8, 2:3, 42:7-8; John 9:1-3; Acts 28:1-6). More generally, Christians can never know enough about a person's situation, or about God's purposes, to *rule in* a specific theodicy as being God's reason for permitting evil in a particular case. In fact, it would be entirely presumptuous to do so. But if he who affirms must prove, then the question in the problem of evil is not whether *Christians* know enough to "rule in" the applicability of a theodicy on any particular occasion, but whether *critics* know enough to "rule out" the applicability of any theodicy. But how could a critic reasonably claim to know that *there is no reason* that would justify God in permitting suffering? How could he know that premise (2) of the original argument is true? For why think that God's reasons for permitting particular cases of evil are the kinds of things that *we* would discern by our cognitive capacities, if such reasons were there?

## ***Analogies for our Cognitive Limitations***

It is widely recognized that we have cognitive limitations with respect to discerning goods and connections, at least in territories where we lack the relevant expertise, experience, or vantage point. Some examples:

- It doesn't *seem* to me that there is a perfectly spherical rock on the dark side of the moon right now, but that's no reason to conclude that such a rock *isn't* there.
- It didn't *seem* to any medievals that the theories of special relativity or quantum mechanics were true, but that was no reason to think they *weren't* true.
- It didn't *seem* to humans in earlier eras that fundamental human rights of one sort or another were in fact *fundamental* human rights, but that was no reason to think there *weren't* any such rights.
- It wouldn't *seem* to a non-Greek-speaker that spoken Greek sentences have any meaning, but that is no reason to think they *don't* have a meaning.
- It wouldn't *seem* to the musically uninitiated that Beethoven projected the 'sonata form' onto the symphony as a whole, giving the entire musical work a fundamental unity it would not otherwise have had. But it wouldn't follow from their ignorance that Beethoven *didn't* have such a purpose, much less that he was unsuccessful in executing it.
- It might not *seem* to my one-month-old son that I have a good reason for him to receive a painful series of shots at the doctor's office. But it wouldn't follow from his ignorance that there *isn't* a good reason.



God is omniscient, which means he not only knows everything that *we* are likely to guess at, but every truth whatsoever. This means that God knows things that we cannot even fathom. As the above analogies suggest, this is easily demonstrated for a huge range of cases. If the complexities of an infinite God's divine plan for the unfolding of the universe *does* involve God's recognizing either deep goods, or necessary connections between various evils and the realization of those goods, or both of these things, would our inability to discern these goods or connections give us a reason for thinking they aren't there? What would be the basis of such confidence? But without such confidence, we have little reason to accept premise (2) of the problem of evil. So we have little reason to accept its conclusion.

### ***Biblical Argument for Divine Inscrutability***

The theme of divine inscrutability is not only exceedingly defensible common sense. It also looms large in the Bible, having both pastoral and apologetic implications. It closes the mouths of Christians who would insensitively offer "God's reasons" to those who suffer (when they don't know such reasons). And it closes the mouths of critics who would irrationally preclude divine reasons for the suffering. Imagine we were on the scene in the cases of Job (as his friend), Joseph (as his brother), and Jesus (as his tormentor). Would we have been able to guess at God's purpose for the suffering? Would we not instead have been wholly unaware of any such purpose? Does not a large part of the literary power of the Bible's narrative, and the spiritual encouragement it offers, rest upon this interplay between the ignorance of the human actors and the wisdom of divine providence?

One of the most extended reflections in the New Testament on the problem of evil – in this case, the evil of Jewish apostasy – is Romans 9-11. Paul's concluding doxology blends together these twin themes of divine sovereignty over evil and divine inscrutability in the midst of evil:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:33-36).

To the extent that God has not spoken about a particular event in history, his judgments *are* unsearchable, and his paths *are* beyond tracing out. But that does not mean there is not a greater good which justifies God's purposing of that event.

## FURTHER READING

- William P. Alston, ‘The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition’, reprinted in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument From Evil* (Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 97–125.
- Alistair Begg, *The Hand of God: Finding His Care in All Circumstances* (Moody, 2001).
- Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (NavPress, 1988).
- John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, chapters 16–18.
- D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?* (2nd edn.) (Baker, 2006).
- John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (P&R, 2015), chapters 7–8.
- Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (IVP, 1994), chapters 7–8.
- Daniel Howard-Snyder, ‘God, Evil, and Suffering’, chapter 4 of Michael J. Murray (ed.), *Reason for the Hope Within* (Eerdmans, 1999).
- C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Macmillan, 1962).
- John Piper and Justin Taylor (eds), *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Crossway, 2006).
- Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000), chapter 14.
- Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 1998).
- Greg Welty, *Why Is There Evil in the World (and So Much of it)?* (Christian Focus, 2018).

---

This essay is part of the Concise Theology series. All views expressed in this essay are those of the author. This essay is freely available under Creative Commons License with Attribution-ShareAlike, allowing users to share it in other mediums/formats and adapt/translate the content as long as an attribution link, indication of changes, and the same Creative Commons License applies to that material. If you are interested in translating our content or are interested in joining our community of translators, [please reach out to us](#).

This essay has been translated into [French](#).

This work is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#) 