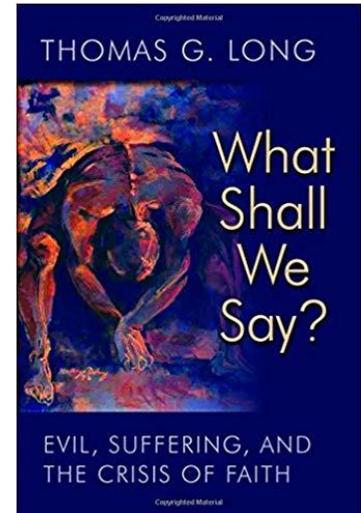


Thomas G Long

What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith

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Summary by Alison Morgan, Jan 2019



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Excellent overview of the question of suffering and faith.

This book is about what preachers can and should say regarding the theodicy problem. Theodicy = theos (God) + dike (justice); ie the justification of God in the face of evil. Now used to mean how believers can hold together faith claims that seem incompatible – that there is a God, that God is loving and just, that God is powerful, and that there is undeserved suffering in the world. It's about how faith in a loving God is plausible, given what we know and experience about suffering. It's an issue which has arisen with the advent of modern science and the idea of human reason as a counterforce to 'revealed religion'; new ways of thinking have developed about questions like how the universe is built and why natural disasters occur.

1. The Shaking of the Foundations

On 1st November 1775, All Saints Day, an earthquake followed by a tsunami devastated the city and killed 15-60 thousand people. 25,000 out of 250,000 were priests/monks/nuns; the city had more priests per capita than any other on earth. It had been the HQ of the Holy Inquisition; doom had been prophesied for as long as anyone could remember. It sent moral and theological shock waves throughout Europe, and still does. The word Lisbon was used in the C18th much as we use the word Auschwitz. It wasn't the first such disaster (the Black Death was far more calamitous); but it symbolised the destruction of a world view – because it happened in the midst of a major turning point in human understanding; and so it symbolised the toppling of an old world and the way that world grasped faith and held onto hope. In the medieval world, such events were seen as a punishment from God. The Lisbon earthquake was the first disaster of worldwide proportion that could not be neatly fitted into the accepted idea of divine causality. It came as the modern scientific world view was taking shape. The new natural philosophers (the word scientist came in only in the C19th) were beginning to understand the laws which governed the world, and realising that it seemed to operate on its own. Most continued to assert their faith in God as creator; but God became more of a 'first cause' than a daily manager. Theologically, the doctrine of particular providence (God is an active player in the events and circumstances of the world) was yielding to the doctrine of general providence (God cares for the world not through interventions but through creating and sustaining it). This shift has been termed the 'disenchantment of the world' - the shift from a world in which God is present and active in the events of everyday life (the falling rain, the song of the robin, the birth of a child) to one in which the world is a closed system operating according to natural laws, with God outside them. Most Christians today have learned to be bilingual, speaking the languages both of enchantment and of disenchantment; God blessed us with rain, but it was also to do with the humidity levels in the air.

Many preachers explained Lisbon in the old way, as the wrath of God. Leibnitz wrote a book *Theodicy* (first use of the word) in which he argued that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds, because God would have created nothing less. It was wearing thin. Voltaire responded with *Candide*, where the main character lives through Lisbon and asks, if this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others? It no longer washed.

We are all the heirs of Lisbon. What was the outrageous thought of the C18th became the daring scepticism of the C19th, and finally the common dilemma of the C20th: namely that belief in a loving and powerful God is challenged by the irrationality and inexplicability of innocent suffering.

2. The Impossible Chess Match

In 2008 Bart Ehrman wrote *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer our Most Important Question – Why We Suffer*. It's not sophisticated but it is a good expression of the issue. He lists four customary truth claims and says they cannot all be true:

1. There is a God
2. God is all-powerful
3. God is loving and good
4. There is innocent suffering

This is the classic formulation of the theodicy problem. David Hume had said in the C18th that if God is willing but not able to prevent evil then he is impotent; if he is able but not willing, then malevolent; if he is both able and willing, why is there evil? This has served as a short cut to modern day atheism, because these two claims cannot both be true: claim 1 = there is a God who is loving, compassionate and powerful; claim 2 = there is innocent suffering. The fact that the God people no longer believe in is loving, compassionate and powerful shows how deeply embedded biblical understandings of God persist in our society.

Ehrman is left sad, rather like Julian Barnes who wrote 'I don't believe in God, but I miss Him'. Ehrman ends, 'I have such a fantastic life that I have an overwhelming sense of gratitude for it; I am fortunate beyond words. But I don't have anyone to express my gratitude to. This is a void deep inside me, a void of wanting someone to thank, and I don't see any plausible way of filling it.' Charles Taylor describes this kind of response as the anguish of people who are caught between a faith that they can't fully accept intellectually and a secularity they can't accept spiritually. Many ministers opt for a ministry of 'presence' rather than trying to offer a way through this conundrum – all we can offer is compassion. But whilst that may be a good pastoral response, it offers nothing to those who regard the whole thing as an intellectually troubling issue; those whose faith prompts them to seek understanding.

He tells the story of Diane Komp, a paediatrician struggling with the fact she had nothing to offer patients and their families to help with their questions of non-medical meaning. Watching children die, she struggled. Then one day a child with leukemia called Anna sat up in bed, said she could see and hear beautiful angels, and died. Exit the chaplain, comfortable with the psychological but not the spiritual; Komp and the family remained, contemplating mystery.

Every day people in congregations face suffering for which their theology is not sufficient.

3. Road Hazards

1. Speaking the truth in love

To regard theodicy as a purely theoretical and scholarly exercise is to provide - albeit unwillingly - a tacit sanction of the myriad evils that exist on this planet"° To say to the Sri Lankan father that the death of his wife and four children fits into some theoretical understanding of theodicy would imply a cold and distant God, or even a God who is a moral monster. It would not only lack comfort and tact; it would not be the gospel truth.

A very different matter, though, is the question of timing in speaking pastoral truth. Some aspects of the gospel await the proper moment to be spoken. For example, William Sloane Coffin said in his famous sermon preached shortly after the death of his son Alex that he had received a "healing flood of letters" from many people, but he went on to say that not all of these words of comfort were genuinely comforting:

Some of the very best, and easily the worst, came from fellow reverends, a few of whom proved they knew their Bibles better than the human condition. I know all the "right" biblical passages, including "Blessed are those who mourn:" and my faith is no house of cards; these passages are true, I know. But the point is this. While the words of the Bible are true, grief renders them unreal. The reality of grief is the absence of God - "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Because of the rawness and depth of Coffin's grief, the 'right' biblical passages could at first be heard only as 'unreal:' But it is significant that this changed for Coffin as time passed. Later in the sermon, he observes that "as the grief that once seemed unbearable begins to turn now to bearable sorrow, the truths in the 'right' biblical passages are beginning, once again, to take hold..."

2. What God? Whose Understanding?

If insensitivity is the first thing to avoid, arrogance is the second. Most C18th philosophers did not abandon their faith in God; but some did, railing against the arrogance of a church which presumes to inflict its worldview on others, bolstered by its own desire for power. This is Thomas Paine:

The most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries that have afflicted the human race, have had their origin in this thing called revelation, or revealed religion. It has been the most dishonourable belief against the character of the divinity, the most destructive to morality and the peace and happiness of man, that ever was propagated since man began to exist. It is better, far better, that we admitted, if it were possible, a thousand devils to roam at large, and to preach publicly the doctrine of devils, if there were any such, than that we permitted one such impostor and monster as Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and the Bible prophets, to come with the pretended word of God in his mouth, and have credit among us.'

Even formulating the theodicy problem in the 4 statements of the 'impossible chess match' is dangerous, because it only permits a mathematical answer. The God who appears in the 4 statements is the God of the Enlightenment, the First cause of the philosophers, and not the God of Jesus Christ.

Imagine a man who confides to a friend that he is experiencing, for the first time, a crisis in his marriage. His marriage has been a happy one, a mutual sharing of love and regard. He and his wife have delighted in making life a joy for the other, but now, suddenly

and inexplicably, his wife has begun occasionally to speak bitterly toward him and to act in antagonistic ways. The man confesses to his friend that he is puzzled and troubled by this new behavior and has been trying to figure out for himself why this is happening. If his friend responded by asking if he had, in fact, made any headway in discerning the reason, I suspect he would be astonished if the husband responded, "Yes, if my wife is good and loving, she must be powerless to stop this behavior, but if my wife is powerful enough to control her behavior, she must not really be good and loving, and, since she cannot be both powerful and good, I have decided that my wife doesn't exist."

This boils down to: "I believe that there is, watching over my life, a good and powerful wife whose nature it is to arrange my life in delightful ways, but since my life is not now delightful, then no such wife exists". The Bible says, 'I see the wicked prosper.' It doesn't then ask, 'I wonder if there's a God?' but rather 'O God, why do the wicked prosper?'. For all Christians, all theological questions are forms of prayer. So the question of God is recast. God is not brought into the courtroom to defend himself, which is the post-Enlightenment approach; as Tillich said, God cannot be reached if he is the object of the question and not its basis. But we still do need to know how to respond to suffering; we need a workable sense of meaning in the face of experiences that challenge our worldview.

4. Fellow Pilgrims

One way out of the impossible chess match is the defence of free will; the evil in the world is neither God's will nor God's fault. JL Mackie argued that this is nonsense, for God could have created a world in which we would be free in our choices but would always choose the good. Alvin Plantinga replied by saying Mackie was operating with a flawed concept of omnipotence, viz that God can suit himself at all times. In fact he can't – he can't generate states of affairs that violate the rules of logic (eg square circles); God could not make a rock so big that God couldn't lift it. Aquinas had said the same:

All confess that God is omnipotent; but it seems difficult to explain in what His omnipotence precisely consists: for there may be doubt as to the precise meaning of the word "all" when we say that God can do all things. If, however, we consider the matter aright, since power is said in reference to possible things, this phrase, "God can do all things:" is rightly understood to mean that God can do all things that are possible; and for this reason He is said to be omnipotent.'

Plantinga argued that to say God is omnipotent does not mean there are no limits to his power; it means there are no non-logical limits. Free means free; if we can be compelled to do only what is right, then we are not free. But we have to be not just logical, but also credible.

Enter [Rabbi Harold Kushner](#), *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. His son Aaron was diagnosed at three with a genetic rapid aging condition, and died at 14. Kushner set out to find why. He dismisses all the standard arguments on the grounds that they all begin with the assumption that God is somehow the cause of human suffering, and concludes that God doesn't because God can't. He turns to Job, esp Job 40. Carol Newsom remarks that the divine speeches in the book of Job have 'a teasing resistance' to being understood. Kushner reads Job 40.9-14 as God saying OK, *you* do it; you defeat evil, see if you can; and you will find you can't. Nor can I. So Kushner lets God off the hook. Where then does evil come from? Fate – random bad luck, or cruel acts by people, or random acts of nature.

This is an approach which works pastorally; it assures people God did not cause their suffering, God is not punishing them; God would have stopped the pain had it been in his power to do so. But it's not so neat theologically. Hall asks who the 'good' people are, because we are all to some extent not good; to put it this way prevents us examining our presuppositions about our own righteousness. But leaving that aside, Kushner is setting up a rival power to God; this is dualism.

[Process theologians](#) take a different approach. They do not, like Kushner, make God weaker. They redefine power. According to John Cobb, God's power is not like that of the potter over the clay, it's more like that of the wise parent over the growing child. God is in the mix of things, influencing for good. Process theologians see God not as 'being' but as 'process', creative energy embedded in larger evolving systems. God works in and with what is available; evolution is a response to the call of this persuasive God. But has God then lured human life to come into being in a world he does not control, thus exposing us to pain and suffering? David Griffin argues that no bad also means no good – a world without danger would be a trivial world; and that in any case God isn't outside it watching, he's in it with us, exposed to the full range of human suffering himself. So process theology sides with Leibniz and Kushner; God did not prevent Lisbon because it was not in his power to do so – this is the best of all possible worlds. Long however suggests this is not really good enough; was the best God could do at Auschwitz really to allow 10,000 Jews a day to go up in smoke?

[Augustine](#) and the free will argument. Augustine found the origins of evil in the free will and rebellion of God's creatures – an event which leads to God's project of salvation through Jesus Christ. The impossible chess match can move forward because there is no suffering that is completely innocent. The advantage of this explanation is that it succumbs neither to determinism nor to dualism. But there are problems. If the world was created perfect, where did the impulse to rebel come from? If there was rebellion in paradise, there was also disease in there somewhere. Most Christians read the story of the Fall not as an event in the lives of two individuals, but as an impulse in all of us; their story is our story, repeated in our lives.

John Hick and Irenaeus. Hick asks, what if our concept of paradise as a harmonious garden is our idea of paradise, and not God's? What if God conceives of something more rugged, more challenging, more conducive to our growth? Irenaeus said 'The glory of God is humanity fully alive' – Hick asks what kind of world God might have created to bring that about, and suggests it would be a world in which we could learn and mature, in which we could travel towards God and not simply remain stationary. What kind of world would best facilitate our growth? We start off remote from God, who is hidden; we respond to his love and learn to become more like him. This has merits; but the snag is that it doesn't seem adequate to deal with the most extreme forms of catastrophe and evil.

So if we go back to the four claims of the chess match, which is the one that has to give?

1. There is a God
2. God is all-powerful
3. God is loving and good
4. There is innocent suffering

In Long's view, all of them. All four are transformed by the Christian gospel. Each of the theodicies discussed here contains a portion of the truth.

Take the first, the question of God. God is not, post Lisbon, a source of energy outside the universe, exerting influence within it. God is involved in creation, but not contained within it. Those who saw God's hand in their rescue from the Haiti earthquake many centuries later were referring to the God of Jesus Christ, the God who took flesh and dwelt among us, and who cares for us in the midst of suffering – not to an external, supernatural God who exists outside the world and plays games with it.

The second concerns God's power. God, in Jesus Christ, exercises power in unconventional ways. Douglas Hall says that all discussions of God's power must be conducted in the light of a willingness not to define that power in the same way that we define human power. God doesn't do things through armies.

The third concerns God's goodness. None of our thinkers are prepared to budge on this one. But constructions of goodness are crafted out of the values of the cultural moment. Why do you call me good, Jesus asked; God alone is good. Goodness is what God is, not the other way round – the definition starts with God, not with us.

Finally, there is innocent suffering. The death of a child may be better described as tragic than as innocent; she may be innocent of moral blame when she's the victim of a hit and run; but she is not innocent of being a human being, with all the perils and possibilities inherent in that condition.

Interlude - Howl: Job and the Whirlwind

Most people who ponder the question of suffering end up in Job. But we don't quite seem to get what we'd hoped for – God just seems to ask Job exactly who he thinks he is. In fact the purpose of the text is to overthrow our desire to know why suffering happens. It's Job's friends who provide the pompous and ignorant explanations for that. But Job's suffering remains a test case in the larger issue of humanity's relationship with God. The book is not an attempt to explain how a good God and innocent suffering can occupy the same space; it is about who God is, and what it means to be human at all when God is understood truly to be God. The issue is spiritual transformation – and Stephen Mitchell said the only person to have understood this was William Blake, in his engravings.

The book of Job is a stage play, set in the mythical Uz, with Job living a stereotypically upright and moral life. Above the stage is God; and also the Adversary. Many think it originally ended with Job steadfast and the Adversary losing his bet with God. But it goes on, and tackles the underlying question, which is not why Job has suffered so, but what kind of God allows such a morally irrational experience. The plot continues, with the question 'How do we live when our experience causes our theological universe to collapse?'

Eliphaz's answer is to deny our experience; he does not have faith, he merely advocates obeying the rules and says all will be fine if you do. He oozes false reassurance.

Bildad is a religious authoritarian; he thinks we deserve what we get. It's all a punishment. It never rains on the righteous, he says.

Zophar is like Bildad, but he's been to seminary, and learned to intellectualise it. Job, he says, has not recognised his own sin; there must be a flaw in him somewhere. He has missed the point.

Elihu turns up and repeats the lot, with youthful self congratulation for having discovered the obvious.

Job's friends love their religion, but Job loves God; Job is willing (they are not) to give up his theology; but not to give up God. He cries out to God. God comes. He asks if Job was there when he created the earth, if Job can control the ox and deck the ostrich with wings – he replies not with rational discourse but with a poetic, visionary address. It becomes apparent that

Job's cry of injustice is effectively an attempt to impose the human notion of moral order upon God. 'Would you treat me as wicked so that you can be innocent?' God in effect asks. Mitchell, *The Book of Job*, reads thus:

Do you really want this moral sense of yours projected onto the universe? . . . Do you want a god who is only a larger version of a righteous judge? . . . If that's the kind of justice you're looking for, you'll have to create it yourself because that is not my justice.

Good question. Do we really want our own moral sense projected onto the universe? Well, that depends. What are the other choices? If the alternative is chaos, let's think about that. Chaos is symbolised by Behemoth and Leviathan, and that's where God goes next.

"Look at Behemoth:" says the Voice. "I created him, and I created your As for Leviathan, "Can you play with him like a pet sparrow?"

As Mitchell expresses it, the Voice is saying, "What is all this foolish chatter about good and evil, . . . about battles between a hero-god and some cosmic opponent? Don't you understand that there is no one else in here?" And thus the Book of Job anticipates the Christian witness. *The New Testament does not claim that suffering is an illusion or that death is a friend. Jesus' own life was marked by suffering with 'loud cries and tears:' and death is named as a very real and powerful "last enemy". At the same time, the New Testament can affirm that "in Christ all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible".* It doesn't deny the painful 'no' at work in human life, or minimise the pain; it underscores it, and then offers the death and resurrection of Jesus as the answer. So the book never does answer Job's question 'why me, Lord?'. It poses a deeper one instead: *Do we ultimately want to offer our own scheme of moral order, the very one we employ to determine that some human suffering is unjust, as a replacement for God? Do we want, in other words, to be God, or are we willing to move toward being the kind of human being who, even in the midst of inexplicable pain, trusts the One who is God?" It is a Gethsemane-sized decision.*

Job's answer, Job 42.6, is this: 'I had heard of you with my ears, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust.' He is not God; he is a human creature made of dust, living before God in a real world that no longer needs to be sustained by a fantasy. And he takes comfort in that.

So his fortunes are restored – and increased. There are differences, though. In the old world, Job's sons are centre stage; now, it's his daughters; their beauty is described, their names are shared, and they receive a share of Job's inheritance. Mitchell says it's as if once Job has learned to surrender, his world also gives up the male compulsion to control.

So we don't get an answer; there is no solution to the theodicy problem here – just an invitation to trust God.

5. Walking Through the Valley of the Shadow

Solvitur ambulando, Diogenes said when Zeno offered a false syllogism suggesting that all motion is an illusion. Many abstract problems have down to earth solutions. We can only test relationships by walking together, as we travel – not in the abstract. Many faith questions are the same; to recall Anselm, faith seeks understanding; as we walk in faith we are drawn more deeply into understanding of God.

The Parable of The Wheat and the Weeds, Matt 13.

Shall we pull up the weeds, the disciples ask? No; they will be separated at harvest time, Jesus says. Trying to pluck up evil in the world might do more harm than good, so just let it go. It will be dealt with in the fulness of time. This parable is an exercise in practical theology.

The first question is a protest – God, did you cause this? The workers ask the farmer if he gave them contaminated seed. God must be held to account; this situation is not right! The psalms are full of this kind of objection; it's legitimate.

No, says the farmer; an enemy did it. He is not the source of the problem. This too needs to be embraced; if the first response of a Christian theodicy is protest, the first word of good news is that God did not will this evil and did not cause it. This is gospel indeed: God does not plant evil in the fields of our lives and of creation. He doesn't do it to allow us free will, or to help form our souls, or to allow our sins to be punished, or because it's the best possible world; it wasn't God. An enemy did it – the devil. *'The devil is best imagined not literally, as some demonic future lurking in the shadows, but as a symbol of a deep theological truth – namely, that the evil we experience in history is more than the sum of its parts and transcends logical explanation. The horror of the Holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda, the massacre at My Lai, the cruelties of those who prey upon and kill children for sexual gratification – none of these forms of evil, or others, can be fully accounted for by political, anthropological, or psychological explanations. There is a dark spiritual force in evil as we experience it... Evil is not just a failing; it is a force.*

How then did evil get itself into creation? Four possibilities: God made the creation as a mix of good and evil; there are two creators; God started with existing materials; God created well but it went wrong after that. Only the last is an option; this is the story of the Fall.

Can we fix it, the servants ask? No, says the farmer; in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat too. Kushner said that God does not root out evil because he lacks the power. This is a miss, but a near miss; Jesus performs many deeds of power, but often in ways that do not conform to our ideas of what power is; and so do the demonic forces. Sometimes, eg Mk 6 in Nazareth, Jesus is unable to do deeds of power. At other times he chooses not to; God could have sent angels to rescue Jesus, but Jesus didn't ask it and God didn't do it. God could wipe out evil; but chooses not to – not because he lacks the power, but because rooting out evil in this way would require a different kind of God. It's not how he does things. We want to eliminate evil on specific occasions – in this cancer ward, in this war. But do we know what we ask for – do we really have an infallible handle on what evil is and who is guilty of it? And how would we do it, because every single one of us is entangled to some degree in evil, both internally in our own souls and in our relationships with others.

God does come; not as a warrior, to provide violent solutions, but as love. We think we want God to plunge into creation with a machete and slash away at evil. God is indeed all powerful, but God's power is not like raw human power but instead a love that takes the form of weakness – it's expressed on the cross. Kosuke Koyama:

The name, Jesus Christ, is not a magic name which transforms the broken world into an instant paradise. . . . The name of Jesus Christ is not a powerful name in the manner of the imperial power. It is a "foolish and weak" name (1 Cor. 1:21-20 . . . Jesus Christ is not a quick answer. If Jesus Christ is the answer, he is the answer portrayed in the crucifixion!'

Moltmann points out that when it comes to evil and suffering, we want God to perform a miracle. But the miracles of Jesus did not provide long term solutions – those he healed still died. Salvation is the annihilation of the power of death, not healing; we are healed not through Jesus's miracles, but through his wounds; not with the power of the sword but with the 'weak' power of the crucifixion.

How do we cope in the meantime? Frank Kermode:

Here it is important to keep in view the image of God as a warrior - a warrior waging love, to be sure, but a warrior nonetheless. In Christ, the God of eternity; the God who transcends past, present, and future, enters all time and redeems it. Aaron suffered in his present, which has now, for him and for us, become the past. But the present and the past are not immune from the action of the eternal God. God invades the present and the past in love, and in God's own way destroys the work and power of evil. "The Greeks . . . thought that even the gods could not change the past:" writes Frank Kermode, "but Christ did change it, rewrote it, and in a new way fulfilled it".

The God revealed in Jesus Christ enters from eternity into time, from the future into the present and the past, and makes war on every seeming conquest of evil, even the conquest of our memories.

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