

**A Theology of Suffering --- Romans 8:28, "And we know that God all things to work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose." How can God do this? How can this include "all things"?** The most difficult philosophical question for God-believers is the question concerning the problem of evil. It is hard because it is an intellectual problem but more than an intellectual problem it is also a personal, emotional one. It includes not just what evil is or why there is evil, pain and suffering. It is also why do I suffer, why does my family suffer, why do I hurt so much? This is also the question that seemed to most drive Augustine through his various philosophies until he could come to some peace with God. It is traditionally expressed this way: How can a good, all-powerful God allow for the existence of evil, pain and suffering in all their dimensions. Why so much suffering? What did I do to deserve this? In its most extreme form it can also be put as: the existence of God and the existence of evil are mutually exclusive, only one must exist. Since suffering exists, God must not exist. Many unbelievers have argued in such a way. Listen to the comments, verbal tones and emotions of the people who reject God's existence and you will find they are more angry at God than they are denying his existence; the primary cause of their anger is hurt.

Remember the old saying, "Nothing in life is certain except death and taxes"? That statement is quite incomplete. There is one other certainty...YOU WILL SUFFER! You will hurt in this life. You will find pain and suffering or rather they will find you. You cannot hide from them. It might come in illness to yourself or to one you love dearly; it might be death to a loved one. It might be the loss of a parent, a child...possibly while still in the womb, it could be the loss of a spouse. It might be an injury or a failure in your job, school, failure in a relationship. It could be a betrayal. But you will suffer...this I guarantee.

I have this thesis I often use in class about older people...I mean older than me. Do you know anyone in their 80's or so? What are they like? I suspect they are either grouchy, mean and bitter, or kind, soft and gentle. Very seldom is someone in-between. Why is this? Because they have suffered...and with suffering there is no neutrality. You cannot ignore pain. It either embitters you or humbles you. No one is immune from suffering and no one can remain neutral to it.

**So why is there suffering? It is purposeful!**

**Let's return to Romans 8:28**

The KJV reads "All things work together for good to them that love God." In NASB it is "We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God." This is the better translation because it begins with God.

God causes all things...this is all-inclusive. It includes every disappointment, frustration, bereavement, adversity. It is not an easy statement, but Paul is persuaded of this.

I often hear people say, "Well, it happened for a reason" or all things happen for a reason. They are appealing to a kind of fatalism. We should respond to them asking, "And what reason is that?"



It does not mean that suffering won't occur or that it will not hurt and be grievous. Afflictions are not fun. The assurance of this passage is that suffering and hope are compatible because God is bigger than our situations and bigger than our pains. When in pain nothing seems to make sense because we are shortsighted. We do not see how such an evil or such a horror could be good. The passage does not say the evil is good. It is knowledge we have. It is knowledge of assurance that God is greater than our situation and greater than the pain. It assures us that no affliction is by chance. This is faith to believe God in this promise.

God is greater than the effects of suffering. All things work together for good means it either has a conclusion of good or nothing makes any sense.

Good means beneficial, useful or profitable. It is a comprehensive good.

Ray Prichard explains "good" in this way: Is Paul saying "Whatever happens is good?" NO. Is he saying that suffering and evil and tragedy are good? NO. Is he saying everything will work out if we just have enough faith? NO. Is he saying that we will be able to understand why God allowed tragedy to come? NO>

What is he saying then? He is placing a sign over the seemingly unexplainable suffering in the life of a believer. It is a sign that reads..."Be still. God is at work." That is the meaning of Romans 8:28. The danger is this...We will judge the end by the beginning. Or that we will judge what we cannot see by what we can see. When tragedy or suffering strikes, if we are unable to figure out or see a purpose, we assume the worst and conclude there must not be a purpose. But the opposite is true. We must judge the beginning and what we see by the end and what we do not see.

Work together means "synergeo" or synergy, synthesizes together as part of a bigger picture. In Rom. 8:18 Paul has declared God as trustworthy. God seals our hearts with this knowledge. It is knowledge that God is over all things and as such has control of everything that happens. It is a very comprehensive, eternal good. It does not mean that everything in this life will be fine and dandy.

Read 8:29 - He doesn't say this to those who know him but to those who love him. These are the only ones who can claim this verse...those who love God. God has predestined us or chosen us for a certain end. It is an end we do not see fully. It is in a mirror dimly. The certain end is that "we might be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ."

Paul does not mean that tragedies and heartaches will always create a better set of circumstances. They might, but then again they might not. God is not committed to making you healthy and wealthy, but he is committed to making you like his Son in character and image. Are you willing to say "whatever it takes to make me more like Jesus is good? It is too bad we learn more in darkness than in light, that we learn more in sickness than health, but that is the way it is. We pray when we are weak, downtrodden, ill and beaten up. Though it is not always obvious or clear to us there is an eternal purpose that God is always orchestrating behind the scenes.

Submit for there is no affliction that comes by chance. We are not left to the misery of believing that things happen independent of a divine power. Not a drop of bitter falls into our cup unless there is the Father's



wisdom placing it there. We understand that everything is ordered by God. This is faith. Whenever adversity hits, it is always with a purpose. WE have the assurance that all thing work for God. Beause of this the attacks of suffering are actually healing medicine not deadly poison.

A Christian gets rich by his losses, we rise by our falling, we go on by being pushed back and we live by dying. We must diligently understand that it happens for our good, we gain by losing.

The Puritan Thomas Watson said, "Afflictions work for good, as they make way for glory....Not that they merit glory, but they prepare for it. As plowing prepares the earth for a crop, so afflictions prepare and make us ready for glory. The painter lays his gold upon dark colors of affliction, and then He lays the golden color of glory. The vessel is first seasoned before wine is poured into it: the vessels of mercy are first seasoned with affliction, and then the wine of glory is poured in. Thus we see afflictions are not prejudicial, but beneficial to the saints."

We may see nothing good from misery and disaster in this world, but this world is not all of reality. A key word for Christians is "until". The "until" is incomparable as Paul says in **8:18**. Why is this? **1 Corinthians 2:9**.

Read **Genesis 45:5**

Read **Genesis 50:20**

Read **Hebrews 12:1-3**

In **John 10:18** Jesus says that he lays down his life. He does so voluntarily of his own will. Piper says, "He chooses suffering." Why would he choose it? Would you choose it? In **1 Cor. 15:19** Paul says, "If we have only hoped in this life we are to be pitied." There is joyful hope beyond suffering. **Romans 5:3-5**. This would include persecution as a Christian but also illness. Piper says, "all of life, if it is lived earnestly by faith in the pursuit of God's glory and the salvation of others, is like the Christian who goes to the disease-ridden village. The suffering that comes is part of the price of living where you are in obedience to the call of God. In choosing to follow Christ in the way he directs, we choose all that this path includes under his sovereign providence. Thus all suffering that comes in the path of obedience is suffering with Christ and for Christ—whether it is cancer or conflict."

Could you imagine a greater biblical promise than **Romans 8:28**? We need to believe in the God of the Bible. This is a God who is bigger than all trials and tribulations. This God is greater than all of our sufferings. This God is big enough to bring good out of evil, to bring life from death, to bring about His eternal purposes through suffering.



## AN INTELLECTUAL SUMMARY OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL – Dr. Hamilton

Put in the way of premises, it is: **1. God is good, 2. God is all-powerful, 3. Evil exists.**

These seemingly cannot all be true so one must be eliminated. They appear to be logically contradictory to one another. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century the Manichaeists eliminated the second. They believed that God is good and that Evil exists, but God is not all-powerful, not omnipotent, thus He could not overcome evil. There is a second god who is the creator of the material world and of evil. God is not sovereign; His hands are tied when it comes to evil. This was the premise of Rabbi Kushner in his famous book *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. God cannot prevent evil. This is also the approach held by Open Theists today. They believe the future is unknown to God and that He works with proposed end of good through evil then God is malicious. This eliminates number one. Finally, in most eastern religions, evil is denied as a reality; it is only an appearance so that number three is eliminated. Augustine would affirm all three premises but add another.

**4. Evil is the result of the misuse or misdirected love by humans with free will.** One could call it disordered love, loving the lower more than the higher or not loving anything according to its deserved nature. Evil is choosing to love the lower more than it deserves. For Adam this meant loving the fruit more than loving and obeying God. This is a type of idolatry and ultimately violates the first commandment. This view understands God as sovereign over all that occurs including all incidents of evil, pain and suffering. God is not the direct immediate cause of these, humans are, but they still happen as part of God's eternal comprehensive plan. Humans and human sin are the immediate cause of evil and suffering. God remains greater than these problems and always uses them for His purposes. In the twentieth century Alvin Plantinga clarified this issue by adding another premise.

**5. It is logically impossible for God to create truly free human beings who could only do good.** Could God have made Adam as unable to sin? Yes, but he would no longer be in the image of God. It would be a logical contradiction for God to do this and since God is rational and as such cannot do the logically impossible (make square circles), though God can do the physically impossible (change water into wine). As C.S. Lewis said, "God cannot do nonsense." The highest beings God could create would be those who would have a measure of freedom, which would include the freedom to act against God. These beings must then be free to choose evil against God. They must be free to do evil, free to sin. God could have made humans who only did good but then they would not be free and be less than in the image of God. To be in the Image of God includes a measure of freedom, at least the freedom to reject God and to sin.

**6. Some have asked whether this world is the best of all worlds; is this world the best world that God could make? No, this is not the best of all possible worlds. This world of suffering is the best of all possible ways to the best of all possible worlds.** This world is not a utopia. God is sovereign king overall and as such has an eternal comprehensive plan that he is building the world for...that includes for His supreme glory. So this means by which he is doing this is part of this eternal purpose. This makes all of life meaningful including suffering. God has a high view of eternal blessedness He wants us to attain; suffering is a means of purging us of selfishness, arrogance, and a lust for power says Lewis. Suffering creates weakness, humility and dependency. It brings us to our knees and undermines our self-sufficiency. Edwards had a famous sermon entitled, "God Glorified in Man's Dependence." It creates a world where we are never comfortable and never settled. It is God's way of troubling us. Lewis – It is God's megaphone to arouse the world. It is a means by which he shatters our illusion of self-sufficiency. It is one of the means by which God perfects "fortitude, patience, pity and forgiveness in his children."