

Ask Anything

“Why believe in a God who allows evil and suffering?”

Selected Texts

Delivered during the COVID-19 crisis via Livestream and to an under 50 gathering at Central Baptist Church on October 25, 2020

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 01)** We are continuing in our Ask Anything series. The next question you asked and voted on concerns the problem of evil and suffering: **(SHOW SLIDE 02)** **Why should I believe in a God that allows such terrible things to go on in the world? Why do innocent and good-hearted people suffer so terribly in atrocities? Why does God create things that harm us, such as murder hornets?**
 - The question of evil and suffering is always so powerful because it’s not theoretical; it’s real life. It is *not* like thinking through a problem as you walk along the ocean on a bright sunny day. It *is* like trying to walk a rugged trail through a forest on a dark night. We all know those moments when life has become so dark that we can hardly see our next step. We all know examples of evil and suffering that are so dark they seem to block out all light.
 - Why does God allow such darkness in his world?
- Let me say this right up front: the Bible does not answer every question we have about why God allows such darkness. But what I hope to show you today is that it does light a few candles in the darkness. In other words, it gives enough light for you to keep walking the trail of life God has set before you.
 - In fact, this morning I want to show you that the Christian faith gives you far more light—that is, far better answers—than any other religion, spiritual path, or secular way of thinking. I will go further and say that the Christian faith also gives far better emotional resources to face the darkness than any other system of belief.
 - So, let’s think this whole problem of evil and suffering through together. Let’s talk about four things: First, the darkness we all must face. Second, the lack of light in other worldviews. Third, the candles that Christianity lights. Finally, the next step along your trail.

THE DARKNESS WE ALL FACE

- First, let’s talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 03)** **The darkness we all must face.**
 - We must begin by saying that Christianity does indeed have a big problem when it comes to evil and suffering. In fact, the first thing Christianity does is to intensify the problem and make it bigger.
 - The Christian shouts with the multitude in Revelation 19:6:
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 04)** **“Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.”** But if God is “Almighty” then why doesn’t he stop evil and suffering?

- You believe racism is evil and should be removed from every culture and society? That's great. Just realize that a secular worldview cannot support this belief.
 - A Christian may have to answer why God allows racism to exist but a Christian has no problems explaining why it is evil. We believe God defines good and evil and God says racism is evil and that we are to do what is good, which means loving our neighbor as ourselves.
- So this is not just a problem for Christians. It is a problem for everyone. This is the darkness we must all face.

THE LACK OF LIGHT IN OTHER WORLDVIEWS

- But let's take this a step further. I am going to argue in the next point that Christianity has far greater resources to help you deal with evil and suffering than any other worldview.
 - Before we get to that let's just consider how little help other views give you in dealing with the darkness.
- In the second place, let's talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 09) the lack of light in other worldviews.**
- First, think about the view of reincarnation. Ask people who hold to this view the same question we are wrestling with today: ***"Why do we suffer?"*** Answer: the reason why you suffer is because you made bad choices in a previous life. It's karma. You are suffering because you are just getting what you deserve.
 - One positive of this view is that justice will always be served. Yet, there is very little hope for you. The only way you escape the cycle of reincarnation is to live a better life so that after many lifetimes of suffering you will hopefully break free from the cycle.
 - So this view does not light up the darkness. It just tells you that you deserve the darkness that you are in and maybe one day you will break free into the light.
- Second, let's think again about the modern secular view.
 - Richard Schweter, a cultural anthropologist, says modern secular culture is the worst culture in history of the world at equipping people to suffer. Why? Because when you ask, ***"Why am I struggling so much?"*** the answer is, ***"There is no reason. There is no purpose. It's just how the universe is."***
 - As Dawkins said, **(SHOW SLIDE 10) *"There is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference."***² The universe doesn't care that you feel lonely, lost your job, or that Covid has made life hard.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 11)** Perhaps worst of all is the fact that modern secular thinking offers no hope for the atrocities that committed in our world because there is no afterlife and no final judgment.
 - Hitler killed millions but he committed suicide and so if you are modern secular person you have to believe he got away with it all.

² Richard Dawkins, *Rivers Out Of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 133.

- So you see, modern secular thinking says there is no ultimate purpose to your suffering and there is no ultimate hope that justice will ever occur.
- I have spent all this time on these first two points because I want to flip some of the questions you asked over onto their heads. Yes, we must face why God allows evil and suffering but far too often people act as if this is a big problem for Christians and they reject Christianity because of it.
 - What I have tried to show you is that it is a bigger problem for other worldviews. Modern secular culture cannot even explain what evil is and offers no justice and no hope. Views on reincarnation just you suffer because you deserve it and you've got many more lifetimes of suffering to go.
 - So that is the darkness we must all face and that is the lack of light from other worldviews.

CANDLE #1

- In the third place then, let's talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 12) the candles that Christianity lights.**
 - I am going to light four candles. That is, give you four Biblical responses to your questions about evil and suffering. These candles will not light up the whole forest. That is, they will not answer every question you have. However, these four candles will give you enough light to make some sense of the darkness, and more importantly, to keep walking the trail of your life.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 13) Candle #1: Creation**
 - People often say, *"I cannot believe in a God who would create a world that is filled with evil and suffering."* The Bible's answer to that is, *"No problem! The Bible is not asking you to believe in a God who would do that."*
 - If the story of the Bible said, *"God created a world filled with evil and suffering"* then it would be fair to say that God is not loving. But Genesis 1-2 make it plain that this is simply not the case. In fact, the God of the Bible is the kind of God we all say we want. He is a good and loving God. You can see this in the fact that the original creation he made was one of absolute goodness and joy.
- When you look at all the atrocities and pain in this world, you are not to think that God created the world this way. Rather, you are to see how sinful and lost human beings are. For, the Bible declares that all of this evil and suffering is what we bring on ourselves when we turn away from our Creator.
 - So this first candle corrects false ideas about how God created the world. It helps you make general sense of the darkness.

CANDLE #2

- **(SHOW SLIDE 14) Candle #3: Cross.**
 - Under all of our questions about evil and suffering is a single idea. A single poisonous idea. Under it all is the idea that God does not really care about us. Our logic goes like this: if he were really loving he would not remain up in heaven sheltered from it all but he do something about it.

- Again, we must fully agree with this. If the message of Christianity is, “God refuses to get involved in human affairs because he doesn’t really care” then we might be able to accuse him of not being loving. But this is *not* the Christian message.
 - Nowhere is this clearer than at the cross. The cross shows us how wrong to think that God does not stop evil because he does not care. The cross is a candle that lights up so much of the darkness.
- Listen, God did not remain in heaven removed from it all. God cared so much he took on human flesh and entered into all the suffering and pain. God did not send emissaries. He himself came into this dark world
 - God himself faced extreme evil and suffering. Look at the cross.
 - Look at the sign above his head! Its accusation reveals the injustice he faced in the courts of men.
 - Look at the bruises on his face. These are the evidence of the physical assaults he endured.
 - Look at the nails through his wrists and feet: these are the murder weapons.
- John Stott wrote these powerful words.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 15)** “It is the cross that gives God his credibility. . . . In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? In the course of my travels I have entered a number of Buddhist temples in different Asian countries. I have stood respectfully before a statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing around his mouth, serene and silent, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. **(SHOW SLIDE 16)** But each time, after a while, I have had to turn away. And in my imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in Godforsaken darkness. **(SHOW SLIDE 17)** The crucified one is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us, dying in our place in order that we might be forgiven. Our sufferings become more manageable in light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross, which symbolizes divine suffering.”³
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 18)** Do you feel like you are in darkness? Are you asking God why? You may never get the full answer but here is what you can know: whatever the reason for your suffering, it cannot be that God is unloving. If he didn’t care, why would he voluntarily enter the darkness of this world for you? If he didn’t care why would he suffer so much on the cross for you?
- He is dying there to take the evil that is in your heart and deal with it. He is taking all the darkness upon himself so we might be forgiven of our sins. Karma says, **“You sinned so you must pay.”** Jesus says, **“You sinned but I will pay.”**

³ John Stott, *Why I am a Christian*, 63.

- This is true light in the darkness. The cross proves that God loves us. The cross proves that God does not remain aloof from our suffering. And the cross proves that God is indeed doing something about evil in this world.

CANDLE #3

- **(SHOW SLIDE 19) Candle #3: Purpose.**
 - The modern secular view says there is no ultimate purpose to your suffering. Reincarnation that says the purpose of your suffering is to pay you back from what you did wrong in a previous life. Ah but the Bible says God can take something as bad as suffering and use it for good in our lives. Let this candle light your path: your suffering is not meaningless.
 - We read that Jesus was shaped by suffering. Hebrews 5:8 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 20) “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.”** What was true of Jesus is true for us. God’s mission is to rescue us from all our sin and all that is fallen in us and make us into perfected human beings. He uses suffering to accomplish this.
- This is why James 1:2-4 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 21) “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”**
 - You see this is not an ultimate answer to why God allows all suffering but it is a partial answer. It saves you from despair because it says your suffering is not meaningless. Search your own experience: is it not true that we often learn the most through difficult times? Talk to older Christians and they will often affirm these famous lines from Robert Hamilton.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 22) I walked a mile with Pleasure;
She chatted all the way;
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.**
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 23) I walked a mile with Sorrow;
And ne’er a word said she;
But, oh! The things I learned from her,
When Sorrow walked with me.**
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 24)** So in the middle of your darkness, this is a third candle. This candle says that there is purpose in your pain.
 - So rather than ask **“why does God allow this?”** ask **“what can I learn from this?”**
- Yet, even after these three candles have illuminated some of the darkness, our biggest question remains. Why doesn’t God stop all the evil and darkness?
 - Everything we have said is true and good but there are some examples of evil and suffering that are so dark we cannot see any purpose in them. Your questions said it well: **“What about atrocities committed against the innocent, like children?”**
 - It’s wonderful that God did not create evil. It is wonderful that God is with us. It is wonderful that God has purposes in our suffering. But oh

God, what we really need is for you to banish the darkness. Why don't you do this? Why do you let the darkness continue?

CANDLE #4

- This is where we need to light the last candle. For this candle shines brightly even when all other lights go out. **(SHOW SLIDE 25) Candle #4: Resurrection.**
 - The resurrection of Jesus is God's foretaste of what is to come for anyone who belongs to Jesus. God promised that he would rid his world of evil, pain, and death. The resurrection of Jesus is the launching of that new creation. God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus was given a resurrection body that is immortal. Jesus was brought into the presence of God.
 - And the great promise of the Bible is that all who belong to Jesus will also experience resurrection. That is, God will raise our bodies from the dead, transform them into bodies of power and immortality, and bring us into God's new creation where there is no death, evil, or suffering.
- The modern secular view offers you no hope for it says on top of all the evil and suffering you must face, you will eventually die and the universe will eventually die. There is no hope. All is darkness.
 - But listen to the good news of Christianity. Take all suffering. Take every evil. Take every wicked act that we can hardly mention. Stare in the darkness. And when all is black remember that the good news of Christianity is that one day—suddenly and without warning—the blazing sun is going rise over the dark forest of this world. Jesus is going to return. On that day, God will not only banish the darkness, he will also make up for all the wrongs you have experienced.
 - As Paul writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 26) I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom 8:18)**
- The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky put this so well in his famous novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.
 - One of his characters says, **(SHOW SLIDE 27) "I have a childlike conviction that the sufferings will be healed and smoothed over . . . and that ultimately, at the world's finale, in the moment of eternal harmony, there will occur and be revealed something so precious that it will suffice for all hearts [and] justify everything that has happened with men—let this . . . come true and be revealed."**
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 28)** Our great objection this morning is, **"why doesn't God do something about all the evil and suffering?"**
 - The answer of the Bible is, **"Oh he will! Just not quite yet. But be assured that a day is coming when he will do exactly what you are asking for...and more"**

THE NEXT STEP ON YOUR TRAIL

- So even though the Bible does not answer every question we may have about evil and suffering, those four candles enable us to see through the darkness.

- So with that light now illuminating the path in front of us, let's wrap all this up by talking about **(SHOW SLIDE 29) the next step on your trail.**
- If you are not a Christian then the next step you must take is to give your life to Jesus Christ. A new world is coming. It is the world of the risen Lord Jesus. Your king offers to pardon you of your sins and bring you into this world but you must bow the knee to him. You must ask his forgiveness and give your life to him.
 - Don't wait too long. In the old stories those who waited too long to seek shelter before the sun rose turned to stone. Don't wait another day for it may be today that the Son of God rises in all his blazing glory.
- Second, for those who have given their lives to Christ, just keep taking the next step in trusting him.
 - In our suffering we can be tempted to turn away from God. Yet, I try to quote G.K. Chesterton to you every so often for he says it so well: **(SHOW SLIDE 30) "When belief in God becomes difficult, the tendency is to turn away from Him; but in heaven's name to what?"**
 - There is nowhere else to turn. Keep walking the path.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 31)** A day is coming when your trail will end. It does not end in a cliff where you fall into utter darkness. It ends at a door that Jesus will open for you as he ushers you into a new world; a world that you always knew was there but could only see by faith; a new world where just your first morning's enjoyment there will heal you of all the wounds in this life. Maranatha! Come Lord, Jesus!