

# WHY IS THERE EVIL IN THE WORLD IF GOD IS SUPREME?

One of the truths of the Bible that we embrace with trembling joy is the truth of God's supremacy in all things. The mission of our church is that we exist to spread a passion of the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. When we say that, we do not mean: "except in calamities," "except in war," "except when Al Qaeda blows up a building or a train," "except when cancer takes a mom or a child is born with profound disabilities." There are no "except" clauses in our mission statement.

We did not formulate our mission in a rosy world—and then get surprised and embarrassed by the reality of suffering. We did not have our head in the sand. We formulated our mission in the real world of pain and suffering and evil and death. We have seen even among our own people, some very peaceful, but also some very terrible deaths. We exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things—all things—for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ—all the time. A passion for God's supremacy—Christ's supremacy (for he is God incarnate)—in all things, all the time.

Sorrowful, Yet Always Rejoicing

None of us who has lived a few decades has embraced this mission without trembling. And none of us has lived this mission for long without tears. We have said it dozens of times here at Bethlehem, and we will say it till we die, that the joy we pursue and the joy we embrace in Jesus Christ is always—always in this world—interwoven with sorrow. There is no unadulterated joy in this world for people who care about others. The Bible describes Christ's servants like this: "[We are] sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." (2 Corinthians 6:10).

"Sorrowful yet always rejoicing." How can that be? It can be because Christ is supreme over all things forever, but suffering and death remain for a while. Life is not simple. There is pleasure, and there is pain. There is sweetness, and there is bitter suffering. There is joy, and there is misery. There is life and health, and there is disease and death. And therefore emotions are not simple. For those who love others, and not just their own comforts, this complexity means that we will rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). And there is always someone we know who is weeping, and someone we know who is rejoicing. And therefore we will learn the secret of "sorrowful yet always rejoicing"—and joyful yet always sorrowing. Those amazing words that describe the Christian soul—"sorrowful yet always rejoicing"—mean that suffering remains for a while in this world, but Christ is supreme now and forever.

9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the Constant Suffering in This World

The first plane that hit the World Trade Towers, Flight 11, immediately killed 92 people on board that flight. Flight 175 that hit the second tower a few minutes later killed 65 people on board. In the Towers themselves it appears now that 2,595 people perished when the Towers fell, including those who worked there or visited there, and those who were entering to save them.

Flight 77 carried 64 people when it hit the Pentagon within an hour after the first attack. Inside the Pentagon 125 people died in addition to these 64. Flight 93 with 45 people aboard turned around over Pennsylvania and was headed . . . where? The White House? The Congress? Todd Beamer and others wrestled control from the hijackers, it seems, and the plane crashed with no

survivors near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. All 45 people died. The total fatalities in these terrorist events was about 2,986.

We thought that would be the calamity for this message to focus on. But God had other plans. Who can pose the question of God's sovereignty and Christ's supremacy today and leave Hurricane Katrina out of account. What happened in the last week in New Orleans and surrounding areas is different than almost anything this country has ever seen. The September 8, 1900 Galveston Hurricane may have killed more—up to 12,000, we don't know—but it did not displace hundreds of thousands and leave a major city virtually empty and paralyzed with several surrounding smaller towns even more devastated. Who can speak of the supremacy of Christ in an age of terror without considering the terror of 140-mile-an-hour winds and broken levees and floodwaters covering 80% of a great city and who knows how many people dead in their attics?

And lest we think naively in response to these calamities, as though the cost of lives was something unusual, let's remind ourselves of the obvious and the almost overwhelming fact that over 50,000,000 people die every year in this world. Over 6,000 every hour. Over 100 every minute. And most of them do not die in ripe old age by sleeping peacefully away into eternity. Most die young. Most die after long struggles with pain. And millions die because of the evil of man against man.

Sudden calamities shock us only to make more plain what is happening every hour of every day of your entire life. Thousands perish in pain and misery every day. Probably seven or eight thousand people will have died during this worship service. Some of them are screaming out in pain just now as I am speaking and as you sit there in relative comfort. If there is to be any Christian joy in this world, along with love, it will be sorrowful joy, broken-hearted joy. What person in this room, who has lived long enough, does not know that the sweetest joys, the deepest joys, are marked with tears, not laughter?

Evil and Pain as a Pointer to the Need and Evidence for God

So even in our own experience—in our own souls—believers or unbelievers, there is a kind of witness that the world of evil and pain and misery and death is not a meaningless place. It is not a place without a good and purposeful God. Some people—not all—have found in the greatest evil—the time of greatest sorrow—the greatest need for God and the greatest evidence of God.

It happens like this. A great evil happens—say the holocaust with 6,000,000 murders. Or the Stalinist Soviet gulag with many more than that sent to their deaths. In the midst of these horrors, the human soul, that had been blithely pursuing its worldly pleasures with scarcely a thought about God and with no serious belief in any absolutes like evil and good, or right and wrong—happily living in the dream-world of relativism—suddenly is confronted with an evil so horrible and so great as to make the soul scream out with ultimate moral indignation: No! This is wrong! This is evil!

And for the first time in their life they hear themselves speaking with absolute conviction. They have a conviction of absolute reality. They know now beyond the shadow of a doubt that such a thing as evil exists. They admit that all their life up till then was a game. And now they are confronted with the stark question: If there is such a thing as absolute evil—if there is a moral

reality that is above and different from the mere physical processes of evolutionary energy plus time plus matter—then where does it come from, and what is it based on?

And many people discover in this moment of greatest evil that there is only one satisfactory answer: There is a God above the universe who sets the standards of good and evil and writes them on the human heart. They are not purposeless chemical reactions in our brains. They have reality outside of us, above us, in God. Paradoxically, therefore, the times of greatest human evil have often proved for many to be times when God is most needed and most self-evidently real. Without him evil and good are simply different electro-chemical impulses in the brain of mammal primates called homo sapiens. We know—you know—that is not true.

Why Does Such a World Exist?

So we ask: Why, Lord? Why is the world you made like this? If you are God—if you are the Christ the Son of the living God—why is this world so full of terror and trouble?

Here is what I believe the Bible teaches in answer to this question. I will give two answers that are not the reason such a world exists, and then four answers that are the reasons such world exists. I deal with each very briefly and point you to the Scriptures where you can search God's word for yourself.

1. The reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is not because God is not in total control.

The Bible is overwhelmingly clear that God governs everything in the universe from the smallest bird to the largest storm. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father" (Matthew 10:29). "Even winds and sea obey him" (Matthew 8:27). "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Proverbs 16:33). "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will" (Proverbs 21:1). "Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it?" (Lamentations 3:37). "Does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it?" (Amos 3:6). "He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mark 1:27). "I am God, and there is none like me . . . saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose'" (Isaiah 46:9-10).

There is no person or being in the universe that can thwart the sovereign will of God. Satan is his most powerful enemy and does much evil in the world, but he must first get God's permission, and none of his actions is outside God's governance. He never breaks free from his leash (Luke 22:31; Job 2:6-7; 42:11).

2. The reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is not because God is evil or unjust.

"This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). "Good and upright is the Lord" (Psalm 25:8). The angels cry before God day and night, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isaiah 6:3). And when he does things that seem evil to us, the Bible teaches us to speak to man like this: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). God is not evil, even when he wills that evil come to pass. There are good and holy and just purposes in all he does. For those who love him he "works all things together for good"

(Romans 8:28). Now and forever.

Now the four positive reasons why this world exists.

1. The reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is because God planned the history of redemption and then permitted sin to enter the world through our first parents, Adam and Eve.

In 2 Timothy 1:9 the apostle Paul said, “[God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.” In other words, before there was any world or any sin in the world, God planned saving grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That means that God knew Adam would sin. He was already planning how he would save us.

Therefore Adam’s sin was part of God’s plan so that God could reveal his mercy and grace and justice and wrath and patience and wisdom in ways that could have never been revealed, if there were no sin and no Savior and no history of salvation. God’s aim for this fallen world is that he be known more fully, because knowing God most fully is what it means for us to be most fully loved. If you turn to Christ, you will discover in God more wonders in this fallen world than could be imagined in any other world.

2. The reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is because God subjected the natural world to futility. That is, God put the natural world under a curse so that the physical horrors we see around us in diseases and calamities would become a vivid picture of how horrible sin is. In other words, natural evil is a signpost pointing to the horrors of moral evil.

Before I say another word, hear this word of clarification: some of the sweetest, most humble, godly, Christ-exalting, heaven-bound people carry some of those signs. Listen to Romans 8:18-21:

The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

In other words, God subjected the creation to futility and bondage to decay and misery and death. He disordered the natural world because of the disorder of the moral and spiritual world—that is because of sin. In our present condition blinded by sin and dishonoring God every day, we cannot see how repugnant sin is. Hardly anyone in the world feels the horror that our sin is. Physical pain we feel! And so it becomes God’s trumpet blast to tell us that something is dreadfully wrong in the world. Diseases and deformities are God’s portraits of what sin is like in the spiritual realm. That is true even though some of the most godly people bear those deformities. Calamities are God’s previews of what sin deserves and will one day receive in judgment a thousand times worse. They are warnings. And that is true even when they sweep away Christ-followers and Christ-rejectors.

Oh, that we could all see and feel how repugnant, how offensive, how abominable it is to

blackball our Maker, to ignore him and distrust him and demean him and give him less attention in our hearts than we do the carpet on our living room floor. We must see this, or we will not turn to Christ for salvation from sin. Therefore, God mercifully shouts to us in our sicknesses and pain and calamities: Wake up! Sin is like this! Sin leads to things like this. (See Revelation 9:20; 16:9, 11.) The natural world is shot through with horrors to wake us from the dreamworld of thinking sin is no big deal. It is a horrifically big deal.

3. The reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is so that followers of Christ can experience and display that no pleasure and no treasure compares to knowing Christ. That is, the loss of every good thing in this world is meant to reveal that Christ himself more than compensates for all losses.

We see it in the New Testament and the Old Testament. The apostle Paul says, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8). The superior worth of Christ is magnified because in all Paul’s losses, he experiences Christ as all-satisfying.

The prophet Habakkuk said it with amazing and painful beauty:

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

Famines, pestilence, persecution—these happen so that the world might see in the followers of Jesus and discover for themselves that God made us for himself and that he is our “exceeding joy” (Psalm 43:4) and at his right hand are pleasures for every more (Psalm 16:11). The losses of life are meant to wean us off the poisonous pleasures of the world and lure us to Christ our everlasting joy.

4. Finally, the reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is to make a place for Jesus Christ the Son of God to suffer and die for our sins. The reason there is terror is so that Christ would be terrorized. The reason there is trouble is so that Christ could be troubled. The reason there is pain is so that Christ could feel pain. This is the world God prepared for the suffering and death of his Son. This is the world where God made the best display of his love in the suffering of his Son.

Romans 5:8, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” All his suffering was the plan of God to reveal redeeming love to us. The sovereignty of God, the evil of the world, and the love of God meet at the cross of Christ. Listen to this amazing statement from Acts 4:27-28 about God’s plan for the suffering of his Son—for you! “Truly in this city [Jerusalem] there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” All the scheming, all the flogging, all the spitting, all the beating with rods, all the mockery, all the abandonment by his friends, all the thorns in his head, all the nails in his hands and feet, the sword in his side, weight of the sins of the world—all of it according to God’s plan. For you to see God’s love more

graphically.

God's deepest answer to terrorism and calamity is the suffering and death of his Son. He entered into our fallen world of sin and misery and death. He bore in himself the cause of it all—sin. And he bought by his death the cure for it all—forgiveness and everlasting joy in the age to come.

On his behalf I invite—I urge—you to receive him as your Savior and Lord and the supreme Treasure of your life