why does God allow suffering?

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An Excerpt from: Why Suffering?
I (Ravi Zacharias) grew up in a neighborhood in New Delhi, India, where communities defined friendships. Houses were close to one another, we played together with the neighborhood kids, and we often crossed one another’s front or back yards on our way to the store or to school. It happened to be government employee housing, and so all the homes were identical inside and out. Our parents were all friends, and meals were often shared in each other’s homes. There was never an issue of finding babysitters because either the servants in the house or the neighbors were there to meet the need. We knew one another’s pay scale and place in society.

We also knew our neighbors’ hurts. The pains that each bore were, in effect, community knowledge. I had a close friend who lived about six doors down, no more than a three-minute walk. Often I would cross his backyard as a shortcut to go to the neighborhood convenience store. His father was a good friend to my dad. When I was about fifteen years old,

I remember a scene that bothered me a lot but that I never quite understood. Each time I would cross my friend’s yard, I could hear his father sobbing uncontrollably, muttering away some words of plea for hope. His wife would be there, sitting on the bed beside him, just stroking his back, oftentimes with tears running down her face.

I wondered what this was about, considering it was a common scene and an obviously disconcerting situation. I asked my friends what had happened and was told he’d had a “nervous breakdown.” I had no clue what that was. I asked my mother to explain it. Knowing why I was asking, she simply said, “Something terrible must have happened and this man no longer has the ability to face life. His constant crying shows he cannot control the pain in his heart and the tears from his eyes.”

I was quite young but was jolted on the inside: One could reach a stage where they could no longer control the pain in their heart and the tears from their eyes?

I thought about that often. Certainly, pain was a reality. I could not even get to the convenience store without having to admit that. The only difference seemed to be who controlled and faced it better, and why. How does one endure grief and pain? How does one manage it in life? Where do we go for answers when we suffer ourselves or when we see those we love suffering?

“A Baby’s Funeral” is an essay by one of my favorite authors, the Englishman F. W. Boreham. He tells of a time as a younger minister when he looked out his window and saw an anxious woman walking back and forth in front of his home, but never quite making it to the doorway. So he stepped outside and asked if he could help her. She said she needed help from a minister, and asked if she could step in for a few minutes.
So he ushered her in and she sat in his study looking terribly nervous and tongue-tied. She finally spoke up: “I have a newborn baby that has just died. I need a minister to perform the funeral.”

Boreham asked several questions, took down the details, and said he would help in any way he could. She left and plans were made for the burial a couple of days from then. Boreham and his wife left after that conversation for a picnic that they had planned. But he couldn’t get the woman’s story out of his mind and said to his wife, “Something is not right. Her story just doesn’t add up.” They headed back home at dusk, and to their surprise, the woman was still pacing outside their home waiting for them to return. They invited her in.

“I have not told you the whole truth,” she said. “Actually this baby was born illegitimately and deformed. She didn’t live very long. I just want to give her an honorable burial with just her name on the stone.” Boreham was deeply moved and the funeral was planned. They arrived at the cemetery and he was surprised to find that nobody had been buried there before. It was pouring rain, and he and his wife, with this woman and the baby in a small casket, were all who were present at the burial. An illegitimate child, deformed, the first in a cemetery, under pouring rain— that was the funeral at which he officiated.

Years later Boreham took a train journey with a veteran bishop who was making stops to meet the pastors of small churches in the towns along the route. Boreham would stay a little distance away to let the bishop have some private time with these ministers. It was obvious that they were sharing the stories and challenges of ministering to people in their respective congregations. Boreham remembered well the closing words of the bishop in each instance: “Just be there for them . . . just be there for them in their need.”

As he journeyed back that day, Boreham’s thoughts returned to the woman with her baby. Years had gone by since that funeral, but every Sunday he could be certain of one face in his congregation. It was that woman. The first time he met her, her face was tearstained and her eyes fearful. As the years went by, the tears were wiped away and the eyes spoke of belonging to a message and a hope and a people that carried her through.

Seldom in one life do all forms of agony converge—a moral struggle, a heartbreak of grief, a little one at the heart of the story, the ultimate desolation of being buried in an empty cemetery, nature pouring its “tears” in a pounding rain, and yet the words of Scripture, the caring heart of a minister, and the years of belonging to a loving community all coming together in one life. What cradles a heart when such griefs converge? Somewhere in the community of those who have set their hope upon God, this woman found comfort and meaning amid the hardest question she ever had to face: Why suffering?

In each chapter of this book, my colleague Vince Vitale or I will outline a different response to this enormous question. Some of the chapters will take a fresh look at an ancient response. Others will propose new responses for your consideration. The responses are of course deeply related, but by looking at them separately we hope to show that the resources of the Christian community for approaching this ever-present challenge are both richer and more numerous than typically assumed.
The Challenge

Before we get to responses, though, I want to linger on the question—to hear it, to frame it, and to ask what it presupposes about who we are. This brings the question of suffering to a felt reality and, if properly addressed, gives us the prospect of hope. As for the intellectual side of this debate, I promise I will get to it. But first I would like to focus on where the darkness of evil and suffering hovers most and where the first glimmer of light may shine.

It is safe to say that both skeptic and believer alike share one opinion in common: The question of pain and suffering provides the greatest challenge to belief in God. In a discussion between scholars the issue of a world torn by suffering is often described as an insoluble trilemma. The argument by skeptics is positioned by first posing three basic claims that are adhered to by a Christian and then showing these claims to be irreconcilable. At least, they insist, these claims as they define them must be held by a Christian:

1. God is all-powerful: He can do anything He wills.
2. God is all-loving: He cares with an intense value for His creation.
3. Evil is a reality: Suffering is an all-pervading part of this world.

At face value, it is obvious that the ideas are indeed at variance. An all-powerful God can do anything He pleases, and from our perspective, the loving thing to do is to ease the pain of someone you love. Yet evil and suffering occupy a major part of our human experience; God has not removed them. These assertions together make no sense. This is the trilemma.

It is almost impossible to find any treatment of the subject without encountering this “obvious” incoherence. So the logical conclusion to solving the trilemma is that one or all three of these assertions must be denied. It is too obvious to deny that evil is a reality so, it is asserted, the Christian must surrender at least one of the first two beliefs and perhaps both—either God is not all-powerful, or He is not all-loving, or He is neither. In fact, some philosophers go even further. Not only do they think that defending these three ideas as compatible is irrational, they believe that the problem is so acute that it makes belief in God irrational. It is no longer merely a defense that theism has to muster; it is an offense that makes theism a violation of reason.

Interestingly, the skeptic seldom pauses to go where the trilemma logically and ultimately leads philosophically; if the first two statements are denied, the most empirically evident statement—that evil is a reality—will ultimately have to be denied as well. But I shall not get ahead of myself here.

So compelling is this trilemma to the skeptic that it is often considered absolute proof of God’s nonexistence. Killing God—what Nietzsche deemed the greatest deed—has been accomplished. Australian philosopher and strident atheist J. L. Mackie said it in these words:

*It can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are*
inconsistent with one another, so that the theologian can maintain his position as a whole only by a much more extreme rejection of reason than in the former case. He must now be prepared to believe, not merely what cannot be proved, but what can be disproved from other beliefs that he also holds.

To Mackie, and to those who support his challenge, it is not so much a critique from a counter perspective that destroys Christian belief, but that these affirmations of belief within the Christian faith actually result in its own demise when put to the test of reason. So strongly is this argument held that it is branded the Evidential Argument from Evil, a counterpoint to theism.

When a counter to this charge of irrationality reveals the incoherence of the challenge, the question is suddenly repositioned. What do I mean by that? Take a look again at the three assertions.

1. God is all-powerful: He can do whatever He pleases.
2. God is all-loving: He cares for His creation.
3. Evil is a reality: Suffering is a real part of our human experience.

Each of these statements dies the death of a thousand qualifications: Who said that God can do anything He pleases and what does that really mean? What does “He pleases” mean? Can He do something that is mutually exclusive? Can He make a square circle? Can He lie and state it as the truth?

The challenge is actually quite silly. If God can do anything, then He surely can even allow evil and call it good. Why does He have to explain it? Surely, if omnipotence means all-powerful without even logical or rational limitation, He can allow evil to exist and not see any incoherence in it. And if God can do anything He pleases why can’t He simply be incoherent as well? That may be irrational to the skeptic, but does not limitless power also mean the power to be irrational without justification?

Or take the second premise: Is eliminating pain always the loving thing to do? Is it a quid pro quo that if you love somebody you will make their life totally free from pain? Taking it a step further, does love always mean giving one the freedom to have or do whatever one wishes? Is it love to remove boundaries? Very quickly one can see that every premise as stated or implied by the critic makes assumptions that are actually irrational.

That is why in debates the attacker quickly shifts the attack in another direction: Why would God have created such a world in the first place when in His omniscience He could foresee the extent of evil that would be done and the depths to which the innocent would suffer? By presenting it this way, the emotions are stretched to the ultimate limit when one delineates the extent of evil. Now the problem becomes thorny. No thinking, caring person can simply stroke his or her chin and say, “That’s true, but it’s unfortunately the way it is.” The anguish has to be felt and it is felt, and that is why the question of suffering is raised in the first place.

But in demanding an answer for the reality of suffering, the questioner is looking for an emotionally satisfying answer as much or perhaps even more than for an intellectually fulfilling answer. A person falling off a high ladder understands that he will fall downward
in the direction of the ground. There is no intellectual struggle there. But his emotional struggle is why the ladder was faulty in the first place or why he was not more careful.

**Is the Trilemma Too Trivial?**

The response to this whole series of challenges can be brief or it can be lengthy. Let me just pose a counter question: Is this trilemma a comprehensive set of affirmations? What if we interject just one more assertion into consideration that the Christian faith also makes—that “God is all-wise”? Is this really more of a quadrilemma than a trilemma? God is all-powerful, all-loving, and all-wise . . . and evil exists. Maybe even a quintilemma? God is all-powerful, all-loving, all-wise, and eternal . . . and evil exists in time.

Any one of these assertions can be defended on reason alone. Why is it that we finite, self-serving, time-constrained, so-often-wrong human beings think we have all the wisdom needed in which to castigate God and hold Him before the bar of our wisdom within our timetable? Is it simply not possible that though thinking we are operating in the light, we could really be operating in the dark? Is it not also possible that there are character lessons learned in adversity that could never be learned in any other way?

Take the simple illustration of a person so engrossed in the story while watching a movie that there has become a disjunction between the viewer and the viewed of unbelievable proportions. My mother-in-law is that kind of a viewer. She becomes so riveted by what she is watching that she actually starts talking to the actors in the movie: “Watch out, there’s somebody standing behind the door!” “Don’t go in...don’t go in!”

I become so frustrated at times like these that I find myself telling her that not only does the actor in the movie know what is going to happen, his goal is to make her think that he doesn’t know and she is falling for his ruse. What is more, this is not the first time he is walking into that room. He has done it again and again until the director determines that he does it well enough to make her think he doesn’t know what lies behind the door. The storyteller hopes to cross the line between imagination and reality suspended in time. If we didn’t believe in this disjunction, it would be the end of all theater.

But in a so-called “true story,” based on facts, an actor plays a role that actually happened. In reality there was a time and a place where there was no actor, but rather the unfolding story of a person’s life that was as real as life itself.

God, who exists in the eternal, in creating time and people, gives us the backdrop to the story and enough information so that we can know how this story will end. The true seeker after truth has enough clues to enable him or her to endure through time what is of eternal value, and see in reality and experience the triumph of truth over a lie, of love over selfishness. It is the ultimate triumph of the sacred over the profane. Neither is imaginary, and neither can be explained without the reality of the other.

Several years ago, there was a powerful movie titled *Not Without My Daughter*. It is based on the real-life story of an American woman who married a Muslim man in the United States. After several years of happy marriage, the man took his wife and young daughter to Iran, his homeland, on a vacation. But it wasn’t long before his wife realized that he had never planned to return to the United States but to keep at least his
daughter in his homeland, even if his wife was able to leave. The story is full of high drama, emotion, and heart-wrenching struggle as the mother experiences the heartache of living with lies and of seeing her daughter raised in a culture with which she is not comfortable, facing hostility and abuse herself.

Gradually, she begins to lay a plan to smuggle her daughter out of Iran. With the help of some locals and with incredible risk, they begin their journey of escape. As the plan painstakingly succeeds, the final scene of the movie is of the mother staggering along an unfamiliar street with her daughter in her arms, not even sure where she is. When she hears something flapping in the wind, she looks up toward the sound and sees an American flag waving above a building. Suddenly, she realizes she is standing before an American embassy, and the tears stream uncontrollably down her cheeks; she has caught the scent and sight of freedom and of home.

I am convinced that such is the hope and victory of one who grasps God’s story for humanity. You arrive at the place of freedom to hope again, because you sense the very presence of the One who makes you free.

The Pain of Painlessness

Some time ago I read an interview with a woman who had a daughter with a rare medical condition. In the last line of the interview she said, “My prayer for my daughter every night is, ‘Dear God, please let my daughter be able to feel pain.’ ” If that were all one read of the interview, what would be concluded? At best, our most beneficent thoughts would be that perhaps this child was callous and totally indifferent to anyone else’s suffering, and the mother was praying that her daughter would learn to empathize with others by experiencing pain herself. But that was not the case. The daughter she spoke of suffered from a rare medical condition that made it impossible for her to feel physical pain.

In a totally different narrative, even as I write the news is hot on the wires of a young Australian student in America gunned down by three young men whose sole motive was to kill for “the fun of it.” No pain over what they had done, no remorse, no guilt. The father of one of them said, “My son doesn’t feel the weight of doing anything wrong.”

Here are two instances of a painless existence. But the difference between them is huge. In the first instance a child was born with a rare congenital disease called CIPA (congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis). This horrific disease has stricken only very few people in human history. The body simply does not feel pain, but this does not mean that the body cannot be wounded. In fact, therein lies the danger: The girl could step on a rusty nail that penetrated her foot and consequently develop a life-threatening infection, but she would feel no pain and not even realize that she had been wounded. She could place her hand on a burning stove and not feel the flesh melt.

In other words, there are two realities. There is actual destruction and debilitation without a concomitant felt loss, because there is an actual loss at a deeper level on which the signal system to the body is no longer functioning. This is a physical malady of deadly proportions; thus the mother’s prayer, “Please let my daughter feel pain.”
The second instance, that of the killing of a man for the fun of it, is actually an even more deadly malady, because here pain is inflicted without any emotional response. In a civilized society it is expected that someone who inflicts pain should feel remorse and anguish over the deed. What a terrifying world this would be if each of us had a neighbor of such deformity that though a perpetrator of pain, they themselves felt none. They could hurt us for “the fun of it.”

Why is it that while the former situation is equally instructive, the latter is more terrifying? Both tell us that pain is a real indicator for a better purpose, and both tell us that when an underlying malfunction is real, the symptomatic issues, though secondary, are warning lights of what needs to be fixed. The worst kinds of diseases are the ones where there are no symptoms that indicate the fatal effect is doing its deadly work.

Imagine you are taking a path that zigzags up a hill, rather than running straight up, because of the steep angle of the climb. As you climb, at times you seem to be moving farther away from your destination at the top because you are angling across the mountain rather than going straight up. Yet in reality you are actually moving closer to the top all the time.

Add to this one further component, that it is also true that the shortest distance to a destination is not always the best route because the most important experiences are often missed. One can quickly see how our journeys in life contain ready examples of traveling toward the destination we seek along a path that is not always free from impediments or obstructions or pain, and that often this is the better way to go. Freedom from pain is not the only indicator of whether or not something is beneficial.

The Reasoning of Reason

Philosophers like J. L. Mackie who use the existence of evil as an argument against God fail to differentiate between logic and reasoning. A person using the same logic as Mackie does can apply a different reasoning to the same situation and come up with a totally different conclusion.

I am from India. There is an old Indian popular song that says:

*My shoes are Japanese, these trousers English; The red cap on my head, Russian, yet my heart is Indian.*

Of course, “heart” here refers to the way one thinks and feels. The problem of suffering is felt in the East as much as it is felt in the West. Pain is the same East or West; where one lives and the culture from which one comes are inconsequential. Both mourn their dead, both visit loved ones in hospitals, both have pain management clinics and psycho- therapists. And when the Muslim says “Insha Allah,” or the Hindu mutters “kismet” (luck), or the Buddhist “karma,” they understand the trilemma we are talking about, though their reasoning process is not the same as Mackie’s and those who pose this trilemma as “insoluble.” Of course I am not talking about those in villages who have never heard of Leibniz or Augustine. I am talking about the educated and those well-versed in philosophy, even Western philosophy.
Using logic as a test for truth and reasoning does not always result in the same implications of what is true. Worldviews must be put through the sieve of our reasoning process to examine if we have done justice to the facts and to logic or have merely forced conclusions from them that amputate other realities. Such extrapolations are often tendentious and reveal more of the cultural bias from which the contender argues.

If one is to be fair to all the major positions, one must test the logic of one’s own position before indiscriminately disposing of an alternative position. Declaring a conundrum insoluble by a crass sterile logic that fails to fully examine the affirmations runs the risk of being illogical and unreal. It is imperative that we understand not only the logical problem that is being presented but the reasoning process that we are bringing to bear upon this very important question.

In a recent interview philosopher Daniel Dennett described Alvin Plantinga’s defense of Christian theism in the context of the problem of evil as “logically impeccable [yet] preposterous.”

That’s quite a statement. I am assuming that by “logically” here he not only means that Plantinga’s argument has explanatory power but that it is coherent, as that is a necessary component of being logical. What, then, does he mean by preposterous? He must mean only that in his view any justification of evil is preposterous. So now he has inevitably shifted to making a value judgment.

In that same interview, Dennett speaks strongly against anyone who believes in absolutes. One can only ask him if he holds that position absolutely, but we won’t stop his argument that quickly. If Plantinga’s position is logical yet preposterous, does that mean that Dennett’s own position on evil is therefore illogical but not preposterous, or in fact both illogical and preposterous? Whatever we conclude, from the theistic viewpoint the trilemma can be invoked only in the context and within the constrictions of time, and therefore Christian belief can be logically sustained.

The View from Brokenness

Some months ago, a friend of mine arranged for me to have the privilege of visiting and speaking to prisoners at the infamous Angola prison in Louisiana, once known as the most dangerous prison in America. There are about five thousand inmates in Angola, more than 85 percent of whom are serving life without parole and forty-five of whom are on death row. Not very many years ago when a prisoner was processed into Angola he was given a knife to protect himself. It was not uncommon to see bloodstains on the floors and walls. These are among the toughest and meanest criminals you could meet. Entering that prison for life without parole was to say good-bye to civility, with no possibility of freedom.

Things have changed at Angola. I couldn’t help but wonder, as I met some of the prisoners and was able to talk with them one-on-one, what crimes they had committed and what had caused this apparently calm and mild-mannered person to do whatever he had done that landed him here. I spoke in the prison seminary, in which about ninety prisoners are enrolled at a time. Afterward, I was chatting with a handful of men and one of them told me a little bit about his past and how he ended up in Angola for life without
parole. I asked him, “How do you handle the prospect that you will never get out of here, and that this is where your life will now be spent?”

He looked to me to be a man no older than his mid-thirties. He answered, “You know, sir, if you knew the kind of person I was before I came here, and what I have now become because of the freedom Jesus Christ has brought to my soul, I can only say that if this is what it took to bring me to my senses, I am happy to spend the rest of my life here.” Then he paused and said, “Please pray for my parents. They think they are free, but they are in a prison of their own darkness without God.”

That evening it was all I could do to fight back the tears as I watched this same man leading more than seven hundred prisoners in worship before I spoke. It was one of the most sobering experiences I have ever had. A hard-core criminal who has experienced redemption conveys a powerful story of how deep the human malady is, and that often one must be brought very low before acquiring the ability to understand what lies beneath evil.

A good friend of mine is a professional comedian, one of the most successful stand-up comics of all time. I mention this because few know the depths of this man’s commitment to make the world a better place. Making people laugh is his avocation; giving people hope is his real passion. In a recent conversation he spoke of his favorite day of the week: the day he leads a Bible study for the homeless in Atlanta, Georgia. He told me of a man who had been banished from his family for twenty-two years. Any attempt he made to go back home was rebuffed because his family members felt they could not trust him.

One day my friend was teaching the story of the prodigal son in the Bible study. This man pondered the story for some time, rereading it and studying it carefully. “You know what?” he finally said to my friend. “There is a world of difference between saying ‘I have made a mistake’ and saying ‘I have sinned.’ A huge difference! When the son in the parable goes back to his father, he doesn’t say, ‘I have made a mistake.’ He says ‘I have sinned against heaven and against you.’ ”

Not long after coming to terms with the implications of the prodigal’s return, this homeless man also returned home to his mother and said to her, “I have stolen from you, I have deceived you, I have lied to you. I have sinned against heaven and against you. I ask your forgiveness for my sin.” Twenty-two shattered years and then the discovery of a most basic truth. He didn’t expect any change in his family’s attitude toward him; he just wanted them to know that he understood what he had done to them and to ask for their forgiveness.

The family, seeing for the first time that he viewed his actions in such self-revealing terms, swung open the doors of their hearts and their house and asked him to come home. He is back with his family. But every week he returns to this Bible study for the homeless to tell the story of his own journey back to God. “I have sinned.” Those words are from the depths of remorse that is rightly felt.

Before anything is lived it has to be believed, and not everything that is believed is always lived out. The reality is that the disavowal of belief in God is fraught with
immense logical and existential problems. If indeed the existence of God (from which the essential nature of man derives) is denied, three logical conclusions must follow.

1. Man (humanity) becomes God.
2. The body becomes the soul.
3. Time becomes eternity.

I have given this outline as simply stated. I will explain it at greater length later. For now, these implications are fairly obvious: Can we live with their ramifications? What becomes of the problem of evil if these implications are true?

Other religions attempt to answer these questions in their own terms, and atheists struggle to hold on to the categories they have invented. Christianity suggests that coherent and livable responses are to be found not in humanity becoming God, but in the God who became human. Vince Vitale and I will explore all of these possibilities in the ensuing chapters.

We suggest that the resources of Christianity provide a wide range of helpful responses to the question, “Why suffering?” The strength of these responses is to be found not in pitting one against another but in appreciating their cumulative force, and in recognizing that a challenge as personal as the challenge of suffering requires responses varied enough to bring meaning and comfort to each particular circumstance and, most importantly, to each particular person.

Ideas cannot bring lasting meaning, comfort, or hope. Only a person can. At the core of every one of the responses we will offer is relationship with God—the freedom to enter into that relationship and the empowerment to live in the fullness of life that only that relationship provides.


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