

About a month ago I stumbled onto an image online while searching for something completely different. It was the Greek philosopher Epicurus. He's even printed on T-shirts you can buy. It had his famous quote, called the Epicurean paradox: "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then where does evil come from? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?" Underneath the tag-line stood out in even bigger letters: "Atheists ... winning since 300 B.C."

The question about the origin of evil is one of the oldest in the book. If God were powerful and loving at the same time, he would stop evil and suffering. The Bible's all-powerful, all-loving God simply can't exist. You Christians can't have it both ways. Even if he somehow is both, why should I trust God? Why should I trust him to always bring some sort of vague good out of suffering?

This is not just one of the oldest objections; it's the most personal. It's personal for our society. Where was God on 9/11? Where was God when Superstorm Sandy or Hurricane Katrina hit? Where is God when every day disasters hit around the world that don't even make our news? It's personal for each individual. Why me? Why now? Why did this happen if I have served God so well? Why did God let me see my loved one dying in the hospital? Trite platitudes don't help. Even if they're meant well, they hardly bring any relief once you're actually in the depths of suffering. "It will all work out." "God has a plan for your life." "Just trust him." Easy to say, almost impossible to do. Even harder to accept or understand. In our suffering, not only the skeptic but even the strong believer cries out, **"Where's God when I'm hurting?"**

There is an easy answer to that question. "God's not there. In fact, he's nowhere to be found. He doesn't exist." This is the very reason to drift from God. Many have. Many have discovered in the lowest parts of their lives that even if God does exist, he's not the kind of God I want. Then we're left with, "Where's atheism when I'm hurting?" The problem is that it doesn't answer the question any better. It doesn't take away suffering. It doesn't deal with suffering except by saying it's a fateful part of reality. You mind as well accept it.

In this common objection that rejects faith, there is a huge idolatrous assumption working behind the scenes. Since we can be perfectly skeptical wondering if God even exists because of evil, that begs the question: how did you determine what is good and evil in this world? Ultimately we're left with: I did. Because God's actions don't fit the bill of what I consider to be good and right, I must be skeptical of his existence and intentions in my life. Why then do we still have this sense that suffering is what makes this world fundamentally wrong, if suffering and pain is necessary for "the survival of the fittest?" Maybe we're missing the bigger issue: if we're angry at God for being so great that he should be able to stop suffering, might we also just have a God who's great enough to bring us good in a way we never could even imagine?

Another easy answer to that question: "God's getting back at you." Today virtually everyone assumes good people deserve a good life. If you don't have one, you must have done something wrong. God's using this to bring you back from your wandering ways. This is the common assumption throughout the whole book of Job. The problem? It doesn't understand the context or purpose of this chapter. Job is described as **"blameless and upright."** **"He feared God and shunned evil."** He went above and beyond what was required of him; he even offered

sacrifices for his kids just in case they had a bad thought he didn't know about. ***“There was no one on earth like him.”*** The conversation between God and Satan shows this suffering happened to Job precisely because he was *not* straying from God.

Another easy answer to that question: “God’s distant and doesn’t care.” Ever since the ancient Greeks like Epicurus, many want God to be present, but non-personal and non-active. He sits on his couch in heaven without a care or concern about what happens in your life. If God didn’t care, why would he even be talking to Satan about Job in the first place? Why did he tell Satan not to touch Job or his health? Why did he come back to speak with Job at the end of this book? Even though many want to view suffering this way, behind this is the belief that love must be defined as the removal of suffering and pain. A careful look at this chapter shows all this happened because God had a great concern for Job.

Another easy answer to that question: “God’s not in control.” To make it easier we often hear, “God merely *allows* suffering. Satan’s really in charge. He’s the one who brought this on Job.” How can Job then respond at the beginning of his suffering, ***“The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.”***? How can the whole story of Job end this way: ***“All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the LORD had brought on him.”***? This is one of the most difficult ideas to understand, perhaps the bitterest pill to swallow. God was in complete control. Satan was just a dog on a chain who could only go as far as God let him. Let me be very clear. God does not send evil your way. He does not send sin your way. He does not send temptation your way. These are only the work of the devil. God is perfect and wants to have nothing to do with any of them. God does, however, send discipline your way. God does send crosses your way. Yes, as hard as it is, God even sends suffering your way. As a loving Father, he is in control and he does care. Just like when parents have to discipline their children and give them tough love, he says, “It hurts me more than it hurts you.”

I know many of you are still wondering, “Where is God when I’m hurting – even when my life doesn’t turn out like Joseph’s or Job’s and God brings good out of bad? Where is God when there is no silver lining to take away? Where is God when there is chronic, inexplicable suffering – for no reason at all!” All those previous easy answers don’t do it. We need something more. Where is God when I’m hurting? He is hanging on a cross ... suffering. He is spitting out the wine vinegar shoved in his face by the Roman soldiers intended to dull the pain, just so he can suffer *even more*. He is choosing to drink the cup of suffering he asked his Father to take from him – to the last drop – because your salvation was too important to him to go through it thinking only of himself. He is in the depths of suffering so much that he asks the question, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He is described as “despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.” He is one whom the prophet cannot help but say, “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering.” He is sent here for one purpose: to suffer. There at the cross of Christ you see God connected as close as possible to our suffering world. There you see God who willingly gave up his perfect home completely lacking suffering to enter into this world defined by suffering. There you see God himself who wants, even delights, to suffer alongside humankind. There you see God’s loving heart who won your salvation through suffering. There you see a God to whom you can never cry out, “What do you know about suffering?” He simply says, “Everything.”

Receive suffering as something which comes from God’s loving hand! Receive suffering as something which is a daily reminder that we must all rely on him in an ever-changing world. Praise his name even when he takes gifts away! Praise him when he takes your bonuses or full-

time status away at work. Praise him when he takes away your employment and financial security. Praise him when he takes away your loved ones in death.

Almost four centuries ago, a young boy left his small hometown to attend school 50 miles away. While he's there, the school almost closes because of the plague threatening Europe. He still manages to graduate and quickly attends the university in the hopes of being a pastor. After graduation, his dream is crushed. The Thirty Years War, one of the worst in European history, is ravaging the land. He has to wait nine years before he finally could be a pastor. Six years later, after moving again, the government, weary of religious division, starts to persecute anyone who wouldn't compromise and just get along. Lutheran professors are removed from their positions. The government then passes an edict forcing compromise. He's removed from his position as pastor two years later, since he refuses. In the next year of unemployment, his wife dies, leaving him only one surviving child. He already had the painful experience of a father burying his child – four times. His other children had all died in childhood.

That man was Paul Gerhardt. He wrote a hymn about his life defined by suffering: "*Why should cross and trial grieve me? Christ is near, with his cheer; never will he leave me. Who can rob me of the heaven that God's Son for me won, when his life was given?*" Paul Gerhardt knew that Christ suffering on the cross was the only answer, the only comfort, for this great question of faith. In your suffering, see a Savior suffering. In your suffering, see a Savior who is near. In your suffering, see a Savior who will never let anyone rob you of heaven. Amen.