

The Problem of Pain and Suffering

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Why Does a Good, All-Powerful God Permit Pain?

No question is more frequently hurled at the Church than this: if God is all-powerful and all-good, why does He permit pain? The question is ancient, but it comes to you with new urgency in a generation that has lost the vocabulary of theodicy. A servant who cannot answer it will be silent when his people most need him to speak. This lesson trains you to respond with scriptural depth, patristic clarity, and pastoral care. It distinguishes what God created from what entered through human free will, sets out the Orthodox understanding of evil as a privation rather than a substance, and refuses both the easy optimism of the prosperity gospel and the faithless cynicism that treats suffering as proof of God's absence. The Cross is the standard against which every Christian account of pain must be measured: the greatest tragedy in history was also the means of the world's salvation. If the Cross can be both, so can the sufferings of those who follow the Crucified.

Why the Question Demands an Answer

Every servant will one day be asked why a loved one died young, why a child was born with a handicap, why a nation was swallowed in war, why a disease took the devout while sparing the profane. The question isn't a philosopher's puzzle. It comes from the mouth of the mourner and the face of the confused. To answer it with a shrug is pastoral dishonesty; to answer it with a formula is worse. The Church has thought deeply about the coexistence of pain and divine goodness, and those thoughts are entrusted to you so that you may pass them on with compassion.

Two False Answers to Refuse

Two false answers must be refused at the outset. The first denies God's power: if God were stronger He would stop suffering; since suffering continues, He must be limited. The second denies God's goodness: if God tolerates suffering He cannot be good. Both answers share a hidden assumption — that God's role in the world is to remove every painful circumstance. This assumption isn't found in Scripture, and it isn't found in the Cross. The Orthodox answer doesn't dissolve the pain; it places the pain inside a story large enough to hold it.

The Parable of the Vinedressers

Christ Himself gave you a parable that puts this same question in the mouth of a landowner rather than a philosopher:

“A certain man planted a vineyard, leased it to vinedressers, and went into a far country for a long time. Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that

they might give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the vinedressers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent another servant; and they beat him also, treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent a third; and they wounded him also and cast him out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son. Probably they will respect him when they see him.'" Luke 20:9-13, NKJV

Notice the shape of the complaint hiding inside this parable. Three servants are beaten, shamed, wounded, and cast out — and still the owner does nothing but send a fourth, his own beloved son, into the very violence that consumed the others. It's the same objection people raise against God when they see the innocent suffer and heaven appear silent: why does He tolerate the violence, and why would He send someone He loves into the middle of it? A philosopher has posed the same difficulty in a more abstract form for centuries: God is said to be all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing. If He is all-powerful, He can abolish evil. If He is all-good, He wants to abolish evil. Yet evil remains. So either He is not powerful enough, or He does not truly want to, or He does not know. Can all three attributes stand alongside the plain fact of pain and suffering in the world? The rest of this lesson answers that question, one attribute at a time.

God's Power and the Gift of Free Will

God is almighty, but His almightiness doesn't contradict His own decisions. When God chose to create a creature in His image, He chose to create a creature capable of love, and love is not love when it's compelled. A world in which every act was automatically righteous would be a world without persons, without virtue, and without real love. To demand that God create such a world is to demand that He unmake the very creature we are.

Can God Make a Mistake?

Being all-powerful doesn't mean God can do absolutely anything imaginable. Can He make a mistake? Can He make a round square? He cannot, and will not, change something He has already defined, because to do so would contradict His own nature, not limit His power. In the same way, God chose to create human beings with free will, and once that choice was made, it fell to them, rather than to God, whether sin would enter the world. That's what free will means. Built into the very situation of God deciding to create human beings with free will is the possibility of evil and, consequently, the suffering that results. A world with free will but without the possibility of sin is a self-contradiction — and a man without free will is a man with no potential to love. So the question isn't whether God is powerful enough to stop evil; it's whether removing the possibility of evil would also remove the very capacity for love He gave you in the first place. Both pain and suffering can coexist with God's omnipotence, because omnipotence was never the same thing as the abolition of your freedom.

From this decision follows an unavoidable consequence: a creature that can freely love can freely refuse. Free will is not a bug in creation; it's a feature of the image of God. The possibility of sin is the shadow of the possibility of love. Sin itself is not God's creation, but the space in which sin became possible is the space of freedom, and freedom is a gift.

God has bound Himself by His own gift. He will not rescind the freedom He gave. He persuades, woos, warns, and waits, but He does not override. This explains why the world in which you live is not a world of continual miraculous intervention. It's a world in which God respects the image He has made.

God's Goodness and the Surgeon's Knife

Consider a man who regularly sedates another human being, opens his chest, and holds a beating heart in his hand. Out of context, he's a monster — the kind of thing you'd call a serial killer if you heard about it secondhand. In context, he's a cardiothoracic surgeon, sedating a patient to spare him pain and opening his chest to save his life. The act is identical; the judgment is transformed entirely by knowledge of purpose. When you condemn God for the presence of pain in a world He made, you're often condemning the surgeon before you've learned that the knife is not the end of the story. If a doctor's cutting can be a mercy you don't yet understand, how much more the actions of your Creator?

This analogy isn't a trick. It's a reminder that your position as a creature is necessarily partial. You see a piece of the work. God sees the whole. This doesn't mean pain is an illusion; the surgery is real. It means that real pain can serve a real good that isn't yet visible to the one who suffers it.

Presence, Not Platitudes

This is the point at which you must tread carefully. It's cruel to tell the bereaved that their suffering is "for the best" as though the statement itself were the answer. The better ministry is presence: to sit with the sufferer as Christ sat with Mary and Martha outside Lazarus' tomb, weeping before He raised him (John 11:35). God's goodness isn't proved by the absence of tears; it's proved by the One who wept with us.

God's Knowledge and the Paradigm of the Cross

The Limits of Human Tragedy

Think of how many people die of starvation somewhere in the world at this very hour — a hardship that a single season of rain in the right place could have relieved. The human concept of tragedy isn't always the full story; you rarely see the whole chain of causes, choices, and consequences that produced a given sorrow, let alone the good God may yet draw from it. The clearest example of this asymmetry is the Cross itself.

The deepest answer the Church gives to the problem of pain is not a syllogism but an event. On Good Friday the sinless Son of God hung on a Roman cross, forsaken, mocked, and tortured to death. By every human measure, that day was a catastrophe.

"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Matthew 27:46, NKJV

is the cry of a world in which the devil seems to have won. Christ is bearing so much pain, so much agony, so much shame, that the devil looks on assuming triumph and victory.

Yet the Church confesses that this was the very moment of your salvation. The tragedy became the triumph. The defeat became the victory. The grave was not the end. From the standpoint of Sunday

morning, Friday afternoon looks entirely different. The Resurrection doesn't erase the Crucifixion; it transfigures it. What if this is the paradigm of the whole human situation — that when you bleed and when you suffer, as Christ did, the same reversal is at work, and this is simply God's way of defeating the devil?

If this is how God works in the central moment of history, you have no warrant to assume He works otherwise in your own sufferings. When you bleed, you cannot see how God could use your bleeding; but you worship a God who has shown, in His own blood, that He can. This is not a platitude. It's the shape of redemption itself.

The Bear in the Trap: Perspective and Pain

An old image used in pastoral teaching: a bear has stepped into a leghold trap. A hunter finds it, pities it, and decides to free it. The hunter cannot explain himself to the bear, so he tranquilizes it. To the bear, the dart feels like an attack. To release the trap's spring, the hunter must first push the bear's paw deeper into the jaws of the trap. In its drugged confusion, the bear is convinced this is its final torture. He doesn't realize the hunter is acting out of compassion, not cruelty.

The bear's conclusion is wrong. It's wrong not because its pain is unreal, but because its perspective is too narrow to interpret its pain. This is the condition of the rational creature before the infinite God. You may feel the dart and the deeper push and assume you've been forsaken. You are not the best judge of your own situation.

The analogy is humbling, not dismissive. It doesn't say that every instance of suffering is a good trick you're too small to see. It says that small creatures are poorly positioned to issue final verdicts on the goodness of a Creator whose purposes exceed their sight. The right response to that asymmetry is not rage but trust, and trust is learned by knowing Christ.

Evil Is Not a Thing God Made

Return for a moment to the parable of the vinedressers. Even after three servants are turned away bloodied, the owner sends his own son — because pain and evil are so often accompanied by an opportunity to do good. There was an opportunity for the vinedressers to change, an opportunity for a second chance. Some would have taken it; instead, they squandered it. It's when you squander your own free will that you choose to inflict pain, not only on yourself, but on others. The vineyard was never the place where God's power, goodness, or knowledge failed — it was the place where human freedom went wrong.

The Fathers developed a precise metaphysical response to those who ask where evil came from. Evil is not a rival substance, not an eternal counter-force, not a thing that God made. St. Basil the Great is unambiguous:

"It is impious to say that evil has its origin from God, because nothing contrary is produced by the contrary. Life does not generate death, nor is darkness the beginning of light, nor is disease the maker of health... No one who is in this world will deny that evil exists. What, then, do we say? That evil is not a living and animated substance, but

a condition of the soul which is opposed to virtue and which springs up in the slothful because of their falling away from good.” St. Basil the Great, Hexaameron, Homily 2

This is the Orthodox doctrine that evil is a privation — a lack of the good that ought to be present. Darkness is the absence of light. Blindness is the absence of sight. Evil is the absence of the goodness a creature was made to have. This teaching refuses the dualism of ancient Manichaeism and the modern cinematic habit of imagining the devil as God's equal and opposite. God has no equal, and evil has no independent existence.

This refusal matters pastorally. If evil were a substance, it would have power over God. If it were a substance, the universe would be two-headed, and fear would be rational. Because it's a privation, the remedy is not to be rescued from a stronger thing but to be reunited with the God who is, always, the source of being and good. This is the conclusive answer to the philosopher's trilemma: the presence of evil in the world does not disprove that God is all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing — it simply reveals that evil was never a rival power to begin with, but the wound left by creatures who were free to turn away from the Good and did.

Two Kinds of Trial

The Fathers distinguish two categories of suffering you will meet as a servant. The first is the natural trial. These are the afflictions that arise from the present condition of a fallen cosmos:

- Natural disasters — earthquakes, storms, famines, and similar upheavals of the created order.
- Natural birth handicaps — congenital disorders and conditions present from birth.
- The wearing away of the body — aging, disease, and the ordinary decline of mortal life.

These are not punishments directed at specific persons. They are the ache of a creation "subjected to futility" (Romans 8:20) that groans in expectation of its redemption.

The second is the personal trial. This is suffering that arises within the web of human freedom:

- Due to personal sin — the pain a person brings upon himself through his own choices.
- Due to others' sin and freedom — the pain a sinner inflicts upon the innocent, including abuse, betrayal, and injustice.
- Innocent trial allowed by God — sorrow permitted for purposes of formation in souls dear to Him, as with Job.

The two often overlap. A natural disaster is made worse by greed or neglect; a personal sorrow intertwines with the frailty of your mortal nature. You don't need a formula that sorts every grief into a tidy box. You need a framework in which to hear, pray with, and walk beside the one who grieves. This framework is the Church's.

Why Pain Exists at All

The Liturgy of St. Basil locates the origin of death at a precise point: not in God, but in the envy of the

devil. The Anaphora prays:

“O God, the Great, the Eternal, who formed man in incorruption; and death, which entered into the world through the envy of the devil, You have destroyed by the life-giving manifestation of Your Only-Begotten Son, our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ.” Liturgy of St. Basil, Prayer of Reconciliation

Most Orthodox dogma will often revolve around Creation and the fall of man. God created everything good, in incorruption. As sin was introduced into the world, so was, as a consequence — not in the sense of punishment, but in the sense of what sin brought along with it — death, corruption, and, essentially, evil. St. Athanasius gives the classical narrative of how this happened. God placed humanity in paradise and appended a single condition. Obedience would preserve incorruption; transgression would release corruption:

“For bringing them [humanity] into His own paradise, He gave them a law, so that if they guarded the grace and remained good, they might have the life of paradise — without sorrow, pain, or care — besides having the promise of their incorruptibility in heaven; but if they were to transgress and turning away become wicked, they would know themselves enduring the corruption of death according to nature, and no longer live in paradise, but thereafter dying outside of it, would remain in death and in corruption.” St. Athanasius, On the Incarnation 3

Two points stand out. First, the fall is not an arbitrary punishment imposed from outside; it's the natural consequence of turning away from the Source of life. Second, the fall is not the end of the story. The same Father who narrates the fall wrote On the Incarnation to announce the cure. It's thus your own free will, exercised by Adam and exercised again by each of you, that stands at the source of the world's pain — never God's design, and never His pleasure.

The Prosperity Gospel Rejected

One of the loudest distortions of this teaching in our time is the prosperity gospel — the claim that God blesses the righteous with material comfort and punishes the unrighteous with disaster. This framework maps Christianity onto a transactional grid: obedience produces wealth, suffering proves sin. It's the opposite of what Scripture teaches.

The prosperity gospel collapses in the face of Job, whose integrity was the cause of his trials, not the remedy against them. It collapses in the face of the Beatitudes, which call blessed those who mourn and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake (Matthew 5:4, 10). It collapses in the face of the Apostles, who were beaten and imprisoned not because they failed but because they succeeded. It collapses, most of all, in the face of Christ Himself, whose earthly life ended in apparent catastrophe.

You must be able to say plainly that this teaching is unorthodox. Pain is not always punishment, and prosperity is not always blessing. Every time something good happens in your life, it's tempting to say God blessed you for being good — or, when disaster strikes, that God is angry with you. This is incorrect. The Father chastens those He loves (Hebrews 12:6), but He also permits the wicked to

flourish for a time (Psalm 73). To judge someone's standing with God by the visible state of their finances or their health is a habit no Christian should keep.

Suffering as Formation and Joy

The apostolic writings take a surprising turn. Rather than treat suffering as a neutral hardship, they treat it as an occasion of joy. St. James opens his epistle with a command that startles every reader: "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience" (James 1:2-3). St. Paul writes with the same confidence:

"And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." Romans 5:3-5

Paul isn't glorifying pain. He's confessing that pain, when joined to Christ, does work in the soul that comfort cannot accomplish. Character is forged in fire; hope is born when the lesser securities have failed. This is why the same Apostle can write, from the depths of his own suffering:

"We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed — always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." 2 Corinthians 4:8-10

You are not asked to enjoy pain. You are invited into a way of seeing pain in which the life of Jesus becomes visible through the sufferings of Jesus' members.

Job, the Man Born Blind, and the Purpose of Encounter

The Book of Job doesn't offer a tidy theodicy. What it offers is an encounter. After chapter upon chapter of argument, God finally speaks — and speaks not to explain Job's suffering but to declare His own majesty:

"Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ... Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know!" Job 38:1-5

Repentance Without Sin

At first hearing this seems harsh. It isn't. Job had asked to see God, and God has come to him. And Job's response is not resentment but worship: "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). This is striking, because the entire book has been a defense of Job's righteousness — and yet the encounter with God still moves him to repent. The answer to Job's suffering was not an explanation. It was God.

The same pattern emerges in the Lord's teaching concerning the man born blind. The disciples ask

whose sin caused his condition. Christ refuses the transactional frame: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him" (John 9:3). The suffering of that man was an opportunity, not a verdict. The encounter with Christ transformed him from darkness into light. Every authentic encounter with Christ is transformative, and very often that encounter comes to you in the very place you would have most wished to avoid.

Pain as Vocation

When you see tragedy in the world — a pandemic, a war, a famine, a local sorrow — the right response is not endless commentary on the brokenness but entrance into the work of healing. Firefighters, police officers, paramedics, and physicians didn't become competent by avoiding the disaster; they became competent by training toward it. The Church must learn the same discipline. The pain of the world is the place where servants are made.

This is the very shape of the Incarnation. Christ did not abolish flesh; He took it — a corrupted flesh, a dying flesh — and gave it life and transformed it. He took something powerless and gave it power. He did not avoid death; He entered it. He did not overcome the tomb by keeping His distance from it, but by descending into it. You, following Christ, walk toward the suffering of others, not away from it, and bring with you the prayer, the sacraments, the compassion, and the sure hope that transform suffering into a door.

"Pain and suffering have come into your life, but remember: pain, sorrow, suffering are but the kiss of Jesus — a sign that you have come so close to Him that He can kiss you."
attributed to Mother Teresa of Calcutta

This is not a sentiment to recite mechanically. It's a truth to carry into the hospital, the funeral home, and the confession booth, for yourself and for those you serve.



Review Questions

1. Encountering God is always seen as a _____. (A: Blessing)
2. What are the two types of pain and suffering that we encounter throughout our lives? (A: Natural and personal trials.)
3. Why do pain and suffering exist? (A: God did not create it, instead when man fell into sin, pain and suffering followed as a natural consequence.)
4. Does God change things He has already defined? (A: False)
5. Why is the prosperity Gospel wrong in its belief? (A: God doesn't punish the unrighteous with disaster and bless the righteous with blessings.)

