

The challenge of suffering “for those who weep and wonder”



Matthew 13

“²⁴ He presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field ²⁵ But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. ²⁷ And the slaves of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ ²⁸ And he said to them, ‘An enemy has done this!’ And the slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’ ²⁹ But he said, ‘No; lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them. ³⁰ Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

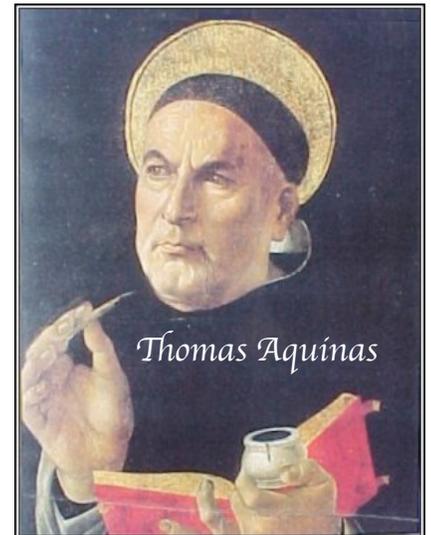
Observations

1. Thinking people are going to have questions about why evil is allowed to persist.
2. God’ people cannot eliminate evil or explain it though they may feel some responsibility to do so.
3. God is not responsible for evil although His plans are not thwarted by it.
4. Justice is postponed in this age out of respect for the welfare of God’s people.
5. Perfect justice will come but not in this age.

“There are two serious arguments against the existence of the Christian God.”

The challenge of science

The challenge of suffering



The problem of “theodicy” (Justification of God)

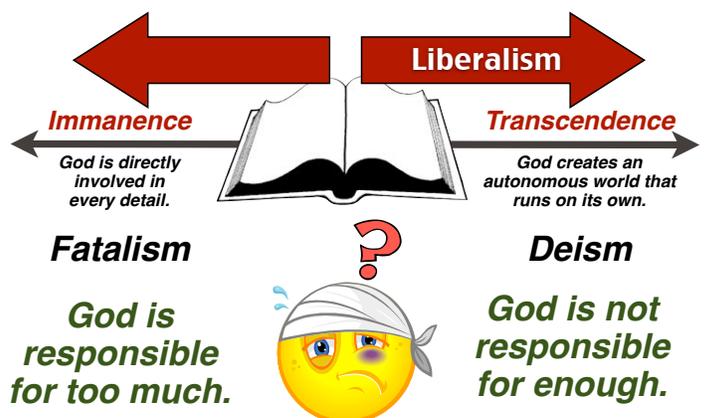


If God is all powerful, loving, and active in the world



why is there “unjustified suffering” in the world?

The bigger question - How does God interact with this world?



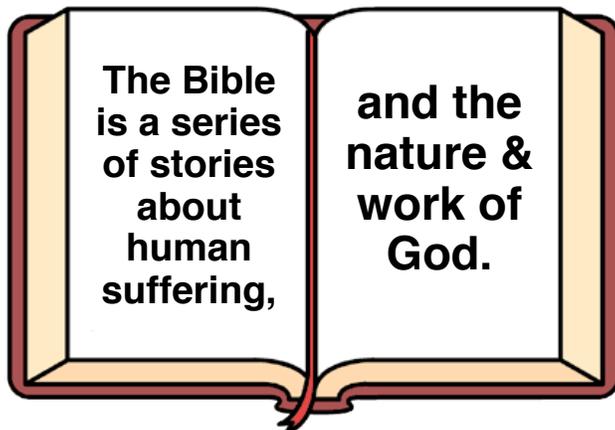
Bart Ehrman's faulty faith assumptions

1. The God of the Bible intervenes on command.
2. The experience of God's people today is different than that described in the Bible.
3. This life is all there is.
4. We must fully understand before we can believe.
5. We have the insight to know the purpose of the world and how it should operate.

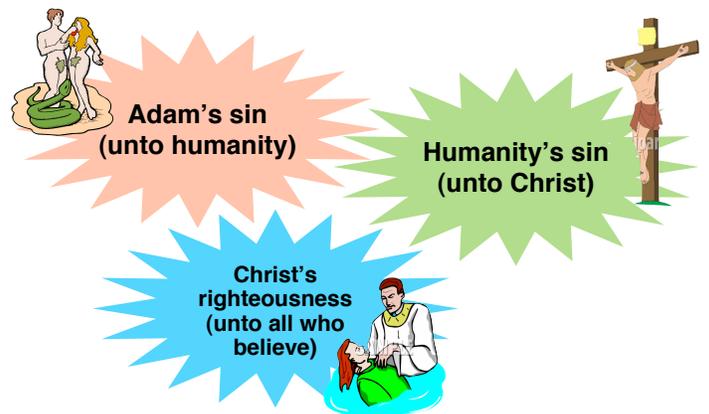
How does God interact with His suffering people?

- ✓ His purpose is defined by His **glory** and the **development** of our souls.
- ✓ His **ways** are not our ways.
- ✓ The **complexity** of life is beyond our knowledge.
- ✓ The supreme example is **Jesus**.
 - He healed the sick but did not remove all illness.
 - He responded with compassion but called us to bear a cross and endure suffering.
 - He expected us to experience God's love and have faith in the midst of trials and suffering.

1. The Biblical record is sensitive to the challenge of theodicy.



Human Suffering & Redemption – three great imputations



John 16

“20 Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned to joy. 21 Whenever a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she remembers the anguish no more, for joy that a child has been born into the world. 22 Therefore you too now have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one takes your joy away from you.”

Sorrow and suffering in this life would precede glory in the next.

Romans 8

“18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. . . . 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 Just as it is written, "For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; We were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." . . . 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Suffering did not keep Paul from but drew him to “the love of” and “faith in” God.

Hebrews 11

“³⁶ and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated ³⁸ men of whom the world was not worthy, wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹ And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised,”

Suffering is not incompatible with our faith or God’s faithfulness.

Hebrews 12:1

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,”

Suffering is a race to be endured not a reason to disbelieve God.

Hebrews 12

“² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.”

Jesus is our model for this life and our hope for the next.

Job 42:3-6

“I have declared that which I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Hear now, and I will speak; I will ask Thee, and do Thou instruct me. I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees Thee; Therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes.”

Paraphrase

“I spoke out of turn and too soon but now I am listening. I now see you as I did not before and apologize for my brashness.”

Unlike Job, we get to see more of the story. But we also must realize that we cannot understand everything.

The Scripture affirms four postures for all who bear God’s image.

1.

They weep with nature as they suffer injustice.

2.

They wonder as they seek answers but see dimly.

3.

They wait with hope in a Loving, Powerful, and Wise God.

4.

They walk by faith and virtue not by sight & fear.

Deuteronomy 29:29

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.”

2. The very problem of suffering is a window and doorway to intimacy with God.

Genesis 3:5, 10

“in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. . . . I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.”

- 1. A moral conscience is a witness to the existence of God and His image in us.**
- 2. A moral conscience is a witness to our need of God and our hope in Him.**

Questions for Bart Eherman

- 1. If God does not exist, where does your “open eye” to or sense of good and evil come from?
- 2. If God does not exist, how do you explain the passionate interest in justice and this topic?
- 3. If God does not exist, is there virtue and why should anyone live a virtuous life?
- 4. How do you explain the faith of Paul & others in Scripture, given their great suffering?
- 5. Do you feel any moral guilt? Why and what do you do with it?
- 6. Would we be more fully human if our world knew no suffering, freedom, & virtue?

3. Our great temptation and arrogance is to compete with God for the right to run the universe.

Our problem with suffering does not suggest that God must not exist but rather that we do not approve of the way He is running things.

Romans 1

“²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools,”

Is it possible that this fallen world is the best possible environment to develop and demonstrate the full breadth and depth of God’s nature in and through us?

