

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 9: THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE

Lesson 29

Providence, Evil, and the Problem of Suffering

How Can a Good God Allow Suffering in the World He Governs?

Key Texts: Job 1–2; 42:1–6; Romans 8:28; 2 Corinthians 4:16–18; Revelation 21:3–4

Though He Slay Me, I Will Hope in Him

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Series Verse
<i>“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?”</i>
Romans 11:33–34, NASB 1995

Introduction

There is a question that no theology can avoid and that no theology fully answers: if God is all-powerful and all-knowing and all-good, why is there suffering? Why does the cancer strike the young mother? Why does the earthquake swallow a city? Why does the child die before she reaches her second birthday? Why does the faithful man of God lose everything he loves, and why does the answer he receives from heaven seem, at first hearing, to be no answer at all? These are not abstract philosophical puzzles manufactured in the academy. They are the cries of real people in real pain, and they have been rising to the heavens since the first generation after Eden.

The doctrine of providence, which we established in Lesson 28, insists that God governs all things. Nothing falls outside the scope of His sovereign, active, purposeful governance. Not a sparrow falls without His knowledge; not a hair falls from a head without His governance; and nothing touches the life of the believer that has not first passed through the hands of the God who works all things after the counsel of His will. This is the doctrine. But when the suffering is acute, the doctrine can feel less like a comfort and more like an accusation: if God governs all things, then He governs this. And if He governs this, why does He not stop it?

This lesson does not pretend to have the full answer, because the full answer has not been given to us. God does not explain His ways; He reveals His character. And it is on the character of the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture, the God who entered suffering in the person of His incarnate Son, who bore the full weight of cosmic evil in the cross, and who has promised to make all things new, that the Christian grounds his response to the problem of evil. This lesson surveys the philosophical dimensions of the problem, examines the paradigmatic biblical case study in the book of Job, presses into the cross as the definitive theological response, and finally receives the eschatological promise that God will resolve what He has not yet explained. Theodicy is ultimately not a philosophical enterprise; it is a pastoral and doxological one.

I. The Problem of Evil Stated

A. The Classic Formulation

The problem of evil, in its classic philosophical formulation, dates at least to Epicurus (341–270 BC), and has been stated in various forms by philosophers and theologians ever since. The argument runs roughly as follows: if God is omnipotent, He is able to prevent evil; if God is omniscient, He knows about all evil; if God is omnibenevolent (perfectly good), He desires to prevent evil. But evil exists. Therefore, a being who is simultaneously omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent does not exist. The God of classical theism is therefore incoherent, a logical impossibility.

This is the logical problem of evil, also called the deductive problem of evil, and it aims at a contradiction within the very concept of the God of Christian theism. The argument

claims that the existence of God and the existence of evil are logically incompatible: they cannot both be true. If evil exists (which is obvious), then God does not.

B. The Logical Problem of Evil and Why It Fails

The logical problem of evil has been the subject of extensive philosophical analysis, and it is widely recognized, even by atheist philosophers, to have been decisively answered. The principal philosopher responsible for this response is Alvin Plantinga, whose Free Will Defense, developed in its most rigorous form in *God, Freedom, and Evil* (1974) and *God and Other Minds* (1967), demonstrated that the logical problem of evil rests on a hidden and unjustified premise.

The hidden premise is this: an omnipotent God can create any possible world He chooses, including a world with free creatures who always freely choose the good. Plantinga's Free Will Defense argues that this premise is false. It is not within the power of even an omnipotent God to create a world with free creatures who always freely choose the good, because whether free creatures choose the good is determined by the creatures, not by God. If God creates free creatures, He cannot also guarantee that those creatures will freely choose rightly; to guarantee their choices would be to eliminate their freedom.

It is therefore possible, and Plantinga argues, logically possible is all that is needed to defeat the logical problem, that God had morally sufficient reasons for creating a world in which free creatures sometimes freely choose evil. The logical problem of evil requires the atheist to show that no such morally sufficient reasons could exist; and this is precisely what the atheist cannot demonstrate. The logical problem of evil, strictly understood, fails. This conclusion is now the consensus of professional philosophers, including many who are not Christians: the existence of God and the existence of evil are not logically incompatible.

C. The Evidential Problem of Evil

If the logical problem of evil has been largely abandoned, the evidential problem of evil, also called the probabilistic or inductive problem, remains the most significant philosophical challenge to Christian theism. The evidential problem does not claim that God and evil are logically incompatible; it claims that the sheer amount, intensity, and distribution of evil and suffering in the world makes the existence of God improbable. Even if it is logically possible that God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil, the actual quantity and character of the suffering we observe, the death of children, the scale of natural disasters, the extent of animal suffering, the persistence and intensity of moral evil throughout human history, makes it unlikely that a perfectly good and all-powerful God would permit all of it.

The most influential contemporary defender of the evidential problem is William Rowe, who focuses especially on what he calls "gratuitous evils", evils that seem to serve no redemptive or compensating purpose. If God permits suffering only when there is a morally sufficient reason for it, if all permitted suffering is purposeful, then the critic challenges us to identify the morally sufficient purpose for a particular instance of apparently pointless suffering. The Christian response, developed by philosophers such

as Stephen Wykstra and Michael Bergmann, is that our inability to identify the purposes of God in particular instances of suffering does not justify the conclusion that no such purposes exist. This response, called skeptical theism, argues that the scope of God's knowledge and moral vision so far exceeds ours that our failure to see His reasons is entirely consistent with those reasons existing.

The evidential problem of evil is ultimately a question about the probability of hidden divine purposes. The Christian does not claim to be able to identify the specific purpose of every instance of suffering; she claims to trust the character of the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture as perfectly wise, perfectly good, and perfectly faithful, and who has promised that He works all things together for good. Trust in the character of God in the absence of a full explanation of His purposes is not irrational; it is the appropriate response to a God who is genuinely greater than our comprehension.

"Though He slay me, I will hope in Him." | "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding."

Job 13:15; 38:1–4, NASB 1995

II. The Biblical Framework: Permission, Secondary Causes, and Ultimate Defeat

Beyond the philosophical engagement with the problem of evil, the Bible itself provides a framework for understanding the existence of evil within a world governed by a good and sovereign God. This framework does not constitute a complete philosophical theodicy; it does not explain why God permits every specific instance of evil. But it establishes the theological structure within which the Christian can respond to the problem of evil with something more than philosophical defense, with pastoral faith.

A. God's Sovereign Permission of Evil

The first element of the biblical framework is the distinction between what God causes and what God permits, a distinction we examined in Lesson 28 as the difference between efficient and permissive causality. God does not cause evil in the sense of being its efficient originator; He permits it in the sense of not preventing it, while governing its occurrence for His own holy purposes. The Westminster Confession's language is precise: God extends His providence "not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature."

This is not a cold, bureaucratic permission; it is the active, sovereign, purposeful governance of a God who has not abandoned His creation to the consequences of sin but who is working even the worst of those consequences into the most glorious purposes that any creature has ever witnessed. The permission of evil is not God's defeat; it is God's patience and wisdom operating in a domain where the full display of His glory, in both justice and grace, requires the genuine existence of the evil He will ultimately judge and the genuine need He will ultimately meet.

B. The Reality of Secondary Causes

The second element of the biblical framework is the reality of secondary causes. Natural evil, the evil of earthquakes, diseases, floods, and predation, operates through the natural order, which is itself a consequence of the fall. When Adam sinned, the creation was subjected to futility (Romans 8:20); the natural order, which was created very good, was disrupted by sin in ways that include the suffering we now observe in the natural world. Natural evil is the consequence of original sin operating through secondary natural causes, not the direct act of God, but the broken consequences of a creation subjected to futility through human rebellion.

Moral evil, the evil perpetrated by human beings against one another, similarly operates through secondary causes: the free choices of morally responsible agents who choose to harm, to deceive, to destroy. God does not coerce these choices; He governs their consequences. The cruelty of the oppressor, the violence of the tyrant, the abandonment of the abuser, these are genuine human evils, genuinely the responsibility of the human agents who perpetrate them, and genuinely within the governance of the God who can and does bring good out of evil without being their author.

C. The Ultimate Defeat of Evil

The third and most important element of the biblical framework is the assurance of the ultimate defeat of evil. Evil is not a permanent feature of the universe; it is a temporary disruption of what God made very good, and it is destined for absolute and final defeat at the coming of Christ. The cross of Christ is the decisive moment in this defeat: in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the power of sin and death was broken at its root, and the ultimate conquest of all evil was guaranteed. The kingdom of God is already breaking into this world through the gospel; the consummation of that kingdom, when every enemy is placed under Christ's feet (1 Corinthians 15:25–26) and when death itself, the last enemy, is destroyed, is the certain future toward which all of history is moving.

III. The Book of Job: The Paradigmatic Case Study

A. The Prologue: Suffering Within the Sovereign Counsel

The book of Job is the Bible's most sustained engagement with the problem of suffering, and it approaches the question in a way that is fundamentally different from what the sufferer and the reader might expect. The prologue of Job (chapters 1–2) gives the reader a perspective that Job himself does not have: we see into the heavenly council, we witness the conversation between God and the Adversary (the satan), and we learn that Job's suffering is not random, not punitive, and not the product of divine indifference. It is the result of a sovereign divine permission, granted within the context of God's own purposes, in which Job's faithfulness will be tested, vindicated, and displayed.

Job does not know any of this. From his earthly vantage point, the suffering is inexplicable. He has done nothing to deserve it; his life of integrity and piety provides him with no framework for understanding why God has allowed these catastrophes. And this is precisely the point of the prologue's heavenly perspective: the suffering of the righteous is not always explicable from within the sufferer's own frame of reference. There are

dimensions of reality, divine purposes, heavenly contests, eschatological purposes, that the sufferer cannot see from where he stands. The book of Job does not explain why God permits suffering in general; it demonstrates that the reasons may lie in realities that the sufferer cannot access.

B. The Friends: The Failure of Retributive Theology

The three friends of Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, joined later by Elihu, come initially to comfort Job. But they quickly become his most persistent accusers. Their theology is a strict retributive calculus: suffering is the consequence of sin; therefore, Job is suffering because he has sinned. Their pastoral counsel to Job is essentially: confess your sin, repent, and your suffering will end. It is a coherent, internally consistent theological position. It is also, in Job's case, entirely wrong.

The friends' error is not that they have a false theology of retribution in general, the Bible does teach that sin has consequences and that God does discipline His people. Their error is that they apply this general principle too simply and too quickly to Job's specific situation, assuming that they can read the meaning of another person's suffering from outside. They have a theology that explains all suffering, and they apply it to Job without remainder. The book of Job is, among other things, a warning against the pastoral cruelty of those who think they understand the reasons for another person's suffering and who use that assumed understanding to condemn rather than comfort.

God's verdict on the friends at the end of the book is explicit and devastating: "You have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has" (Job 42:7, NASB 1995). The friends spoke confidently about God; Job argued passionately with God. And paradoxically, it is Job's agonized wrestling with God, his refusal to offer easy answers, his demand to be heard, his insistence on the injustice of his situation, that God vindicates. The sufferer who argues with God is closer to the truth about suffering than the theologian who thinks he has it all figured out.

C. The Whirlwind: The Answer That Is Not an Answer

When God finally speaks to Job from the whirlwind (Job 38–41), He does not give Job the explanation he has been demanding. He does not explain why Job has suffered, what the heavenly conversation was about, or what purpose the suffering has served. Instead, He speaks for four chapters about the creation, the foundations of the earth, the morning stars, the storehouses of snow, the Pleiades, the lion and the raven and the ostrich. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (Job 38:4, NASB 1995). "Have you entered into the springs of the sea?" (Job 38:16, NASB 1995). "Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the belt of Orion?" (Job 38:31, NASB 1995).

This is not an evasion; it is the deepest possible answer to Job's question. God's answer is not an explanation; it is a revelation. He does not explain His ways; He discloses His greatness. And in the presence of that greatness, the greatness of the God who governs the cosmos with a wisdom and a power that no creature can comprehend, Job finds not an answer but something better: he finds God. "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You" (Job 42:5, NASB 1995). The encounter with the sovereign

God does not resolve Job's intellectual questions; it transforms his relationship to the God who has not answered them.

This is the book of Job's most profound contribution to theodicy: the answer to the problem of suffering is not ultimately a philosophical argument but a personal encounter with the God who governs suffering. The suffering does not stop; the explanation does not come; but the God who governs all things reveals Himself, and in that revelation, the sufferer finds what he most desperately needed, not an answer, but the God who is greater than the question.

IV. The Cross: The Definitive Answer to the Problem of Evil

A. God Did Not Remain Distant from Suffering

The most powerful single response to the problem of evil that the Christian possesses is not a philosophical argument; it is a historical event. It is the fact that the God who governs all things, including all suffering, did not remain at a distance from the suffering He permits. He entered it. In the person of His eternal Son, the God who inhabits eternity became flesh, took on human nature with all its vulnerability to pain and grief and death, and lived a life of genuine, concrete, fully-experienced human suffering. Jesus wept (John 11:35). He was tired and hungry (John 4:6; Matthew 4:2). He was betrayed by His closest friend, abandoned by His disciples, mocked by those He had healed, and crucified by those He had created. And in the culminating darkness of Golgotha, He cried out with the cry of desolation that every sufferer has echoed in every generation: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46, NASB 1995).

This is the God who governs the suffering you are enduring. He is not a God who looks down at your pain from a place of celestial comfort, offering philosophical explanations from a safe distance. He is the God who has been there, in the grief, in the abandonment, in the darkness, in the dying. The cross does not explain the problem of evil; it demonstrates that God's response to evil is not explanation but participation. He has not answered the why of suffering with a theory; He has answered it with a cross.

B. The Cross as the Defeat of Evil

But the cross is not merely God's solidarity with suffering; it is the decisive defeat of the power that makes suffering possible. Paul declares in Colossians 2:15 that at the cross, God "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (ESV). The cross, which appeared to be the defeat of God, was in fact the defeat of everything that opposed God: sin, which was judged and atoned for in the death of the spotless Lamb; death, which was conquered in the resurrection of the one who is the Resurrection and the Life; and the power of the evil one, whose works the Son of God came to destroy (1 John 3:8).

The resurrection of Christ is the eschatological event that has erupted into the middle of history: the first fruits of the new creation have appeared, demonstrating that the powers of evil, death, and decay have been overcome and that their defeat, though not yet complete in experience, is certain in reality. The resurrection does not immediately end suffering; it guarantees the end of suffering. It does not immediately answer every

question raised by evil; it demonstrates that God has the power and the intention to overcome every consequence of evil, including death itself, in the final consummation of all things.

C. The Cross as the Revelation of Divine Love

The cross also provides the Christian's most powerful response to the evidential problem of evil. If God were indifferent to human suffering, if the existence of suffering were evidence that God does not care about the creatures who suffer, then the cross would be unintelligible. But the cross is not an act of indifference; it is the most extravagant act of love in the history of all possible worlds. "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8, NASB 1995). The God who gave His own Son for sinners is not the God of the problem of evil, the distant, indifferent power who allows suffering without caring. He is the God who entered suffering, bore it, and conquered it because He loved the creatures who suffer.

C. S. Lewis, who had wrestled with the problem of evil both intellectually (*The Problem of Pain*) and existentially (*A Grief Observed*), captured something of this when he wrote that at the cross, God put Himself in the dock and allowed Himself to be accused, judged, and condemned by the very creatures whose suffering He was being accused of permitting. The cross does not exonerate God in the philosophical sense of answering every objection; but it demonstrates that God is not the kind of God that the problem of evil assumes He is. He is the God who suffers with and for His creatures, who bears the full weight of the evil He permits, and who overcomes it through the love that is stronger than death.

"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." | "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison."

Romans 8:28; 2 Corinthians 4:17, NASB 1995

V. Romans 8:28, The Audacious Claim

Among all the Scripture passages that bear on the Christian response to suffering, Romans 8:28 is perhaps the most pastorally daring and the most theologically demanding: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (NASB 1995). The audacity of this verse lies not merely in what it claims but in what it claims about all things. Not some things. Not most things. Not the things that seem, from our vantage point, to be the more manageable forms of suffering. All things. Including the death of the child, the diagnosis of cancer, the betrayal of a spouse, the persecution of the innocent, the falling of the sparrow.

The word "know" (*oidamen*) is equally significant. Paul does not say "we hope" or "we trust" or "we believe." He says "we know", with the settled, confident knowledge of those who have encountered the God who has revealed this truth, who have seen it demonstrated in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and who have experienced its reality in the providential ordering of their own lives. This is not wishful thinking; it is theological

conviction grounded in the character of the God who has revealed Himself and the redemptive history that demonstrates His faithfulness.

The promise of Romans 8:28 is not that all things feel good, or that all things are good in themselves. The cancer is not good. The grief is not good. The evil done to the innocent child is not good. But God, the sovereign, all-wise, infinitely good God who governs all things, works all things together for good. He takes what is not good and, through His sovereign providential governance, works it into a pattern whose outcome is good. This is not a therapeutic sentiment; it is a theological claim about the character of the God who governs all things and whose purposes cannot be thwarted.

The limiting phrase, “to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose”, is important. Paul is not making a universal claim about the experience of all human beings. He is making a specific claim about those who are in covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ. For the believer, every event in life, including the most painful and the most apparently purposeless, is within the providential governance of the God who loves them, who has called them, and who has promised to bring them to glory. The promise is specific, personal, and covenantal.

VI. The Weight of Glory: 2 Corinthians 4:16–18

Paul provides his most personal and most theologically rich reflection on the relationship between present suffering and future glory in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18: “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (NASB 1995).

The careful reader is immediately aware that the description of suffering in verse 17 as “momentary, light affliction” comes from the man who has been shipwrecked three times, beaten with rods, stoned and left for dead, imprisoned, and subjected to a life of hardship that most of us cannot imagine (2 Corinthians 11:23–28). Paul is not minimizing suffering; he is calibrating it against the eschatological reality of the “eternal weight of glory” that is being produced by it. The Greek word for “weight” is *baros*, the same root as the Hebrew *kavod* (glory), and it conveys the sense of something massive, substantial, and overwhelming. The glory that awaits the believer is not a light, wispy, ethereal reward; it is a weighty, substantial, overwhelming reality that makes the heaviest present suffering look, by comparison, like a momentary lightness.

Paul’s key phrase is “producing for us.” The affliction is not merely something to be endured until the glory arrives; it is the means by which the glory is being produced. There is a causal relationship between present suffering and future glory that Paul insists upon without fully explaining. It is not merely that the suffering will be compensated by future glory; it is that the suffering is, in the purpose of God, the means by which eternal weight of glory is being produced in the lives of those who endure it in faith. The cross of Christ is the paradigm: the way to resurrection glory is through suffering and death, not around it.

The key to maintaining this perspective, Paul says, is where we are looking: “while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.” The believer who is sustained by this vision is the one who has learned to look through and beyond the present suffering to the eschatological reality that the present suffering is producing. This is not denial of the suffering; it is the discipline of faith that places the suffering in its proper eternal perspective, trusting the God who has promised that the outcome of this process is an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.

VII. The Eschatological Resolution and the Pastoral Posture

A. The Eschatological Resolution: All Will Be Made Right

The Christian response to the problem of evil is ultimately eschatological: not every question will be answered in this life, but all questions will be resolved in the age to come. Revelation 21:3–4 is the eschatological promise that grounds the Christian’s endurance: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away” (NASB 1995). The personal intimacy of the image, God Himself wiping away every tear, is staggering. Not an angel, not a created intermediary, but God Himself, the sovereign Lord of all, personally, tenderly, and finally wiping away every tear that has ever been shed.

The promise is not merely that suffering will end but that every evil will be judged and that justice will be perfectly and permanently established. The wicked will not get away with it; the innocent will not be forgotten; every act of cruelty, every abuse of power, every persecution of the innocent will face the verdict of the One who is both perfectly just and perfectly good. The eschatological resolution is not merely comfort for the sufferer; it is the vindication of God’s justice in a world where His justice often seems absent.

This eschatological hope does not make the present suffering less real; it places it within a framework in which it is not the final word. The last chapter of the story has been written, and in it, every tear is wiped away, every injustice is resolved, and the God who governs all things is seen to have been perfectly wise, perfectly good, and perfectly faithful through every dark chapter that preceded the ending. The book of Job ends with restoration (Job 42:10–17); the story of redemption ends with a new creation. The ending does not erase the suffering of the middle chapters; but it recontextualizes them in a way that transforms the meaning of everything that preceded it.

B. The Pastoral Posture: A Savior More Than a Syllogism

The most important thing this lesson can say is also the simplest: the suffering person does not primarily need a theodicy. They need a Savior. They need the presence of the God who has entered suffering, who understands grief, who wept at the tomb of His friend, who cried out in desolation from the cross, and who rose from the dead to guarantee that death does not have the final word. Theodicy, the philosophical defense of God’s justice in the face of evil, has its place, and we have engaged it in this lesson with the seriousness it deserves. But the person in the acute experience of loss is not primarily sustained by

arguments; she is sustained by the presence of the God who is near to the brokenhearted and who saves those who are crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:18).

The pastoral task in the presence of suffering is not primarily explanation but accompaniment. Job's friends sat with him in silence for seven days (Job 2:13), and it is in those seven silent days, before they opened their mouths, that they most faithfully comforted him. When they began to speak with explanations, they became his accusers. The pastor who sits with the grieving parent, who weeps with those who weep (Romans 12:15), who offers the presence of Christ through the ministry of faithful presence, this pastor is closer to the biblical model of pastoral theodicy than the one who offers a carefully worded philosophical defense of God's justice.

This does not mean that doctrine has no place in pastoral ministry to the suffering. The truths we have examined in this lesson, the cross, Romans 8:28, 2 Corinthians 4:16–18, the eschatological promise of Revelation 21, are among the most powerful resources available to the suffering soul. But they must be offered with the wisdom to know when they are received as comfort and when they would be received as condemnation, with the patience to accompany the sufferer through the long valley before the light begins to return, and with the humility to acknowledge that the full answer to the problem of evil has not been given to us and that the God who governs all things has not explained all things.

C. For Every Season of Life

For the one who is suffering: This lesson is written primarily for you. The God who governs your suffering is not absent, not indifferent, not surprised, and not defeated. He is the God who entered suffering in the person of His incarnate Son, who bore the weight of all evil at the cross, who rose from the dead to guarantee that death does not win, and who has promised to work all things together for your good. He has not explained what He is doing; but He has revealed who He is. And who He is, the God of the cross, the God of the resurrection, the God who will wipe away every tear, is sufficient ground for hope even when explanation is absent. “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him” (Job 13:15, NASB 1995).

For the one who is angry at God: The book of Job gives you permission to argue. God's verdict is that Job, the one who argued, who protested, who demanded to be heard, spoke more rightly of God than the friends who had easy answers. Bring your anger to God honestly. He can handle it. He has handled far more than your anger; He handled the cross. And the God who is big enough to be argued with is the God who is big enough to sustain you through what you are carrying.

For the one who is doubting: The problem of evil is the most serious intellectual challenge to the Christian faith, and it should be taken seriously. This lesson has tried to do that. But note that the logical problem of evil has been defeated by Christian philosophers; note that the evidential problem rests on the assumption that we can assess the likelihood of God having good reasons for permitting evil, an assumption that requires us to be more omniscient than we are; note that the cross demonstrates that God is not the indifferent power of the problem of evil but the suffering, loving God who entered the darkest darkness to redeem it. The problem of evil is real; the God of the cross is more real.

For the pastor and the caregiver: Sit with the suffering before you speak to them. Accompany before you explain. Weep before you instruct. And when the moment comes to speak, speak the cross. Speak the resurrection. Speak Romans 8:28 and 2 Corinthians 4:16–18 and Revelation 21:4, not as explanations of why God permitted this specific suffering, but as the ground of hope that the God who governs this suffering is the God who has promised that the ending is glorious. Be the presence of Christ before you be the theologian of Christ.

Key Texts: *Job 1–2; 42:1–6; Romans 8:28; 2 Corinthians 4:16–18; Revelation 21:3–4; Matthew 27:46*

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Theodicy	From the Greek theos (God) and dikē (justice). The philosophical and theological discipline that attempts to justify or defend the justice and goodness of God in the face of the existence of evil and suffering. The term was coined by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in 1710. Theodicy seeks to show that the existence of God is compatible with, and even consistent with, the existence of evil. The Christian theodicy goes beyond philosophical defense to pastoral response: the God of the cross is the ultimate answer to the problem of evil.
Logical Problem of Evil	Also called the deductive problem of evil. The argument that the existence of a perfectly good, omnipotent, omniscient God is logically incompatible with the existence of evil. If God is all-powerful (He can prevent evil), all-knowing (He knows about evil), and all-good (He desires to prevent evil), then evil should not exist. Since evil does exist, God (as classically defined) does not exist. Widely considered to have been decisively defeated by Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense.
Evidential Problem of Evil	Also called the probabilistic or inductive problem of evil. The argument that, while God's existence may not be logically incompatible with evil, the sheer amount, intensity, and distribution of evil and suffering in the world makes the existence of a perfectly good, omnipotent God improbable. Associated especially with philosopher William Rowe. The Christian response includes skeptical theism (our inability to see God's reasons for permitting evil does not establish that no such reasons exist) and the appeal to the cross as evidence of God's character.
Free Will Defense	Alvin Plantinga's philosophical response to the logical problem of evil. The argument is that it is not within the power of even an omnipotent God to create free creatures who always freely choose the good, because free choices are determined by the creatures, not by God. It is therefore logically possible that God had morally sufficient reasons for creating a world in which free creatures sometimes freely choose evil. Since the logical problem of evil requires showing that no such morally sufficient reasons could exist, and since this cannot be demonstrated, the logical problem fails.
Skeptical Theism	The philosophical response to the evidential problem of evil, arguing that our inability to identify God's reasons for permitting specific instances of evil does not justify the conclusion that no such reasons exist. Given the vast difference between God's knowledge and moral vision and ours, it is epistemically appropriate to expect that God's reasons for permitting evil may be

	beyond our comprehension. Associated with philosophers Stephen Wykstra and Michael Bergmann.
Gratuitous Evil	Evil that appears to serve no redemptive, compensating, or morally sufficient purpose, evil that seems pointless. Central to William Rowe's formulation of the evidential problem of evil. The Christian response is twofold: (1) skeptical theism argues that the appearance of purposelessness does not establish that there is no purpose; (2) the cross demonstrates that God can and does bring the greatest good out of what appeared to be the most purposeless of evils.
Retributive Theology	The theological position that suffering is always the direct consequence of sin, that suffering functions as divine punishment for wrongdoing. While the Bible does teach that sin has consequences and that God does discipline His people, the book of Job is a sustained critique of the simplistic application of the retributive principle to every instance of suffering. Job's friends represent the error of applying retributive theology too rigidly and too quickly, assuming they can read the spiritual meaning of another person's suffering.
Lament	The biblical genre of prayer that expresses grief, protest, confusion, and complaint to God in the face of suffering, injustice, or divine silence. The Psalms of lament (Psalms 13, 22, 44, 88, etc.) and the book of Job provide the canonical model for honest, agonized engagement with God in the midst of suffering. Lament is not the absence of faith but a form of faith, the faith that takes its pain to the God who is present, who can handle the protest, and who is the only one who can ultimately respond.
Participatory Theodicy	The theodicy of the incarnation and the cross: God's response to evil is not primarily explanation but participation. God entered suffering in the person of His incarnate Son, experienced the full weight of human pain and grief, bore the ultimate evil (the death of the innocent at the hands of the unjust) in the crucifixion, and conquered evil through the resurrection. The cross does not explain why God permits evil; it demonstrates that God's response to evil is to enter it, bear it, and overcome it.
Weight of Glory	Paul's phrase in 2 Corinthians 4:17 for the eschatological reward that awaits the suffering believer: an "eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison." The Greek <i>baros</i> (weight) carries the connotation of something massive and substantial. Paul's claim is that present suffering, whatever its intensity, is being used by God as the means by which eternal glory of incomparable weight is being produced in the lives of those who endure in faith. The suffering is not merely compensated by the glory; it is the instrument through which the glory is produced.

Eschatological Resolution

The ultimate answer to the problem of evil: not the philosophical resolution of all questions in the present age, but the final defeat of evil, the perfect vindication of divine justice, and the renewal of all things in the age to come. Grounded in Revelation 21:1–5 (God wiping every tear from every eye; death, mourning, crying, and pain abolished), the resurrection of Christ as the first fruits of the new creation, and the promise of Romans 8:18 (the glory to be revealed will not be comparable to the present suffering). The eschatological resolution transforms the meaning of present suffering without eliminating its reality.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the existence of evil and suffering, while presenting the most serious intellectual challenge to the Christian faith, does not constitute a disproof of the God of Christian theism. The logical problem of evil has been defeated; the evidential problem is not unanswerable; and the cross of Christ provides the most powerful single piece of evidence against the claim that the existence of suffering proves the non-existence of a good and powerful God. The God who entered suffering, bore it, and conquered it is not the cold, indifferent power of the problem of evil; He is the suffering servant of Isaiah, the crucified Lord of the New Testament, and the risen King who has guaranteed the final defeat of all evil.

We must also believe Romans 8:28, not merely as a verse to be cited in the presence of suffering but as a conviction about the character and governance of the God who is working all things, including this specific suffering, for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. This belief does not eliminate the pain of suffering; it provides the framework within which suffering can be endured, and ultimately redeemed, by the God who governs it.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the lament tradition of Scripture give you permission to grieve fully and honestly before God. The God who inspired Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning” (NASB 1995), is not threatened by your honest cry. He has been there in the person of His incarnate Son. He can handle your pain, your confusion, your anger, and your grief. Bring all of it to Him, without sanitizing it or spiritualizing it prematurely.

Desire the eschatological hope that transforms present suffering. The believer who has genuinely received the promise of Revelation 21:4, who has genuinely appropriated the assurance that every tear will be wiped away, is the believer who can endure present suffering with a quality of peace and perseverance that no merely natural resource can produce. This hope is not escapism; it is the long view of the God who governs all of history and who has written the last chapter.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Engage the problem of evil honestly and carefully. When unbelievers raise the problem of evil as an objection to the Christian faith, do not dismiss it or retreat from it. Engage it with the intellectual seriousness it deserves: explain the defeat of the logical problem, engage the evidential problem with the tools of skeptical theism, and always point to the cross as the definitive demonstration of God’s character in the face of evil.
- Sit with the suffering before you speak. The pastoral task in the presence of acute suffering is primarily accompaniment. Be present. Be silent. Weep with those who weep. Follow the model of Job’s friends in the seven silent days of solidarity before

they opened their mouths to explain. The ministry of faithful presence is the most immediately needed pastoral gift in the presence of suffering.

- Speak the cross as the ground of hope. When the time comes to speak, do not speak primarily about why God permitted the suffering; speak about what God did about it. The cross is God's definitive response to evil: He entered it, bore it, and conquered it. The resurrection is God's guarantee that the end of the story is glory, not defeat. These are the pastoral words that can be received even in the darkest moments.
- Use the resources of lament. Help suffering believers learn to pray the Psalms of lament, Psalms 13, 22, 42, 43, 44, 88, as the canonical form of honest, agonized, faithful prayer in the midst of suffering. The psalms of lament model what it looks like to bring your full experience of suffering to the God who can handle it, who hears it, and who ultimately answers it in ways that exceed the sufferer's expectations.
- Hold out the eschatological promise. In the long ministry of accompaniment that faithful suffering requires, keep reminding those in your care of the eschatological destination: the new heavens and the new earth, the wiping away of every tear, the abolition of death and mourning and crying and pain, the direct presence of God among His people, and the eternal weight of glory that is being produced in and through the present suffering. The God of the last chapter is the God who governs the present chapter, and He has promised that the ending is worth everything it costs.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Has there been a season of suffering or loss in your own life, or in the life of someone you love, that has pressed upon you the question of why God allows suffering? How did you respond to that question at the time? Looking back, what resources, theological, pastoral, or communal, were most helpful, and what was most unhelpful?

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Job 1:6–22 and 2:1–10. What does the prologue of Job reveal to the reader that Job himself does not know? How does this heavenly perspective reframe Job's suffering? What does Job's response in 1:20–22 and 2:10 tell us about the quality of his initial faith?

3. Read Job 38:1–11, 31–33. What is the character of God's answer to Job from the whirlwind? Does God explain why Job has suffered? What does God's answer accomplish if it does not answer Job's question?

4. Read Romans 8:18, 28–30. What does Paul claim God is doing with "all things" in verse 28? Who does this promise apply to, and what does the limiting clause tell us about the nature of the promise? How does the golden chain of verses 29–30 provide the theological grounding for the confidence expressed in verse 28?

5. Read 2 Corinthians 4:7–18. What is the context in which Paul describes his affliction as "momentary and light" (v. 17)? How does this recontextualize the claim? What does Paul mean by "producing for us an eternal weight of glory"? What does "looking at things that are not seen" (v. 18) mean practically?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

6. Explain the logical problem of evil and Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense. Why does the Free Will Defense succeed in defeating the logical problem? Why is the conclusion, that the logical problem has been largely abandoned in academic philosophy, significant for the Christian's engagement with the problem of evil?

7. What is the evidential problem of evil, and how does it differ from the logical problem? Explain the skeptical theist response to the evidential problem. What are the limits of this response? What does it accomplish, and what does it not accomplish?

8. The lesson argues that Job's friends made a fundamental pastoral and theological error. Identify specifically what their error was, and explain why God judged that Job "spoke more rightly" of Him than they did (Job 42:7). What are the implications for pastoral ministry to the suffering?

9. Explain how the cross functions as the definitive Christian answer to the problem of evil. What does it demonstrate about God's character? What does it accomplish with

respect to evil and suffering? Why is the cross a more powerful response to the problem of evil than a philosophical argument?

10. The lesson argues that theodicy is ultimately a pastoral task and that the suffering person needs a Savior more than a syllogism. What is the relationship between intellectual engagement with the problem of evil and pastoral ministry to the suffering? Are these in tension, or do they complement each other? When should you do philosophy, and when should you simply be present?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

11. Romans 8:28 is one of the most cited verses in Christian pastoral ministry. Have you ever experienced it being cited in a way that felt unhelpful, dismissive, or premature? What makes the difference between Romans 8:28 as comfort and Romans 8:28 as platitude? How can the truth of this verse be offered in a way that genuinely helps rather than dismisses?

12. The lesson models the pastoral posture toward suffering after the pattern of Job's friends in their seven silent days, before they opened their mouths. Think of a person in your life who is currently suffering. What would it look like to offer them faithful presence, accompaniment before explanation, in the coming week? What specific, concrete thing could you do?

13. The Psalms of lament model honest, agonized, faithful prayer in the midst of suffering. Read Psalm 13 together as a group: "How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever?" (NASB 1995). Does this kind of prayer feel foreign to you? What would it look like to incorporate the language of lament into your own personal prayer life? What might make this difficult, and what might make it valuable?

14. As we close Unit 9 on the Doctrine of Providence, and approach the final lesson of this series, reflect on what Lessons 28 and 29 together have taught you about the God who governs all things. What is the most important truth about providence that you want to carry with you into the years ahead? And how does this truth bear on whatever circumstances, joyful or painful, settled or uncertain, you are currently navigating?

Prayer Focus

Open your prayer time with the words of Job at the very bottom of his experience: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21, NASB 1995). Let those words sit with you in their full weight: the acknowledgment that everything we have is gift, that God has the right to take what He has given, and that the appropriate response to both the giving and the taking is blessing. This is not resignation; it is faith of the most costly kind.

Then pray through the range of suffering represented in your group: those who are in acute pain, those who are grieving loss, those who are carrying long-term burdens, those who are struggling with doubt or anger or confusion in the face of suffering. Do not rush to resolution. Sit with the pain in prayer before you speak comfort. And when you speak, speak the cross: the God who was not distant from suffering but entered it, bore it, and conquered it.

Close with Revelation 21:3–5 read together as a declaration of eschatological hope: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them... and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away... Behold, I am making all things new” (NASB 1995). Let that promise be the last word in your prayer, not because it erases the present pain, but because it establishes that the present pain is not the final word. The God who makes all things new is the God who governs all things now, and He will not fail.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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