

Always Be Ready to Give a Defence (9)

Background

Last time, we began to consider the problem of suffering as an argument against the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving God. This week, we will look at this problem in more detail.

Questions

There are two different forms of the problem of suffering: one is an *intellectual argument*; and the other is an *emotional argument*.

For most people suffering is an emotional problem rather than an intellectual one. However, it may be that someone is unwilling to address the former until they have answers to the latter.

The **intellectual argument** has the following form:

- Proposition 1 If God is all-powerful, he can create any world that he wants.
- Proposition 2 If God is all-loving, he prefers a world without any suffering at any time
- Proposition 3 Suffering exists
- Deduction 1 If God is all-powerful and all-loving he will create a world without any suffering at any time. (from Proposition 1 and 2)
- Deduction 2 An all-powerful and all-loving God does not exist (from Deduction 1 and Proposition 3)

In order for this to be a good argument, an atheist must demonstrate that these three propositions are more plausibly true than false (and that the deductions necessarily follow).

- Which of these propositions does the Bible support? Which of these propositions (or deductions) does the Bible deny? See, for example, Psalm 115v3, Lam 3v37-38, Isa 55v8-9 and Rom 11v33-36.

Although the Bible does not explain why an all-loving God allows suffering in the present world, it teaches us that our own understanding is limited. It also encourages us to trust that God will achieve his good purposes.

- Which narratives in the Bible show that God can use suffering for good? See, for example, Gen 50v20, Acts 2v22-24, 1 Pet 3v18.

This intellectual argument *against* the existence of God also needs to be weighed against other rational arguments *for* the existence of God.

- Can you give four reasons to believe in God apart from the Scriptures?

The **emotional argument** has the following form: I do not want to believe in a God who permits suffering. This argument might have arisen from observing the suffering in the world in general, or it may be arisen from very personal experiences of suffering.

We can all sympathise with this problem to a greater or lesser extent. We also have a God who sympathises with this problem.

- What has God done about the problem of suffering? See John3v16.
- What does God promise to do for all who trust in him? See, for example, Matt 11v28-30, Rev 7v15-17 and Rev 21v3-5.

As we said last time, the answer to the emotional problem of suffering is not to turn away from God; it is to turn to him through Jesus Christ.¹

Conclusion

We need to be prepared to address the problem of suffering humbly and sympathetically. We may not understand why God allows certain things to happen but we do know that he has promised to do us good, if we trust in his Son.

¹ These notes are based on William Lane Craig, *On Guard: Defending your Faith with Reason and Precision*. Craig uses a free-will argument to oppose proposition 1. However, in the light of such Scriptures as Prov 21v1 and Eph 1v11, I think it is better to let proposition 1 stand.