

## DP5.09 Things to Say When You Are Asked the Question of the Moment

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The US terrorist attacks have brought the age-old complaint against God to everybody's lips: how could he allow such a thing to happen if he is good and omnipotent? Here are some brief ideas on how you can respond.

### Concede the Force of the Question

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We must acknowledge up-front the great force of the problem about suffering and evil. It has vexed theologians, philosophers and sufferers throughout the centuries. We dare not treat it glibly. There is no virtue or spirituality in pretending the question poses no threat intellectually or emotionally to faith.

### Don't be too Defensive

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Related to the first point, we should try not to become defensive, as if God's glory depended on the strength of our answer. Take the position of a fellow traveler with questions of your own, but one who nevertheless looks to God for answers and comfort.

### Don't overstate your Answer

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There is no 'knock-down' answer to the question of suffering, and we should not act as if there is. Anything we might say about human sin, the sovereignty or compassion of God and so on, will only provide a partial picture. So perhaps introduce each aspect of your response with something like, "Well, part of the Bible's response to suffering involves..."

### Understand the Question

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It is crucial to know where your questioner is coming from. There are two types of questions people ask about suffering and evil: the first challenges God's existence ("If there were a god, he'd never allow this to happen!"), the second doubts God's character ("Why would God allow this to happen?"). Before we launch into our response we should work out what type of question we are facing. The first requires an argument of logic, the second, a more nuanced reflection. So remember to ask your questioner to clarify his or her query before you jump in.

### Does suffering disprove God's existence?

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If you establish that your questioner has an essentially intellectual query, it is reasonable to respond in a manner which forces him or her to assess the logic of the position. The conclusion God does not exist is by no means the logical deduction from the phenomenon of suffering.

The existence of suffering could be used as evidence against the existence of God only if you could first demonstrate that God does not have valid reasons for allowing the existence of suffering. Of course, this can't be demonstrated and so the intellectual aspect of the argument dissolves. Put more simply, you could respond to the person who insists suffering disproves God's existence by asking: "How do you know God hasn't got good reasons for allowing it to happen?"

Having said this, more common in my experience is the second type of question, the one which assumes God's existence but is confused about his motives: "How could God let this happen?"

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#### Affirm the right to Question

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One of the interesting dimensions of the biblical response to the problem of suffering is the permission it grants to men and women to ask questions of God. Of course, the classic example of this is Psalm 22 which opens with the confronting words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?". The presence of this question and many others like it in the Scriptures makes clear that the true God is one you may question, doubt, and towards whom you may feel anger and confusion. Point this out, perhaps saying something like: "Your question's a good one. In fact, the Bible encourages that sort of honest questioning. God's big enough to hear your doubts."

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#### Describe the reality of the Human will

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While the Bible does not teach the notion of 'free will' – anyone who has tried to stop sinning for a day knows our wills are not 'free' – it does speak clearly about the reality of the human will. While this does not account for all suffering – think of cancers, for instance – much of the suffering of our world is the direct result of the cruelty of human will. This hardly needs saying and you will rarely find people willing to disagree. The tricky question, however, emerges: Why doesn't God override human will to protect others? We don't know the answer to that question, and we mustn't diminish God by implying that he doesn't have the ability or right to do it. He certainly does. Nevertheless, I have found some usefulness in asking my enquirer the following question: If God was to decide regularly to override our wills, how far would we really want him to go? For instance, when I feel like eating out, do I really want him to force me to send the money to the Third World instead?

In addition, perhaps point out this larger problem. If God did override our wills, it's true that we wouldn't be here pondering, "Why does a loving God permit evil and suffering?" – for there wouldn't be any. However, we would be here asking the more difficult and more tragic question: "Why has God made us like this – without a will, without true personal expression?". The point is purely hypothetical, of course, since a god like this would not allow us to pose such questions. He would 'correct' our thoughts and keep us in the dark, adding to the depth of the tragedy in which we would exist.

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#### Emphasise the Justice of God

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In dealing with questions about injustice and violence it is worth underlining that the Bible insists that this world is not all there is. God will right all the wrongs on the great Day of Judgment. The concept of God's judgment has had a lot of bad press over the years, and this is partly because we have divorced it from the doctrine of the love of God. In addition to his holiness, it is precisely his love for the victims of tyranny and injustice that fuels his judgement against perpetrators of evil and tyranny.

The Day of Judgment is not so much a theological scare tactic, designed to make us more religious, as God's pledge to us that he hears our cries for justice and will one day console us by bringing his justice to bear on every evil act of the will.

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#### Emphasise the New Creation

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The resurrection of Jesus is God's proof and pledge within history that he is willing and able to breathe new life where there is currently chaos and death. The new creation – where there will be no more tears, death, or evil – is one of the most beautiful aspects of biblical hope. Don't be embarrassed to

pin your hopes on it publicly. God has proven his ability to create – just look at the first creation. In the resurrection of Jesus, he has demonstrated his intention to do it again.

### [Point to the Cross](#)

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The most beautiful aspect of the Bible’s treatment of the problem of evil and suffering is the news that God himself has wounds. This is a blasphemy in some religious traditions, but it is the glory of the gospel of Christ. On the cross, God identifies with the suffering of humanity. He shows himself willing to enter our world and feel what we feel. The biblical God is one who understands our pain, not just because he is all-knowing, but because he has experienced it first-hand. The striking and deliberate literary parallels between Psalm 22 and the crucifixion narratives (Mark 15:16-34 for instance) make this point clear: what was once the tortured lament of the sufferer has become the story and song of God himself.

The cross does not answer all the questions about suffering, but it does something very important: it reveals that the God who does hold the answers is one we can trust. In view of the cross there can be no lurking doubt that God is distant from us, that he lacks compassion toward us, that he is unmoved by our predicament. Of course, the cross is much more than an identification with us – it is also a substitution for us, and if you have opportunity to speak of this as well, go for it. But don’t be afraid merely to say something like: “I don’t have all the answers, but when I see what Jesus went through I realise that God understands my feelings of anger and pain, and I realise that even though I can’t always work out what his hand is doing, I can always trust his heart”.