

## Is God Good?

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*“Aslan is a lion- the Lion, the great Lion.” “Ooh” said Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he- quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion...” “Safe?” said Mr. Beaver ... “Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.” (C.S. Lewis, The Chronicles of Narnia)*

*“And a ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” (Luke 18:18-19, ESV)*

### **The Difficult Doctrine of God’s Goodness**

Before we can even try to talk about whether or not God is good, I think we would do well to spend a few moments contemplating whether or not we would recognize “goodness” if it came up and slapped us in the face... which presumably it wouldn’t do. Allow me to illustrate. The other day I was driving home from church with my kids and my youngest child was pestering me to let her watch a movie when we got home. Perhaps I should have mentioned this before, but we were driving home from Wednesday night church. Now, the obvious answer to this question from any “good” parenting perspective is, of course, no. “No, you may not start a movie at 9:00 p.m.” But I didn’t say that. Why not? Well, you see, it’s because I HAD allowed her older brother (who hadn’t gone to church for various reasons) to start a movie with his friend just a few minutes earlier. It is going to be very difficult for me to claim it is unreasonable for my youngest to start a movie at 9:00 p.m. when I let her slightly older brother do exactly that. And what’s more, it was summer break and they COULD sleep in the next day. And then, as always happens, my oldest started saying, “Hey, I want to watch a movie too!” Oh dear. Heaven help us!

Parents often have these moments of what I am going to call “competing goodness.” It seems like a good thing to make your child’s dreams come true. And it seems like a good thing for children to enjoy the final days of their summer break before the school year crushes all their hopes and dreams. And fairness seems like a good thing, doesn’t it? It feels like a good idea to treat our kids fairly and not make special privileges for certain children. On the other hand, a good night’s sleep is... well... good. And I am going to have to explain all of my actions to my wife, who might not be quite so enthusiastic about our children watching movies after Wednesday night church. What is the right thing to do here? What is GOOD for our children?

The problem of goodness is that MOST of the time, if there isn’t a very clear moral component to a decision, you and I have NO IDEA what is good and what is bad. And yet we know that even decisions with no clear moral component can deeply affect the trajectory of a life. Jesus once famously said that even lowly humans know how to

give their children good gifts. How much more, then, will our Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him (Matt. 7:11)? But I am not even so sure I always know what is a good gift to my children! How can we, who have such a tenuous grip on what is good, decide whether or not God is good?

### **The Problem of Definition**

And that is the first problem with this whole thing: definition. What do we mean when we say God is “good”? The word “good” has a huge semantic range, and to further complicate matters, the Bible often uses the word good to mean something like “kind” (Ps. 23:6, 107:1; Nah. 1:7). Not only that, but we humans have some preconceived notions of what is meant when someone says something like, “I try to be a good person.” They usually mean they are trying to be “honest, helpful, and morally good<sup>1</sup>.” In other words, they don’t rob liquor stores, cheat on their wives or taxes, help little old ladies carry their groceries, try not to be racists, and are generally trustworthy. There is little wonder why we struggle with deciding whether or not to let our kids watch movies after church! How then are we supposed to think through the goodness of God when there are so many ideas about what “good” means? Let’s begin by looking at some of the common ways that we think of goodness as it applies to God.

God is moral, but that’s not all we mean by “good.” By moral, I mean that God is without sin (1 John 3:5; 1 Pet. 2:22; Heb. 4:15). In other words, when we say “God is good,” what we are really trying to get at is that God is not bad. He isn’t evil. He is holy, perfect in his actions, and completely blameless. This does not mean he is above morality (God can never be blamed), it means that in his nature, God is completely moral<sup>2</sup>. But this isn’t all we mean by good.

God is worthy of approval, but that’s not all we mean by “good.” If you had an object that completely fulfilled its purpose, you would call it good<sup>3</sup>. Likewise, a bad object is one that does not fulfill its purpose. Let’s say someone picked up a pen off your desk to write something, but you know it didn’t work for some reason. You would say something like, “Don’t use that pen, it’s no good. Use this one instead.” So, when we say God is good, at least in part we mean that he is a perfect representation of being God (Is. 44:6; Is. 37:16). He is “God to the fullest<sup>4</sup>.” And therefore, he is worthy of approval by all who know him. But that’s not all we mean by good.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/good%20people> Date accessed 7/28/22.

<sup>2</sup> Geisler, N. and Brooks, R. (1996). *When skeptics ask: a handbook on Christian evidences* (p. 27). Baker.

<sup>3</sup> Kreeft, P. and Tacelli R.K. (1994). *Handbook of Christian apologetics* (p. 96). IVP Academic.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Geisler, N. and Brooks, R. (1996). *When skeptics ask: a handbook on Christian evidences* (p. 27). Baker.

<sup>6</sup> It is immensely confusing to talk about God’s creation being good. Some might be tempted to say that God created everything good before sin, but that creation has been spoiled by sin and is no longer good. But this is not quite right. God’s creation remains good as God made it. How could a good God

God is the creator of good things, but that’s not all we mean by “good.” When God created this world, including you and me, he looked at all he created and called it “good” (Gen. 1:31). In addition to that, however, the Bible also tells us that every good thing in our lives is from God (James 1:17). In order to create something good, the creator must be good<sup>5</sup>. We cannot create something that is different in its very nature than we ourselves (James 3:11-12). Let’s go back to our “bad” pen, for a moment. If we say the pen is bad, what we mean is that it fails in the very thing it is supposed to do. Therefore a “bad” pen cannot create beautiful lines. If it could do that, it would be a “good” pen. So, if God creates good things<sup>6</sup>, God must be good. But that’s not all we mean by “good.”

God is kind, but that’s not all we mean by “good.” Perhaps most often today when one person calls another person “good,” they mean that the person is kind. “Kindness is the will to free the loved one from pain<sup>7</sup>” and certainly this is God’s heart toward us and, indeed, toward all of his creation. But kindness is far too simple to completely describe God’s goodness toward us. God is also willing to create pain if it is for our ultimate good. As the writer of Hebrews points out, the more he loves us, the more he is willing to give us pain that will shape us and make us more like him (Heb. 12:5-6). A father is willing to discipline his son, but he is not willing to discipline someone else’s son. God loves us, wants the best for us, is constantly working to create the best possible outcome for us, up to and including saving us from our sin and its consequences (Tit. 3:4-6). This includes kindness, but it may also include discipline and even pain. Therefore, simple kindness is not all we mean by good.

God’s goodness is not any one of these things, but an amalgamation of all of them. God is kind, morally perfect, worthy of approval, and the creator of all good things. Theologians over the years have struggled to make more succinct definitions of God’s goodness, but they almost always come back to these points. Consider the following two definitions:

**Definition 1:** “*The goodness of God is that perfection of God which prompts Him to deal bounteously and in a kindly way with all His creatures<sup>8</sup>.*”

create bad things? No, what God creates is good in its being. Even when we say that we have a “sin nature” we do not mean that the being itself is sinful (e.g. the atoms and molecules and cells are sinful), we mean that our nature is bent toward sin and prefer it over holiness. What God creates is good because God is good. We spoil the good that God creates when we sin and create harm both to ourselves, to others, and to the world around us. Aquinas helpfully said that evil is what is contrary to nature, meaning the goodness that God created. What we call vice is something that is contrary to virtue, specifically the virtue of God. Therefore, an action can be evil, but the being or created thing is not evil of itself. See Aquinas, T., & In Kreeft, P. (1990). *A summa of the Summa* (p. 470-481). Ignatius.

<sup>7</sup> Kreeft, P. and Tacelli R.K. (1994). *Handbook of Christian apologetics* (p. 139). IVP Academic.

<sup>8</sup> Lloyd-Jones, D. M. (1996). *God the Father. God the Son* (p. 74). Crossway Books.

Lloyd Jones says that from God's goodness/love (which he sees as indistinguishable from one another) flows his grace, his mercy, and his patience. Goodness is an essential aspect of his nature and grace, mercy and patience are evidences of his goodness. Grudem gives ascent to this approach, "The other three characteristics (mercy, patience, and grace), while also prominent in Scripture, will be treated together as aspects of God's goodness to individuals in specific situations<sup>9</sup>."

**Definition 2:** "The goodness of God means that God is the final standard of good, and all that God is and does is worthy of approval<sup>10</sup>."

Grudem goes on to say that there is no higher standard of goodness than God himself. Therefore, the approval that God is worthy of, is his own approval. The point with all of this is simply this: even theologians struggle to define the goodness of God. It is difficult because of the huge number of things that make something of someone "good" and it is difficult because of our limited perspective.

### The Problem of Measurement

But even if we could arrive at a universally agreed upon definition of what "good" means when it comes to God (it seems we can't...or at least theologians can't), we still have a measurement problem. The question, "Is God good?" implies that you have a good definition of what goodness is and a standard way to measure it. But in order to measure something you have to have a complete perspective of the thing. For example, a woodworker cannot measure the length of a board unless he can see both ends. How does something in God's creation measure God<sup>11</sup>? We lack the necessary perspective. So, we often end up meaning something more like, "God does good things." Or "As best I can tell, God is good to me."

Logically, we cannot know if God is good in totality, except that he tells us he is good. This is because only God has the complete perspective of his own goodness. But this argument, of course, seems a little self-serving on God's part and pretty circular in its logic. Whether we like it or not, however, this is the way of God. When God could find nothing greater than himself to swear by, he swore by himself (Heb. 6:13). We could just as easily say, "When we can find nothing with the proper perspective to measure the goodness of God, we are left to take his word for it."

<sup>9</sup> Grudem, W. (2020). *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Second Edition, p. 237). Zondervan Academic.

<sup>10</sup> Grudem, W. (2020). *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Second Edition, p. 236). Zondervan Academic.

<sup>11</sup> This is one of the big issues that the book of Job tackles (among other things). In his lowest moments Job questions God's judgment in dealing so harshly with him (Job 7:20). God's response to Job is one of measurement (Job 38-41). In essence God's response is this: you cannot judge my actions unless you understand me. But since you cannot understand me (in fact, you can't even understand the most basic things about your own world like its size and weather patterns, etc), you cannot judge me. And

Perhaps it would be helpful to look at this issue of measuring the goodness of God the other way round. Can God be evil? Even one moment of evil would disprove God's complete goodness. So perhaps we don't have to measure the goodness of God, perhaps we only need to find that one exception that disproves the rule. I think if most believers thought about this for a few minutes, however, they would arrive at this conclusion: no, God cannot be evil. If God is good as part of his nature, then everything he does is good. It's not that God is "above the law" or above judgment, it's that God is literally unable to do evil things. It is contrary to his nature. Even the things that seem bad and feel bad are ultimately good (like the mother that takes her unsuspecting baby to get those horrible shots). Even the things that seem to violate his own standards of goodness for us, would be good when done by him. This is not because the rules don't apply to him, it's because God understands every possible outcome and eventuality of every possible decision and will always pick the good or best option.

The problem is that, for many people, this answer completely destroys any hope of defining good and evil<sup>12</sup>. Additionally, this logic again feels a little circular, doesn't it? This is the formulation: 1) God is good. 2) Since God is good, God cannot do evil. 3) Since God does no evil, God must be good. The way out of this circular logic spiral is to recognize that, just as it is impossible to measure goodness without complete perspective, it is equally impossible to measure evil without complete perspective. In our limited perspective and understanding what we know for sure is that certain things most definitely feel bad. And most of us believe we can recognize evil when we see it.

### The Problem of Evil

And this brings us the very heart of the problem people have with God's goodness: if God is good, from whence cometh all this bad stuff? For most people, this problem has two parts. The first part of the problem is this: God appears to do things that are most certainly not good. How can a good God order genocide, including the death of innocent children, in the Old Testament<sup>13</sup>? But, of course, there are problems in the New Testament as well. How can a good God condemn to death people who don't place their faith in Jesus...when those people have never even heard of Jesus? If anyone but God did these things, we would most certainly not call that person good!

this continues to be true for us today. We cannot possibly measure the goodness of God unless we have complete perspective of God.

<sup>12</sup> This issue was first brought up by Plato and reiterated by Bertrand Russell in "Why I Am Not a Christian." Russell would say that it is a logical impossibility for anyone to call God "good" because good and evil or good and bad lose all meaning with God. In order to call God good, there would have to be some standard of goodness apart from God, something that does not exist. <https://medium.com/excommunications/the-logical-paradox-of-a-good-god-e2349fa2211> Date accessed 7/26/22.

<sup>13</sup> The destruction of Jericho in Josh. 6:17-21 is one example, but God himself killed almost everyone on earth in the flood and this most certainly included small children and even babies.

The second part of the problem is this: God does not seem to stop bad things from happening. God appears to violate his own word in James 4:17. “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (ESV). How can a good God fail to relieve the suffering of a woman with cancer when he certainly has the power to do so? How can a good God stand by and allowed one person to rape another when he could stop it with one word? When most people ask the question, “Is God good?” these are the examples to the contrary. In their minds, there is no way he can be good if he stands by and watches evil exist.

This problem is most often called “the problem of evil” or sometimes, “the problem of pain.” If God is good, how can evil exist? If there is evil, how can God exist? The most often quoted formulation of the problem of evil goes like this,

*“Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?”<sup>14</sup>*

Let you think this is some trick of modern atheism, let me remind you that this quote by Epicurus was stated approximately 300 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The problem of evil has been on our minds all along.

#### **Telling Stories to Communicate Difficult Truths**

For the rest of this paper, I want to tackle the problem of evil and give you some very practical ideas to store in your mind about how to talk with people who are struggling to wrap their mind around the idea of a good God. I happen to believe that telling stories is the very best way to communicate very difficult truths. Endless arguments, lectures, and complicated theological discussions rarely get to the heart of the person who is doubting the goodness of God. When believers and unbelievers alike question the goodness of God, they are generally basing their questions on lived experiences. Really bad things have happened and, in their minds, God either allowed it to happen or caused it to happen. Clever arguments stored up on an index card in our minds are rarely going to be helpful. The problem is not a mental puzzle solved with logic; the problem is an experiential and emotional problem that can only be answered with experiential and emotional answers that are deeply and logically rooted in the character of God as defined in the pages of scripture. In short, we tell stories. So, let me tell you a story. It’s a story you probably already know if you have read the gospels in the New Testament<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.newscientist.com/letter/0-the-trilemma-of-evil-in-a-classical-question/> Date accessed 7/28/22.

<sup>15</sup> Using the story of Lazarus to address the problem of evil is suggested by Rebecca McLaughlin. McLaughlin, R. (2019). *Confronting Christianity* (pp. 197-203). Crossway.

#### **When God Doesn’t Show Up**

Jesus is good friends with three siblings that all live together, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Every time he is in their neck of the woods, he stays at their house. He loves them; they love him. But Lazarus gets sick. This is no head cold. His sisters are extremely worried about him and they know that their good friend Jesus can heal people. So, they send a messenger to Jesus saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill” (John 11:3). And Jesus basically blows them off. He stays where he was and doesn’t rush to Lazarus’s side. It’s not like Jesus even had to come in person. Mary and Martha probably knew that Jesus could and had healed people from a distance (Matt. 8:5-13, 15:21-28; John 4:46-54). So, it’s not just that Jesus didn’t come heal Lazarus, he apparently couldn’t be bothered to even say a few words to heal Lazarus. Instead, he tells his disciples that Lazarus illness would not lead to his death and that his illness exists to show his (Jesus’s) glory.

And this is our first stop. We may not completely understand this answer or love the idea of it, but sometimes our suffering exists to show us things about God. Or our suffering is an opportunity for God to show other people his power and glory. The story of Job in the Old Testament is an example of this. God allowed Job’s suffering. He allowed Satan almost completely free rein over Job’s life and health. He not only wanted us to see Job suffer and still trust God (despite his questions), but he wanted to show us the essential differences in the character of God and Satan. Satan’s tools are to destroy and tear down and God’s ways are to restore and bless.

*Principle 1: In those times when God does not seem good, he is always working for a higher good.*

But here is the really hard bit: God rarely shows us the higher good he is working toward. Even in the story of Job, God never told Job why he was suffering. The message God gives Job is simply this: “I am in control and I know what I am doing (Job 40:1-2).” There are going to come a thousand instances in our lives when we are going to ask God to show up and he won’t. Or perhaps he will come too late. Like with Lazarus. The atheist looks at this as further evidence that God isn’t there. The immature believer thinks it is evidence that God doesn’t care. But for those mature believers who have been through the fire on many such occasions, the beat of their heart tells them the difficult truth, “It must be better this way.”

But I want to make two crucial points. First, just because God uses suffering and evil for a higher good, it does not follow that God causes suffering and evil<sup>16</sup>. Lazarus would never have gotten ill if sin had not entered into this world and messed up everything. At some level, all suffering and evil in this world is the result of free will. Of their own free will, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and suffering and death entered

<sup>16</sup> James 1:13-14 makes clear that God does not tempt or cause people to sin. We sin when we are drawn to sin by our own lusts. What God is able and willing to do is to use even our sin for good. Ephesians 1:11 says that God is able to “work all things according to the counsel of his will” (cf. Rom. 8:28).

into the world. Of their own free will, humans hurt each other. God is very rarely in the business of interfering with human choices, but he most certainly is in the business of redeeming, restoring, and using even our bad choices for our and his ultimate good (Gen. 50:20; Is. 61:1-3).

Second, we do not have to defend God by naming the higher good he is working toward<sup>17</sup>. It is a completely reasonable answer for a finite being to say, “I don’t know what my infinite God is doing.” The point we must emphasize is that God has sufficient moral grounds to allow and use the evil and suffering that exists in this world to create a higher good, even when we don’t know what that higher good is. If you come across a wild animal caught in a trap, the things you will need to do to free it are going to feel like harm to the animal. It will not understand you are trying to free it<sup>18</sup>.

### **When God Shows Up Wrong**

But let’s return to the story of Lazarus and his sisters. After taking his sweet time to get to Bethany, Jesus arrives to find that Lazarus has not only died four days earlier (John 11:14 tells us that Jesus already knew this, of course), but that the mourning and grief were well underway. Martha comes out to Jesus and accuses him of not showing up in time to save Lazarus’s life.

I think, maybe, we all fantasize about holding God accountable for his actions. How many times have you heard people talk of asking God some questions when they meet him face-to-face? Perhaps chief among these questions is the cry of our heart, “Lord, why didn’t you show up when I needed you?” For Martha, the question came out as more of an accusation. “Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died.” Instead of justifying himself or at least telling her the same thing he already told his disciples (that God is going to use this situation to show people his power), Jesus instead points Martha to the future good. “Your brother will rise again.”

Jesus’s response is to remind Martha that the entirety of his mission on earth was to bring resurrection (the end of death) and life (the more abundant and perfect life that God has always wanted for his people). In one way, the entire tension around the problem of evil is ultimately a problem of timing. Believers understand that there is coming a time when we will either have all of the answers or the questions won’t matter, but until that time comes, we are drowning in our grief and pain. This is where

Martha was living. “Yes, yes, I know there will be a resurrection someday, but I wanted you here four days ago to keep the resurrection from being necessary!” At least part of our accusations against God is that we disagree with his timing. The resurrection someday doesn’t completely remove my grief today.

### *Principle 2: God welcomes our grief and knows that we will not understand how he is working.*

Jesus is so patient and kind to Martha, even though her understanding of his big story and big purposes was lacking. This is even true when we accuse God of evil! Martha essentially was calling Jesus onto the carpet for not coming when they begged him, literally begged him, to come. Martha loved her brother and she loved Jesus. And she knew that Jesus loved her brother too. So how is it possible he didn’t come when they needed him? As McLaughlin wrote, Lazarus’s death “has cost her emotionally, and likely also jeopardized her security at a time when most women depended on male relatives for support. Martha longs to have Lazarus back<sup>19</sup>.” Jesus does not get mad or frustrated. Instead, he patiently reminds her of the first principle: I have a higher good that I am accomplishing on earth.

My point is that we should never discourage honest questions and honest grief in the face of evil and suffering. It is not more spiritual for you to gulp down your grief. It doesn’t show more faith when you refuse to question God. To the contrary, crying out to God and pounding his chest while remaining in his arms is the ultimate act of faith<sup>20</sup>. “I don’t understand and I am hurting. But I don’t know where else to go for answers and so I will stay here with you even though I am angry and confused and completely wrecked.” God welcomes our grief and comforts us with truth: “I am the resurrection and the life.”

### **When God Weeps**

It is possible that the shortest verse in the Bible tells us everything we need to know about God’s character, “Jesus wept.” That would be just like God, wouldn’t it? Jesus asks to see the tomb where Lazarus was laid and, when he sees it, he weeps. The response of the people around him was two-fold:

*So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?” (John 11: 36-37, ESV)*

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<sup>17</sup> William Lane Craig makes this point very eloquently. The atheist believes the burden of proof is on the theist, but in fact it is the other way around. The burden of proof that God is not somehow working good in what we feel is evil or suffering is on the atheist. It is the atheist who claims to be able to prove the absence of a sufficient cause for God’s actions. The question the atheist must answer is this: “Can you absolutely prove that God is not accomplishing some higher good through this suffering or evil? The theist merely and truthfully only needs to say, “How can I know the complete mind of God?” Craig, W.L. & Gorra, J.E. (2013). *A reasonable response: answers to tough questions on God, Christianity, and the Bible* (pp. 273-276). Moody Publishers.

<sup>18</sup> Provocatively, this is even true up to the point of killing the animal out of mercy and compassion. Sometimes the most merciful and kind action possible is to kill the animal in suffering. God in his omniscience understood this as well. Gen. 3:22 implies that God introduced death into the world at least in part so that humans did not have to live forever in a fallen world. Even death can have a merciful component and be good when redeemed by God. See Kreeft, P. and Tacelli R.K. (1994). *Handbook of Christian apologetics* (p. 140). IVP Academic.

<sup>19</sup> Rebecca McLaughlin. McLaughlin, R. (2019). *Confronting Christianity* (pp. 199-200). Crossway.

<sup>20</sup> If we understand this concept, we will understand many of the psalms which portray people bringing accusations of God while crying out in pain (cf. Psalm 13, Psalm 35, Psalm 42).

One person looks at what God does and sees much to commend. For them, Jesus's tears are proof of his love. Another person looks at what God does and sees much to condemn. God has failed. Jesus is clearly a great healer, but for Lazarus, he just cries? God could have done so much more.

The point I would like to make here is that regardless of how God will choose to respond to the suffering of this world, what the Bible makes clear is that God suffers with us. And this is why this little two-word verse, "Jesus wept," tells us so much about who God is. This is one of the most important distinctives of the Christian faith: God chooses to enter into our suffering with us. This is true even though he knows that our suffering will be short-lived. Jesus clearly knew from the beginning of the story that Lazarus was going to die and that he was going to bring him back to life (cf. John 11:14, 23). If Jesus knew that he was going to set things right, why weep?

*Principle 3: God is touched by the evil and suffering that we are going through.*

The prophet Isaiah told us that the coming Messiah, the suffering servant, would be "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Is. 53:3b). God does not understand our suffering intellectually or theoretically. The incarnation and passion of Christ shows us that God understands our suffering experientially. Jesus suffered with us and he suffered for us. God's heart is touched by the brokenness and sin in our world. And God himself suffered physically on the cross. When the modern atheists write about God, they portray him as a moral monster<sup>21</sup>. Never do they portray a God who has "borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Is. 53:4). The Christian looks at the tears of Jesus with a grateful heart and says, "See how much he loves us?" The atheist looks at the tears of Jesus with a scornful eye and says, "See how powerless your 'god' is?" They cannot imagine a God who purposely chooses to allow pain and suffering and evil to exist for some higher good and then suffers with us. But this is exactly how the Bible portrays God.

### **When God Shouts**

Out of his great emotion (John 11:38 says he was "deeply moved"), Jesus approached the tomb, commanded it to be open, and called Lazarus out. Actually, that's not quite right. The Bible says Jesus "cried out with a loud voice." Jesus shouted. When I was a kid, I assumed that was because dead people don't hear very well (actually, I guess I still assume this is true) and so Jesus had to raise his voice. Or maybe, I thought, the grave clothes covered his ears. But as an adult, I know better. Having read more of the Bible, I know better. God shouts in judgment over evil and sin (e.g. Is. 42:13; Jer. 25:30; Rev. 14:18, 18:2) and God shouts when he restores the world (e.g. Ps. 47:5; 1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 12:10). Sometimes, these are two pictures of the same event. God shouts when he sets the world right again, when he makes bad things good.

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<sup>21</sup> For a much more in-depth study of the arguments of the "New Atheist Movement" and how to respond, see the paper I presented at the 2020 Apologetics Conference. Waibel, J. (2020). *How to respond to the argument "Religion poisons everything."* Truth in Love Apologetics Conference.

Throughout Jesus's brief ministry on earth, he was constantly giving us glimpses into this coming restoration. Every time he healed someone, he was giving us a glimpse into a kingdom where disease and pain do not exist. Every time he fed the multitudes, he was giving us a glimpse of a coming wedding feast where God will meet our every need. And every time he resurrected someone from the dead, he was giving us a glimpse of a world where sin and death have been swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:54-57). Jesus was foreshadowing a world that would be eventually set right.

*Principle 4: While God is willing to allow suffering and pain and evil to exist for a time and for a purpose, he is not willing to allow it to exist forever.*

Evil and suffering and pain are all examples of God holding himself back. He is not holding himself back because he hates us or is indifferent to our plight. He is holding himself back because, for reasons we cannot imagine, it is ultimately better that way. But it will not always be like this. Grief over the suffering and evil of this world is temporary.

### **In Conclusion: The Problem with the Middle**

I don't know if you are a fan of fiction or not, but I would like to gently suggest that you should be. I'm not saying you should be reading horrible romance novels or, worse yet perhaps, spy thrillers. But truly good fiction can illustrate what life is really like. Some of you are thinking this: "I don't need to know what life is like, I am literally living life right now. And it isn't that great." That may seem like a good argument against reading fiction, but it isn't. Reading fiction can show you things about life that your real life cannot. This is why Jesus often spoke in parables. You see, the problem with real life is that we are all in the middle of it. Some of you are perhaps a little closer to the beginning and some of you are a little closer to the end, but we are all somewhere in the middle. When you read a good story, you get to see the beginning, the middle, and the end all within a few short hours (or however long it takes you to read the story). And this is immensely helpful.

Let's take a murder mystery as an example. As you read the story, you see the entire arc of the storyline from the discovery of the murder to its investigation to the discovery of the murderer to the thrilling ending where the murderer is held accountable. Good stories show us everything from problem to resolution. Can you imagine opening up such a story to only the description of the murder and then closing the book without reading the rest of it? What would you think of the book if you only read the worst part? What would you think of the author?

I think it is important to think of the question, "Is God good?" through this lens. People who doubt God is good are stuck in the middle of the story. They are living in the

dilemma without seeing the resolution. And they are doubting the author. The point I really want to make is that doubt and discomfort are completely reasonable emotions when you are reading a murder-mystery. We all go through it. We think, “I cannot imagine where this author is going?” “How is she going to fix this mess?” “There is no possible good outcome of this story.” “Did he really need to put in that detail?”

But there is this thing that happens when you read a lot of stories by the same author. You almost seem to develop a relationship with the author. You start to trust him or her. Even in the darkest moments of the story you keep reading because everything you have read from that author has worked out in the end and sometimes in the most unexpected and glorious ways possible. And I believe this is ultimately the answer. Those who have never read the stories of the people of God are constantly doubting the goodness of the author. Some doubt there is an author or a storyline that will work out in the end. For those of us who have read all the stories and developed a trusting relationship with the author, we are willing to endure the evil and pain and suffering in this world because we understand this is the way of all stories. The darkest night will eventually break forth into the brightest day. The bad guy who seems to be winning in the middle of the story will be brought to justice in the end. And we know that the absolute worst thing possible is to stop reading in the middle.

So, what are we to do with the problem of evil and suffering? What are we to do with our doubts that God is truly good? We keep reading. We read the Bible first and foremost. We are used to reading it word by word and verse by verse, but don't forget to read it for the storylines. Zoom out and look at the big stories in scripture. The story of Abraham, the story of Jacob, the story of Joseph, the story of David, the story of Jesus, the story of the early church. The middle of these stories are often a very disturbing mess of human sin and great calamity. But don't get stuck in the middle. Keep reading. Read the stories of the saints next. Read more church history. Look once again for the big storylines. Even when you read the gruesome stories of the death of a martyr, you realize that this is not the end of the story, it's just more of the middle. That martyr's death sparked a revival or inspired other believers or created change. Or perhaps the martyr was singing praise to God while his world burned to the ground. God was glorified even in the most horrible moments. The point is: keep reading. Read the modern stories of God's people next. Some are published in blogs, some in books, some in podcasts. Look, once again, for the storyline. Watch how God is working things to a good end.

If we train ourselves to think in terms of the whole story, we will be much less likely to be disturbed by all of the crises and dilemmas in the middle. We might even find ourselves looking with thrilling excitement for how God is going to redeem each situation. Or you might even find yourself looking at the pain and suffering in this world with the sort of detachment that marks people of great faith. Think about Paul writing to the Corinthians.

*<sup>16</sup> So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, <sup>18</sup> as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:16-18)*

Compared to the coming weight of glory, everything we experience is light and momentary. In fact, there comes a point where you begin to see that in order to have the grand and thrilling conclusion, you must, as an absolute necessity, have the difficult middle. And this, I believe, is where we begin to finally see the world through the eyes of the great “author and finisher of our faith.”

There is this great moment in J.R.R. Tolkien's “Lord of the Rings” series that explains exactly what I am talking about. If you know nothing of the story, suffice it to say that Frodo (a hobbit) and his friends are tasked with the very difficult job of taking the ring of power and all of the evil it represents and throwing it into a volcano named Mount Doom. Seems easy enough...except that the whole world and all of the forces of evil in it is conspiring against them. And, if they fail and the ring falls into the hands of the wrong people, middle-earth will be completely enslaved by the evil Lord Sauron, which probably is not good. Along the way they encounter every difficulty known to man...well...hobbits. In the second book, The Two Towers, Tolkien records this conversation between Frodo and his good friend and servant Samwise Gamgee. They are sitting exhausted and discouraged after yet another horrible experience. Sam says this:

*I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, or course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: "Let's hear about Frodo and the Ring!" And they'll say: "Yes, that's one of my favourite stories. Frodo was very brave. wasn't he, dad?" "Yes, my boy, the famousest of the hobbits, and that's saying a lot."*

*'It's saying a lot too much,' said Frodo, and he laughed, a long clear laugh from his heart. Such a sound had not been heard in those places since Sauron came to Middle-earth. To Sam suddenly it seemed as if all the stones were listening and the tall rocks leaning over them. But Frodo did not heed them; he laughed again. 'Why, Sam,' he said, 'to hear you somehow makes me as merry as if the story was already written. But you've left out one of the chief characters: Samwise the stouthearted. "I want to hear more about Sam, dad. Why didn't they put in more of his talk,*

*dad? That's what I like, it makes me laugh. And Frodo wouldn't have got far without Sam, would he, dad? "*

*'Now, Mr. Frodo,' said Sam, 'you shouldn't make fun. I was serious. '*

*'So was I,' said Frodo, 'and so I am. We're going on a bit too fast. You and I, Sam, are still stuck in the worst places of the story, and it is all too likely that some will say at this point: "Shut the book now, dad; we don't want to read any more." '*

*'Maybe,' said Sam, 'but I wouldn't be one to say that. Things done and over and made into part of the great tales are different.'<sup>22</sup>*

We are in a great tale ourselves. The great story of good God and how he sets about to rescue those he loves from the great evil and suffering of this world. But we are still in the middle and it is only at the end that we will see what it all meant and why it all had to happen as it did. Until we read those final chapters, the very best thing we can do is to trust the author. Keep reading.

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<sup>22</sup> Tolkein, J.R.R. (2005). *The two towers*. Harper Collins.