

Where Is God in Suffering?

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Three Stories:

Story 1: Meticulous Providence

God ordains evil for His greater glory and our greater good

1. God has written a plan where He controls everything to the detail. He either causes or gives permission (with a purpose) for every event of history (tapestry)
2. This is the best of all possible worlds for God's glory.
3. God is to history as Shakespeare is to Hamlet.
4. Freedom: Do what we want and what God wants. No contrary choice.
5. Sovereign: God controls every detail.
6. Mystery: How God can control every detail and humans still be responsible for evil? (Compatibilism)

Story 2: Active Providence

God is at war with evil usually overcoming it with good

1. God is working His battle plan where He directs history to its appointed goal of crushing the Serpent and establishing His pure creation. He gives us partnership in ruling the world.
2. This is a broken world where God works His glory.
3. God is to history as Captain to mutinous ship.
4. Freedom: Do what we want within the limits of the ship. Limited contrary choice.
5. Sovereign: God is not accountable to anyone. His plans and purposes cannot be overcome. God does what He wants, but not everything that happens is what God wants.
6. Mystery: Why doesn't the all-powerful God just crush the Serpent now?

Story 3: Free Will Providence

God allows us to choose evil for the sake of true loving relationship

1. God has perfect knowledge of all events of history by which He makes His plan. He only occasionally interferes in people's decisions and never for salvation.
2. This is broken world where God works His glory.
3. God is to history as a good King to the subjects.
4. Freedom: Humans have the ability to make their own choices. While true choice is limited by humanity and character, it is not fixed by an external power.
5. Sovereign: God is not accountable to anyone. His plans and purposes cannot be overcome.
6. Mystery: How God can control history's outcome and not control people's choices?

Faith Statements

Story 1. God is too good to do evil and too wise to make a mistake.

Story 2. God is loving enough and powerful enough to do good in the worst evil.

Story 3. God is working His rescue mission to the world. He loves us and respects our decision to join Him.

Faith Questions

Story 1. What is God's purpose in this? What is God teaching me in this? How can God allow this?

Story 2. What is God doing in this? When will Jesus return and stop this? How can we make His glory known?

Story 3. When will people respond to God's love and join His rescue mission in the world?

Active Providence: God created image bearing humans to join Him in the war with evil, giving them freedom to rule with Him. Satan attacked the humans through deception and shame and defilement entered God's good creation. He limits, frustrates, brings good in the midst of the resulting evil

- a. Evil is the result of the morally significant free actions of God's creatures.
- b. God is loving enough and powerful enough to bring good out of the worst evil.
- c. God "works the night shift" to limit & frustrate evil.
- d. This is not Eden or heaven but a broken world.
- e. Physical calamity like disease usually comes from a broken world though it may come as a consequence of sinful actions of the sufferer or other humans.
- f. The human context of suffering/evil is a place where God's glory can be demonstrated.
- g. I believe in a theology, a theodicy, of protest. This evil is wrong!
- h. I can trust a God who will die for me. In light of the life of Emanuel I will be tenaciously loyal to the God I do not get.
- i. God is active and involved, choosing to join us in suffering as He wars against it.
- j. God is currently overcoming evil through the mercy of redemption with believers as part of His forces.
- k. God's glory is shown in our faith response, not our circumstances.
- l. If God were to just eliminate evil, He would have to eliminate me!
- m. Remember that evil is fundamentally irrational
- n. We pray
"How long, O, Lord" (Psalm 13:1; 37:13; 74:9-10; 94:3-4; Rev. 6:10)
"Thy Kingdom come (Matt. 6:10)

Key points in the *enemy narrative* is “You are like God. Why doesn’t everyone see that?” and “If your God really cared about you, he would not allow this to happen to you.” It does not question God's existence or power, but His goodness and compassion. The key point in the accusation is that everything that happens is under God's watch and He personally allows it or perhaps just neglects to intervene. He could have stopped it but didn't.

The narrative that *all Christians* can affirm is that God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, forgiving but does not let the guilty go unpunished at the end of the day (Ex. 34:6-7). He is good enough and powerful enough to do good in the midst of the worst evil. His presence and care is made unquestionably visible in the life of Emanuel who voluntarily entered into a life of terrible suffering ending with His death to bring forgiveness and redemption and destruction of the Prince of this world and His resurrection to bring life into the place of death. When Satan points to the terrible suffering and suggests that God does not care, we look to Emanuel and remember how much He cares.

The basic *meticulous providence* response is that there is a divine good behind all evil. There is no purposeless pain, though we usually do not know what the purpose is. The appeal is to the example of Jesus whose death was the worst evil ever, but behind the terrible suffering is the greatest good ever. Even Satan does not realize the good according to 1 Cor. 2:8. In this view all events of history are in line with God's decretive will, though they are against his will of desire which is His revealed will. There are no genuine accidents. Eph. 1:11 says God is working all events of history according to the counsel of decretive His will to display His glory.

The basic *active providence* response is that God is at war with evil. In it He is loving enough and powerful enough to bring good in the worst evil. But the evil is really evil. While there is a divine good and a specific purpose behind some evil, especially evil used to judge evil, most evil is against God's will though not out of His providential restraint. That there can be specific divine purpose shows in the example of Jesus whose death was the worst evil ever, but behind the terrible suffering is the greatest good ever. But there are also the examples of Israelites sacrificing their children to Molech's culinary delight (Jer. 32:32ff) that God rejects in strongest terms. In this view there are events that are against God's will as well as genuine accidents. Eph. 1:11 says God is working all things to fulfill the counsel of His will to crush the Serpent's head.

The basic *free will providence* response is that God has given the gift of free will to moral agents including angels and people. That means they can choose to enter into genuine loving relationship with Him which is a supreme value. But it also means they can exercise their free will to choose moral evil which breaks the world and unleashes all sorts of evil. God can and does influence people to good, but He cannot give genuine free will and also stop the exercise of it, so evil continues until the Day of Judgment. That judgment may be individual (think Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:29ff or Herod in Acts 12:23), national (the Babylonian captivity) or cosmic (Rev. 20). In this view evil is against God's will and there are genuine accidents. Eph. 1:11 says God will carry to completion the plan to redeem and restore creation in spite of human sin and evil.