

Romans 5:3-5 5/6/13 (The Reason for God #3) **HOW COULD A GOOD GOD ALLOW SUFFERING**

In writing the book “The Case for Faith”, Lee Strobel commissioned the pollster George Barna to conduct a national survey in which he asked a scientifically selected cross-section of adults:

Slide: “If you could ask God only one question and you knew he would give you an answer, what would you ask?”

The top response was the question:

Slide: “Why is there pain and suffering in the world.”

This question is absolutely huge and we **do** have answers for it. This is an apologetics series that we’re right now. Apologetics is the discipline of providing answers. Again, the theme verse for this series and a good theme verse for the life of every Christian:

Slide: “...in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” (1 Peter 3:15 NIV)

And there absolutely are answers to this question of “How Could a Good God Allow Suffering?” And we’re going to get to them. But I want to talk a little first about where this question comes from. And the truth is:

Slide: I. Only the Knowledge of God Makes the Question of Evil Even Relevant.

See...

Slide: A. Without God There is No External Moral Standard.

...By which you could judge something to be evil or good. Darwinists explain it simply as “Survival of the Fittest.”

Slide: Fish eating fish eating fish picture.

It’s “kill or be killed”, “eat or be eaten.” This is what we’ve been told by evolutionists such as Richard Dawkins who has given us numerous examples of his thinking. Here’s one that sums it up pretty well:

Slide: clip from “The Genius of Darwin” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptV9sNezEvk>
Dawkins in Kenya saying “For most animals the reality of life is struggling, suffering and death.” Time Stamp 25:03 – 25:49

That’s a nice, cheery clip, isn’t it? Standard fare for Dawkins, who almost seems to delight in reminding us that’s just the way it is with an accidental world and accidental life, no God, no central authority and so on. And yet even Dawkins can’t get away from the fact that he doesn’t like it that way, that something inside of him rebels. Did you catch it in what he said?

Slide: **The total amount of suffering in the natural world is beyond all DECENT contemplation.**

What exactly does he mean by that? With God out of the picture, how does Dawkins arrive at something we could all call “**decent** contemplation”. Who is to say what’s decent, good and right, with no external moral standard outside of ourselves to make it so? Dr. William Provine, an atheist professor at Cornell University, takes the evolutionary view to its logical conclusion:

Slide: Provine clip from “The Truth Project” (You can also get clips from the movie:

“Expelled”)

Slide: Provine chart pic

No God.

No life after death.

No ultimate foundation for ethics. (rights and wrongs, good and evil)

No ultimate meaning in life.

No free will (we're all just biologically programmed to do what we do.)

So again, without God the idea of human rights, for instance, or women's rights or minority rights, is irrelevant. And human beings acting like animals would just be normal. And yet, when just about anyone sees that happening, again, something inside them rebels. For instance, even the most strident evolutionist like Dawkins has a moral outrage at what he sees as injustice in the world. You see it in his pet names for God. He calls God a:

Slide: Psychotic delinquent

Malevolent bully

Monster

And so on, and he calls us "deluded" for believing in Him. But where does that anger come from? Where does the question of the day even come from: "How Could a Good God allow suffering?" What you're going to find, even though many people don't want to believe it, is that ultimately...

Slide: B. Our Judgments of "Good" and "Evil" Come From Our Knowledge of God.

Anger against what people perceive to be an "unfair God" comes from an appeal to an ultimate standard of "fairness" which we are claiming to exist in and of itself. But if this universe and life and you are all just accidents, and nobody made us and we aren't accountable to anyone or anything, then that ultimate standard can't even exist. And I would say to Dawkins and others, "Why bother to be angry at a God who doesn't exist?" Why not just embrace the law of tooth and claw, eat or be eaten, and be done with it? And the answer is, that simply does not satisfy the innate sense of justice that we all have. At least, most of us have it – until your worldview really does take things to their logical conclusions. Ravi Zacharias, again, just a great Christian apologist, talks about what happens when men do totally reject God and put themselves in his place:

Slide: Ravi Zacharias Clip from "Life's Toughest Questions" lecture 2011

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jundo3A9nsw> Time stamp: 39:34 – 42:24

Folks, Eichman and Hitler were only following the logical conclusions they reached from evolutionary theory. Hitler murdered 70,000 mentally and physically handicapped people in his T4 program so they couldn't breed with those of 'good genetic stock' and thus pollute the entire gene pool. If evolution is true, wasn't he just doing mankind a favor?

Of course, evolutionists don't like to go there, but it is where their theory naturally leads.

Darwin understood that and it's reflected in the very title of his book:

Slide: ON

THE ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES

BY MEANS OF NATURAL SELECTION

OR THE

PRESERVATION OF FAVOURED RACES IN THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

Darwin was without doubt a racist because he believed that lighter-skinned people were superior to darker skinned people by virtue of a higher evolutionary development. This is what allowed his supporters to capture Australian aborigines and put them in cages to display as

missing links, or what led to our own country to put the pigmy Otta Benga on display in the monkey cage in the Bronx zoo.

Slide: Otta Benga pic

So, where do we go from here? If evolutionary theory doesn't have the answers to the question of suffering in the world, maybe we should look somewhere else. Tim Keller puts it this way in "The Reason for God."

Slide: "There is only one way out of this conundrum. We can pick up the **Biblical account** of things and see if it explains our moral sense any better than a secular view. If the world was made by a God of peace, justice, and love, then that is why we know that violence, oppression, and hate are wrong. If the world is fallen, broken, and needs to be redeemed, that explains the violence and disorder we see."

Slide: "If you believe human rights are a reality, then it makes much more sense that God exists than that he does not. If you insist on a secular view of the world and yet you continue to pronounce some things right and some things wrong, then I hope you see the deep disharmony between the world your intellect has devised and the real world (and God) that your heart knows exists." – Timothy Keller

So let's get to it. Let's "pick up the Biblical account of things." First, the logic of the question: "How Could a Good God Allow Suffering" was summed up long ago by the philosopher Epicurus,

Slide: "Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to; or he cannot and does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, and does not want to, he is wicked. But, if God both can and wants to abolish evil, then how comes evil in the world?"

How could a good God allow suffering? Well, the first part of your answer might sound kind of strange...

Slide: II. God Allows Suffering Because He **LOVES** us.

We've talked about it before. The Bible says "God is love". Well, if God is love, it's obvious that He didn't want to sit around loving himself for eternity. So he created our awesome universe with it's billions of galaxies and stars and set it all in motion with God-given natural laws to keep it functioning the way he wanted, and he created all the wonder and the beauty of this world with all the plants and animals. And then for the exclamation point on His creation, He made man. All so that He could have someone on whom to bestow His love. And He looked upon all that He had made and He declared it good. And at that point, God had an unbelievable choice to make. Was He going to be serious about His love, or just pretend? God could either program man with the software to only do good and obey Him, or He could give them the choice to love Him and obey Him willingly.

Slide: Robots pic from iRobot

If He had made man into robots who could only do His will it's a pretty good bet that there would be no evil or suffering in this world today. Neither would any of us truly love God or anyone else – because we wouldn't have a choice, and there is no true love without the choice to reject the object of that love. And God didn't want that – for Himself or for us. So He made us free - free to love Him and free to reject Him.

Again, the folks at the Veritas Project have done a good job putting this together in a very short and succinct way:

Slide: Veritas Project – Pain and Suffering clip

Folks, could God put a stop to all the pain and suffering in the world? Of course - He can do anything He wants. But the moment God puts a stop to all the evil in the world is the moment when he takes you off-line and downloads the software into your brain that will completely take away your freedom forever.

Slide: Robots pic

And God, in a love and compassion for us that is beyond our understanding, is not willing to do that.

Slide: A. He will not FORCE us to love Him.

Instead, He showers us with love and **invites** us to return it.

Slide: “...Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love...” (Joel 2:13 NIV)

In the same way

Slide: B. He will not force us to DO GOOD instead of evil.

Once again, instead of forcing, God urges us to freely choose the better way.

Slide: “Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.” (Psalms 34:14 NIV)

And folks, our loving God is always seeking peace and good for you despite the way it might seem when suffering and evil knock on your door. As we've already said, in an odd way the very fact that we all admit the existence of **evil** in the world proves the existence of God. It means that we know that there is a corresponding supreme Good that would not be there without a supreme God.

Again, if the evolutionists were right and we're all products of chance and survival of the fittest, then where is the standard that would judge evil? It's not wrong for one animal to kill and eat another. Why is it wrong for humans? Only the knowledge of God inside us brings us to that point. Not only that, but we want a God who is a just God and will do something about evil and punish the evil-doers. And we get frustrated when we don't see that happen - when people seem to get away with something. Well folks, I have to turn that around again and use that as another answer to the evil and suffering in the world. How can God allow it?

Slide: III. God Allows Suffering Because He is a JUST God.

And

Slide: A. He must PUNISH sin.

And He does. The Bible says:

Slide: “The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished...” (Numbers 14:18 NIV)

And that's what we want isn't it? We all detest lawyers who find loopholes that let the guilty go free. We don't like it on an earthly level and we wouldn't want it on a divine level. We want a God who is just and will punish sin.

But folks, it was for that very reason, when Adam and Eve sinned against God and set their feet not on the path of peace but on the path of evil, He brought judgment on them and that judgment fell also on the created order. All of creation is now a fallen creation.

Slide: fallen pic from the Veritas clip

There are now thorns and thistles and storms and floods that cause suffering and death - none of which was God's first intention for His creation. But if God in love allowed man the freedom to choose, He also...

Slide: B. He must allow the CONSEQUENCES of sin.

The “good thief” recognized that and said to the other:

Slide: “We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.” (Luke 23:41 NIV)

We don’t always have that clear of a perspective to see how the consequences of sin and the justice of God play out, but it always does in God’s time. Every choice; a good choice and a bad choice; has consequences. I choose to do some pretty dumb things and so do you. In this life, you bear the consequences. I do too. There’s only one exception where our bad choices don’t have bad consequences. And those are eternal consequences – those you and I don’t face because of the cross of Jesus Christ. Those are taken away for those who believe in Him and trust in Him. Because thank God...

Slide: IV. He Has a BIGGER plan. (than what we can see).

Do you think God is cruel and unloving because He allows sin and suffering to play out in this world? Then you have to explain how an unloving God could love us enough

Slide: A. To Enter Suffering HIMSELF.

700 years before it happened, the prophet Isaiah foretold what the life of Jesus would be like:

Slide: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:3–5 NIV)

Keller talks about the issue of suffering from that perspective and writes:

Slide: “It can’t be that he is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he was willing to take it on himself.” Timothy Keller

God so loved the world that He could not bear to bring the full punishment for our sins upon us, so He punished them instead in His own Son, Jesus Christ. And in doing so He crushed Satan’s power to remind us of those sins or to hold them against us, because they are all washed away in the suffering and death, in the blood of Jesus Christ, who also rose from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. Folks, that’s love. And that’s the same loving God who has decided that even though He will not remove our free-will and so remove all the world’s suffering, He will use that suffering to bring about good in our lives. He will...

Slide: B. To use suffering to produce CHARACTER in us.

Paul actually taught from experience that we can even...

Slide: “...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” (Romans 5:3–5 NIV)

Now folks, the fact that we don’t generally like what it takes to build character does not lesson the fact that God can change you and mold and you make you a much better person through times of suffering in your life. Some of the greatest lessons in my life were learned because of some dumb mistake I made and suffered for it, or from other suffering that I didn’t cause, but nevertheless had to wait patiently to see the hand of God redeem the suffering and use it to ultimately create good in my life. It isn’t just a flippant promise of God. He declared

to you and to me: “All things work together for good to those who love him and are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

God has also promised...

Slide: C. To use Suffering to STRENGTHEN our faith.

The psalmist tells us that “the Lord is near to the brokenhearted” (Ps. 34:18), and that when we go through the “valley of the shadow of death” He will be with us. (Ps. 23:4). Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord said,

Slide: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you.” (Isa. 49:15 NIV).

Folks, think about that – God has more concern and attention for you than a nursing mother toward her child! But often it isn’t until you’re helpless and flat on your back looking up to God that you truly get to know Him as the “God of all comfort and Father of mercies” that Peter speaks when He bids us to cast our anxieties on Him, “for He cares for us” (1 Pet. 5:7). Again Peter tells us to rejoice in our salvation even in the midst of trials:

Slide: “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.⁷ These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” (1 Peter 1:6–7 NIV)

“These have come,” he said, “so that your faith – of greater worth than gold which *does* perish eventually, even though it’s so pure that it’s refined by going through the fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” (1 Peter 1:6-7) We go through the fire too sometimes, don’t we? Some of you are in it right now. Folks, when you’re in it with faith in Jesus, you’ll find it to be a purifying fire that will only burn up the chaff of your life and leave you stronger when you get out the other side. Until finally we realize God’s bigger plan

Slide: D. To one day RELEASE Man from all suffering.

A hospital posted a notice in the nurses’ mess saying: “Remember, the first five minutes of a human being’s life are the most dangerous.” Underneath, a nurse had written: “The last five are pretty risky, too.”

Not really, when you’re walking through them with your Savior, who has already made that journey before you. Folks, death is not truly an enemy to someone who knows Jesus Christ, Who is the resurrection and the life. Death was part of the consequence of sin, but it wasn’t just a punishment, it was also a gift so that you and I would not be trapped in this sinful, pain infested body forever. I don’t know about you folks, but when the day comes I for one am going to be glad to shed this shell. Death will release us to live forever without the consequences of sin and it’s temptations...where

Slide: “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:3–4 NIV)

Next week we’re going to celebrate Mother’s Day. And I don’t like it that I don’t have my Mom to call or visit or write. But I do like the example she left to our family, the character she developed, the faith she displayed and the way she released her tired body into the hand of God with her last words “I just want to go home now and be with Jesus.” She got her wish and I’m

glad for her. And I'll see her again...and it is my goal to take all of you with me – (don't get nervous...not right away... – in God's way and time, of course). So that one day, when we're done with all the questions and all the suffering of this life, we too will see our Savior, Jesus face to face and all of our questions will fade away into the Joy of Jesus. Amen.