

If God's so good, why so much bad?

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That's the idea on the menu tonight for us to chew over together.

Its a really big question... they don't come much bigger.

Especially because its rarely merely an intellectual question...

Its often a question often asked in the midst of pain & hardship & grief.

Its often an emotionally charged question.

Which is why I need to tread carefully tonight.

I want to throw some ideas out for us to think about together but I don't want to be insensitive to any particular suffering or sadness that you are feeling right now.

I don't want to give glib shallow answers.

In fact if I was having a personal conversation with you I would do far more listening than speaking...

and there'll be time for that later...

But I recognise the danger I'm in... and so let me apologise in advance.

And like all of our Food for thought dinners... this is just the beginning of a conversation...

its food for thought... its ideas for us to continue to discuss...

And I reckon that there are some issues & ideas that we ought to consider...

The first of which is whether or not the existence of suffering is evidence that God doesn't even exist in the first place.

1. no God?

Its a common enough suggestion.

Its not a hard argument to imagine.

If God is all powerful he'd be able to end all suffering.

If God were all loving he would want to end all suffering.

Suffering exists.

Therefore an all powerful all loving God cannot exist.

It seems a neat argument... tidy... but its got a big logical problem...

Because it ignores the real possibility that an all powerful all loving God might have a reason for allowing suffering to continue.

Suffering in the world might prompt us to ask some hard questions of God...

but it doesn't necessarily mean that an all powerful all good God cannot exist....

Its interesting that for a famous atheist... C.S.Lewis...(the author of lots of books including the Narnia Chronicles)

for C.S.Lewis it was precisely his despair at the suffering in the world that led him away from atheism & towards a faith in God...

He said that his argument against God was that the world was so cruel & unjust...

but then he wondered where he had even got the idea of just or unjust, fair & unfair...

And CS Lewis recognised that as an atheist he had no reason to complain about suffering... and yet he knew that it was wrong...

and so in the end he rejected atheism as being too simple.¹

Atheism just doesn't work... it doesn't match the way we experience reality...

it doesn't match our instincts about the way life should be...

So could it be that God is good in spite of the presence of bad?

That's the idea that I want us to explore next by looking briefly at the big message of the Bible.

Because in the Bible I think we find great hope & help....

hope & help that matches reality.... hope & help that makes sense...

When I read the Bible & consider its message...

I don't have all my questions answered... but I do find hope & help.

And I'd like to take a few moments to share with you what I mean. Firstly in terms of hope.

2. the hope found in the Bible

The Bible is very clear that the present condition of everything is not the final chapter in the story.

In fact the Bible looks forward to what it calls the new creation.

Its a future so good that it defies our imaginations...

and so whenever the Bible describes it...

it does so with imagery & poetry...

Let me give you just a brief taste of what I mean from the last book of the Bible which describes the end of suffering...

Rev. 21.3-4

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

That's the hope of the Bible.

when all the bad of this world will become untrue...

the end of suffering...

a broken & messed up creation renewed & transformed...

Every tear wiped from the eyes of the people of God by God himself...

¹ quoted in Keller p26 from Mere Christianity see also Problem of Pain

No more death.... no more mourning.. no more more crying... no more pain... for the old order of things.. the messed up order of things will have passed away.

A perfectly good harmonious peaceful eternity for people to enjoy.

If God is so good... why is there so much bad?

According to the Bible.... God is good... and he is committed to his creation.... and pain & suffering & evil & death have a very limited shelf life. There is an end to it all.

However, before we too eagerly demand that God bring all that in now... We need to be aware that in order to bring in the new creation... God must deal with the old... and he must do so with justice.

In fact immediately before the good news of that picture of the new creation...

immediately before that in the last book of the Bible is the bad news of the picture of God's justice.

Rev. 20.11-12

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened.

That's a picture of the judgement of God.

Its the answer of the Bible to everyone who has ever cried out to God for justice.

Its the answer to everyone who has ever cried out to God to act against wrongdoing.

Its the answer to everyone who has ever cried out to God to bring evil to an end.

On that final day in the future.... the living & the dead will stand before the throne of God... and the books will be opened...

If you want murderers held accountable for their crimes... you can know that God will one day punish the guilty.

If you want pedophiles held accountable for their acts of evil... you can know that God will one day punish the guilty.

If you want drunken drivers, and abusive parents, and war criminals & suicide bombers held accountable... you can know that God will one day punish the guilty.

But know this too... that God will also punish liars & gossips & greedy people & selfish people & adulterers & ...

for God's justice is not like our justice...

its perfect & complete & unbiased & all knowing & all-encompassing & you know what?...

none of us will survive it.

Because the sobering message of the Bible is that we are all guilty... all of us fall short of God's standards... all of us have rebelled against God's loving rule...
all of us have a stake in the messing up of this world...
we are each guilty.

We don't like to think of ourselves like that much do we?
But if you think about it... I think you'll agree that you even fail to live up to your own standards...
I know that I do...
Its why we get frustrated & disappointed & angry with ourselves...
And if I can't even satisfy my own standards.... what hope have I got of meeting God's?

Which all in all puts us in a very difficult position doesn't it?
We seem to know instinctively that things are not right.... we instinctively know that pain & suffering are wrong...
and we want to cry out to God to act.. to do something...
but we want his clean up campaign to stop just short of us...

- **the help**

All of which brings us to the help found in the Bible.
Because according to the Bible ...
At a particular moment in time... at a particular point in history... at a particular place on this planet....
God entered into it precisely to help us.

The eternal God, the holy God, the perfect God....
entered into this messed up world.. our messed up world.

If this world were a car accident on the road... God would not be among those looking on... God wouldn't be a spectator....
God would be rushing in to help... prepared to get dirty & bloody... risking everything to help the trapped & the wounded...
Because that is what God is like!

God entered into our messed up world to bring help.
As incredible as it seems.. and it is incredible!... in the person of the man Jesus... God took on human flesh.
God walked upon the earth.
It was seen in the authority of Jesus... it was seen in the power of Jesus... to control nature, to heal disease, to power over evil...
It was seen in the wisdom of Jesus.. in his teaching...

God experienced first hand, close up the suffering & pain of this world.
He suffered loss, he suffered grief, he suffered injustice, he suffered mockery,
he suffered pain, God suffered.
He knows what it is like to suffer.
God too has been wounded by this world.
He is well able to sympathise with us.

But more than that... God in his goodness has mercifully opened up a way for
undeserving people, guilty people to be able to enjoy the renewed pain free
new creation...

For Jesus not only entered the world... he gave up his life in this world...
he allowed himself to be killed... to be crucified...
And in his death he offered himself as a substitute... he stood in the place of
his people & bore the judgement on their sins ahead of the final judgement
day.
So that when that final judgement day rolls around...
the people of Jesus will have nothing to face themselves...
it will have all been dealt with...
the books will be opened... and there will be no condemnation found there...
and they will freely enter into that renewed pain free new creation and enjoy
life eternally.

Its an incredible truth.
Despite our guilt God makes a way possible for us to enjoy the new creation.
That is a desperately needed help for a wonderful hope.
And it does not depend on our performance.. on how good we are... on how
religious we are...
its all because of God's mercy, God's generosity, God's love.

And God's guarantee in all of this is the resurrection of Jesus.
That's what the Easter celebration is all about...
That 3 days after his saving, sin-bearing death..
Jesus was alive... and standing among his disciples declaring... Peace!

Because death is no longer final.
With the resurrection of Jesus... life has arrived...
the life of that future new creation has invaded this old one.
The resurrected Jesus, is the first fruits of the new creation.
This old creation is marked by suffering & death....
but in the resurrection of Jesus God brought new life!

The bodily resurrection of Jesus is God's guarantee, his promise, that what he
has done in Jesus, he will do for the whole of creation and for all who belong
to Jesus!

I want you to imagine some really rough stormy seas under a dark cloudy sky...
Massive thundering waves... howling winds... stinging rain...
Often life in this messed up world can seem like being caught in that stormy dangerous sea.

Now I want you to imagine in the midst of that storm & howling wind & stinging rain...
I want you to imagine a life boat floating on the stormy sea.

The life boat is help & hope isn't it?

The death & resurrection of Jesus is that life-boat.
Its the only life boat floating on the stormy seas of a world that is groaning.
And the risen Jesus invites everyone throughout the whole world to take shelter from the storm in the life-boat....
Jesus wants everyone to know that there is hope and help in suffering... there is safety from the coming day of judgement... but it can only be found by trusting in him for help... by trusting in his death in your place... that's how you shelter in the lifeboat.

Its captured in a wonderful invitation from Jesus.
He says this:-

Matt. 11:28-29

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Right back at the beginning I suggested that an all powerful all loving God might have a reason for allowing suffering & evil to continue....
and the Bible tells us that the reason is mercy... patience...
God wants to give people like us time to get into the life boat of Jesus' death & resurrection.
He wants to give you time to seek shelter.

And notice that if you do...
If you renounce trying to live your way without God... if you entrust yourself to Jesus & his loving rule...
for a time you won't escape the groaning of creation.
You will still experience suffering & grief & sadness & disease & injustice & bad.
The life boat is still tossed around by the stormy seas.
But God promises to keep you safe in this old creation and to deliver you safely into his new creation.

Friends there is much bad in this world.
But I'm convinced that God is good... he's very good.

and I invite you to keep searching out some of the wonderful Bible truths that I've tried to point you towards tonight.

To help you in that task there are some things down the front that you might like to grab ... a copy of a biography of Jesus taken from the Bible.. called the Essential Jesus... leaflets explaining the good news message at the heart of the Bible...

We run short informal courses to help people investigate the truth about about Jesus & Christianity... chat to anyone you know from evening church or me..

We're going to serve some tea & coffee now... and I reckon we ought to keep on talking about these things... from what I've been saying... what made sense?... what didn't make sense?... what resonated with you?... what didn't? Keep thinking!