

Robin McGonigle
University Congregational Church
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“Debunking Religion: Good God, Why Evil?”

Romans 8:28-37

A husband suffering with Alzheimer’s, his memory getting worse, his driver’s license taken away, his dignity shattered.

A daughter in ill health – watching as she declines, grows weaker, withers away.

A vibrant young man with a college degree, unable to find a job for months, depressed, losing hope, worrying about his future.

A single mom with 3 children. One is autistic; another has behavior problems. She works long hours and then comes home to chaos. She ages prematurely as she struggles just to survive.

A family choosing between staying at home close to friends and family or moving to a new city, new schools, new doctors, new church, the unknown.... because a company is moving the job they depend upon.

A gay couple who has lost the security of family support, afraid to share the important aspects of their lives with co-workers and neighbors because of prejudice and stigma.

A three generation family living together in a single bedroom apartment and trying to make ends meet; not knowing where the next meal will come from.

Good God, why? Why? Just last week, I sat down with a friend who hasn’t been attending church in months because her grandma died and she just can’t figure out why God allowed it to happen to the only person who ever loved her. So, she

has cut herself off from the people who want to comfort and support her the most – people who have experience with being angry at God. “Good God,” she says, “Why is there evil?” or “If God truly loves me, why did this have to happen?”

David Hume, a famous 18th century philosopher, framed the issue as succinctly as anyone: “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?”

You don’t have to be a philosopher to feel this tension. All of us experience various types of evil, whether great or small, on a regular basis. Why would a good and all-powerful God allow this? Satisfying answers do not spring readily to mind. It is therefore no surprise that the presence of evil drives many people to conclude that such a God does not exist. The logic is straightforward: “A God who is good and all-powerful cannot allow evil to exist, but evil does exist, therefore there is no good and all-powerful God.” This is a riddle theologians have named “theodicy”.

Thousands of books have been written about theodicy, so a 15 minute sermon is very limited in its scope. I have many resources on this topic, however, and would be happy to loan them to you.

Let’s start by defining what “evil” is in this context. Sometimes we use the term loosely to describe something we don’t like – brussel sprouts, for example. That’s not what we’re talking about today. We also tend to use the word to refer to something bad that happened, but that we brought upon ourselves, even unwittingly. If you exercise too much, too fast, you can hurt your back. And you might say, “Lord, why me?” But that isn’t what we’re talking about today.

We are talking about evil in a third sense: the suffering we cannot control. It may be because of the choices of others – a drunk driver who kills a friend, or

people we love who divorce one another. It can be from natural events – the earthquake in Haiti, cancer found in a loved one.

When something bad happens, people gather around with clichés said to make someone feel better – usually the person who is speaking. One of the clichés that is said is “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle.” This is NOT IN THE BIBLE. And I don’t think it is true. I’ve met several people who are dealing with more than they can handle.

Another saying that is made into a cliché is our text for today – from Romans 8. “All things work together for good” and “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 8:28-37 NRSV

We would like to believe Paul when he says this. We’d like to say that God has reasons beyond our understanding for the suffering in the world. It is somehow comforting to think that suffering has a purpose and that these things happen for

a reason. We tend to believe that God is in charge, and though we don't always understand, there is a greater plan for all the stuff that happens here.

In his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Kushner says there may be another approach. "Maybe God does not cause our suffering. Maybe it happens for some reason other than the will of God. The psalmist writes, 'I lift mine eyes to the hills; from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord.' Note that the psalmist does not say, 'My pain comes from the Lord,' or 'my tragedy comes from the Lord.' He says 'my *help* comes from the Lord'".

If we allow Psalm 121 to shine a light on Romans 8, we realize that what the apostle Paul is saying is that God brings us into a family where Jesus is the big brother. And each person in this large family is valued, understood, and praised. When we are in a family like that, we can weather the storms of life surrounded by love. "If God is for us, who is against us?" It makes the painful, unbearable parts of life better knowing that God is with us. And Paul says there is a safety net around us so that the family of God can hold us close when things are terrible.

So, does the problem of evil – or bad things happening to good people – prove that there is no good and all-powerful God? Some people say that suffering can be explained by "free will". C.S. Lewis responds to the free will argument this way in his book *The Problem of Pain*:

"We can, perhaps, conceive of a world in which God corrected the results of this abuse of free will by His creatures at every moment: so that a wooden beam became soft as grass when it was used as a weapon, and the air refused to obey me if I attempted to set up in it the sound waves that carry lies or insults. But such a world would be one in which wrong actions were impossible, and in which, therefore, freedom of the will would be void; nay, if the principle were carried out to its logical conclusion, evil thoughts would be impossible, for the cerebral matter which we use in thinking would refuse its task when we attempted to frame them."

Some people say that suffering is necessary for spiritual growth and have even used our text today to add credence to the argument. "All things work together

for good..." The problem with this argument is that many evils do not seem to promote this, such as the suffering of young, innocent children. And others enjoy lives of luxury where there is virtually nothing that challenges them to undergo moral growth.

Kushner answers the problem with these words, "I believe in God... but I recognize God's limitations. I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I blame God for those things. I remember seeing a bumper sticker that read 'My God is not dead; sorry about yours.' I guess my bumper sticker reads 'My God is not cruel; sorry about yours.'"

Paul would say, God creates this family with Jesus as the big brother and all of us as siblings. This family is our safety net when life presents us with too much.

The husband still has Alzheimer's but he enjoys coming to church. His wife comes too, and is surrounded by the love and nurture of God with human face.

The daughter declines, grows weaker, withers away with her parents waiting and praying. The church brings meals, celebrates her life, listens lovingly to grief, and tells her stories long after she is gone.

The vibrant young man still looks for a job, but finds enough hope to get by on when he worships with his friends, and they pray for him.

A single mom and her children find friends who live in similar worlds. They take turns staying strong for one another.

A gay couple finds acceptance and love among friends in the church and learn again how to consider themselves loved by God.

Or, in the words of Eugene O'Neill, "Man is broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue."