



Sermon Series – Road Blocks for Faith

#1 How can a good God allow suffering?

How many years ago did the fall of the Berlin Wall take place?



This weekend marks the 30th anniversary of that world-changing event in 1989.

Little of the wall exists today – but it once partitioned the former GDR from the rest of Europe. The wall Donald Trump is building today is to keep non-citizens out. But this wall that fell 30 years ago was built **to keep people walled-in!**

The feature film, Balloon, showing in cinemas now, tells the true story of an East German family in 1975 seeking to escape to West Berlin by hot air balloon over that very wall. The mental anguish and anxieties of cold war life included limits to knowledge, restricted liberties, random disappearances of citizens, and constant govt surveillance, resulting in oppression and depression.



Imagine the joy and the disorientation of crossing over the rubble on 9 November 1989 to join the Western vision of life. Yet, 30 years on, psychologists and historians note how some former citizens of the GDR **remain walled-in mentally**; unable to live without limits to freedoms akin to past days - a **virtual wall and roadblock to their liberty and new life.**



It could be said that for some people today, the problem of suffering keeps them **virtually “walled in”**; unable to consider faith in God due to serious objections held to for a long period of time.

It’s a question that has challenged many down the years, **“How can I believe in a good and all-powerful God when there’s so much unjust suffering in the world?”**



Sadly, there's always **plenty of reasons** for this question. Just last week in Melbourne an innocent and helpless 3 year old was run over and killed near a child-care centre last week. We could find in the news a natural disaster in the past year that killed hundreds of innocent people somewhere. Perhaps a friend or neighbour of good standing received bad news from the doctor. There's no shortage of material to press the question "Where is your God?"

Sometimes these big questions **keep people stuck where they are:** roadblocked; unable to journey with us on the road of faith in Jesus Christ. It is for some a **deal-breaker**.

Ricky Gervais, the British comedian, well-known for his brutal, acerbic cynicism tells the story of a fictitious **Jewish man** from the 1940's who died and went to heaven. He met God at the pearly gates and said, "Hey God, did you hear the one about the holocaust?" God says, "That's not funny." The man says, "Well, I guess you **had to be there**."

Gervais himself has little or no regard for those who believe in a deity that seems, to him, to be absent when needed most.

Yet, it's **not just** people **outside the church** that struggle with this question. Psalm 42 shows **even God's most faithful ones sometimes question God in the face of suffering** or persecution. The biblical song-writer, David, writes in verses 9-10 of Psalm 42...

I say to God, my rock, 'Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?' As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'

When God seems to **fail the test of turning up** amidst random world horrors or amidst personal tragedies or calamities, even the **faith of the faithful** can fail.

"How could a good God allow suffering?" is therefore an important question for us to tackle for ourselves, and for others. But first, a disclaimer...

- If **you're a person who is a victim** of significant loss or horrors or random traumatic illnesses or persecution, the last thing I want to do is preach a sermon to you! I'd much rather offer you understanding, empathy, advocacy, friendship and service right now.



Yet, for the benefit of those who are **not** right now crippled by and walled-in by circumstances of suffering I will speak briefly now to offer a few theological and philosophical considerations. For, **when the day comes**, and it will, that some of us comfortable ones will be moved by a coming event to ask “Have you forgotten me God?” or worse still, “Are my friends right – do you exist at all?” **So that we may be better prepared** for taking this question seriously, let’s consider some responses to this major obstacle to faith.

Critics of Christianity often tell us there can **only be three possible** conclusions to the problem of suffering:

1. Either God is not all-powerful, or
2. God’s not all-loving or else
3. God doesn’t exist in the first place.

But, we must ask, who said **there are the only 3 options?**

In apologetics we **examine the presuppositions** that form a person’s conclusions about an obstacle to faith and ask: **What’s behind the person’s question?** Presuppositions held **about God** and about **what to expect of life** sometimes need to be challenged and renegotiated.

Let’s be clear that it’s **not the Bible** that puts the idea in our heads that God and suffering **cannot co-exist**. From Jacob to Joseph, from Hagar to Hannah, from Job to Jesus, there’s no escaping the message in the Bible that despite severe suffering and tragedy and horrors, faith in a good, powerful and loving God happens. The Bible has an honest appraisal throughout that suffering is present even when affirming that a good God also exists.

So, who put the presupposition in our heads that God and suffering can’t co-exist? (or at least that suffering makes it hard to believe in that there is a good God)

The anniversary of the **fall of the Berlin Wall** and other revolutions of that time **offers us a clue**. The fall of the wall rebooted the global human quest for the **utopian** dream of 17th century sciences. In the 1990’s almost **every nation on earth** joined the free market race to the top. The revolution of freedom in the West fuelled a **long-lost vision of material prosperity and comfort for all**. For many, this realization of this utopia would be the work of human wisdom and



effort. Not until the attack on the Twin Towers in NYC was this vision really diminished. Now, so much has changed.

But, then, it was as if **Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis***¹ from the 17th Century was finally becoming a reality in our time. It was as if the key motto of **Rene Descartes**², "I think, therefore I am", now truly excised God to the margins and placed human intelligence at the centre.

- David Innes says that Bacon is responsible for "transmuting Christian hope for spiritual salvation into a **secular dream of material comfort.**" Many people born in the prosperous nations of the late 20th Century were raised with a **fundamental presupposition** that they should be able to grow up to be **anyone or anything**, with **prosperity** and **comfort** on the way.
- Alistair McGrath comments on the Cartesian dilemma, saying: "The god of the philosophers is basically **little more than a perfect, ideal and abstract being.** Constructed out of the distilled elements of human benevolence, the characteristics of this god are primarily its omnipotence, omniscience and goodness" (from *Bridge Building* p.140).

Descartes placed enormous emphasis on the **perfection of God.**³ Many people born in prosperous nations in the late 20th Century grew up with **the presupposition that God is a perfect, good, powerful and abstract, though beyond our site.**

¹ According to Howard White (1968), Bacon's purpose was to transform the human quest from the search for the "heavenly city" to the creation of the well-governed country, and to change the philosophical quest from an effort to understand God, God's Creation, and humanity's place in it to a pursuit to understand what humans can make of themselves. David Innes, a theologian influenced by White, contended that Bacon is responsible for transmuting Christian hope for spiritual salvation into a secular dream of material comfort. Some scholars believe that dramatic shifts in thinking took place in the 17th century where the origins of modern rationalism and atheism can be traced. At that time a number of Christian apologists turned to philosophy and reason as their primary text, rather than or in deference to the Scriptures, resulting in quite unorthodox doctrines of God and of humanity.

² Of course Descartes actually said, "I think, therefore I am", marking a seismic shift in philosophy that centered on humans, not God. Descartes, however, also influenced, along with others, a non-biblical idea of God that prevails in abstract philosophy now. "Christianity entered into the defense of the existence of the Christian God without appeal to anything uniquely Christian." (Michael J. Buckley).

³ As a result, the undeniable existence of suffering and evil stood as an obvious roadblock to his conclusions. The question, "How can a perfect being allow such imperfection to exist?" became fundamental. Michael Buckley says, in many cases... "Christianity entered into the defense of the existence of the Christian God without appeal to anything uniquely Christian."



These presuppositions still act today like ghosts in the machine, convincing us falsely that we “...only have 3 options” in the face of the problem of evil and suffering, saying to us: because suffering exists...

1. Either God is not all-powerful, or
2. God's not all-loving or else
3. God doesn't exist in the first place.

Yet, **philosophically** speaking, there is a fundamental flaw in this logic. Evidence of suffering and evil in the world, horrible as it may be, is often accompanied by stories of **bravery, faith, sacrifice, passionate movements against justice, love and care for victims, miracles of hope**, and more. If we are merely **random mistakes** of a universal soup programmed for survival of the fittest, as mid-19th century science proposed, **where does our sense of injustice, our capacity to put others first, and our yearning for a good deity arise from?**

In the end, a sense of injustice about senseless suffering is more **problematic for the atheist than the theist!** If evidence for God exists, and suffering exists, we need an **alternative pathway** to the three classic conclusions that wall us in.

The **Bible offers an alternative viewpoint.** It is viewed by Christians as an authority on matters about God. There we find **evidence** for the existence a loving, gracious and good God **amidst suffering and evil**, time and time again. Nowhere is it more evident than in the suffering, persecution and death of God's one and **only Son**, despite his goodness.

In the suffering of Christ, we see by faith, a good God.



We are told in the Scriptures that **God who became human for our sake in the person of Jesus Christ**, truly experienced the anguish of human suffering and injustice; and in doing so, understands our plight and encourages us to believe that God is good, gracious and loving.

The First Letter of Peter 3:18 tells us...



For Christ also **suffered** for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit,

Again it says...

When (Christ) was abused, he did not return abuse; when he **suffered**, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

The Letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 2 states...

¹⁷Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters^[a] in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Again, *Hebrews* 4:15 tells us...

... we do not have a high priest who is unable to **sympathize** with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

Conclusion

If, you, like me, are one of the comfortable ones right now – take the time to challenge the presuppositions you have inherited about God and about your expectations of what life will deliver. If you are helping a friend who is roadblocked by the problem of suffering, explore with them what presuppositions they hold regarding: i) their expectations of what life should deliver, and ii) their inherited beliefs about what God is like.

Perhaps you and I, and our friends, can be better prepared, with the help of the Bible, for the reality of suffering in life, and more capable of seeing that despite this truth, a good and loving and all-powerful God does truly exist. The key may be to allow the revelation of this God in the person of Jesus Christ to challenge our previous viewpoint.