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God's Sovereignty Amidst Evil

A Defense of the Complex Good of The Christian God

With Reference to C.S. Lewis

A Senior Honors Thesis

By Sawyer Cole Lake '20

Swarthmore College

The Department of Religion

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Preface

If you told me when I was a freshman at Swarthmore College that I would write a senior honors thesis over 20 pages, I would have told you that you had mistaken me for the wrong person. As a freshman, I had very few things I was certain of; but, I *knew* I was not graduating with honors. I barely got into Swarthmore! Given I knew good and well that I hardly got in, there was no way anyone was going to convince me to join the honors program. However, after two years into my undergraduate experience, Professor Mark Wallace of the Religion Department convinced me otherwise. Although he gave me a “C-” on my first college paper, Professor Wallace did not give up on my academic prospects. It took until the spring of my junior year for me to receive my first “A” on a paper in Wallace’s class, and *this* was the inception of my thesis-writing journey. The paper was for my Postmodern Religious Thought seminar after reading C.S. Lewis’ book, *The Problem of Pain*. Despite being a relatively slow reader, I devoured the book in a couple of days and wrote what I thought was the best paper I had ever written. I am somewhat convinced, even if I had gotten a horrendous grade on that paper, I still would have chosen the topic for my thesis. Lewis’ book inspired me greatly, and I enjoyed writing a lot about it.

As the title of my thesis suggests, I am a Christian. I grew up in a Christian household where my family attended church most Sundays; yet, it was not until the later years of high school when I began to critically consider what I believed. It was not a crisis of faith, but rather an external investigation of Christianity and an introspective inquiry into my own life that left me entering college with a deep sense that I had renewed my vows unto the God of the Bible. My love for God has deepened throughout my time at Swarthmore, and I cannot help but write about His goodness.

In my thesis, I seek to bring light to a weighty topic. The entirety of my project has been dedicated to defending the Christian God, the One and only True God, amidst the perennial provocations from antagonists of the faith. With a targeted focus, I attempt to address a variety of ideas related to God's sovereign goodness despite the existence of evil. I believe this is one of the most difficult topics to address, as no one will be spared hardship or death.

There have been nearly two millennia worth of Christian theological discourse that have addressed the puzzling existence of evil. With this in mind, I did not set out to write with any intention of developing a new theological idea. So, if you were expecting that, I would still kindly implore you to keep reading! If I were to write anything *new*, I'm afraid I'd fall far closer to the heretics than the faithful stewards of the Truth who have gone before me.

Ironically, as I write these very words, our world is suffering from a global pandemic. Times like these often lead people to question, if God exists, why would He allow something like this to happen? I hope this project clearly answers that question, while affirming the goodness and sovereignty of the Almighty God. Although the current hardships brought about by COVID-19 virus are as pressing as ever, there have always been cyclical and non-cyclical evils that have plagued the earth from the beginning of time—wars, famines, hurricanes, broken relationships, tornados, tsunamis, earthquakes, to name a few. It is as crucial as ever for Christians to declare the Truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even amidst severe pestilence, the power of God is not lessened by the evils of the world. In Jesus Christ, there is abundant hope.

One Sunday, I heard a pastor say something that struck my heart like no sermon had before. He said that Christians are called to “Preach the Gospel, die, and be forgotten.” If this writing project succeeds at anything at all, I hope that it faithfully testifies to the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

while affirming the goodness and sovereignty of God amidst the world's evils. You may not remember my name; but that's alright, I hope you remember Jesus'.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Thesis Overview

Despite the great strides humans have taken to eliminate suffering from the world, humanity has never seen an end to its oppressive power. No one is a stranger to the discomfort life naturally ushers in, but how can one make sense of perceived, perennial evil? The answer, according to the great Christian thinker C.S. Lewis, is trusting in the *complex good* of God. Lewis addresses, in apologetic fashion, theodicy¹ in his seminal work, *The Problem of Pain*. He confronts many objections to the Christian faith by addressing the horrors of life while attempting to understand the nature of God. This idea of faith in the complexity of God's goodness will be explored more directly, later in the thesis. Although many have written on the topic, the focus of this work is to illuminate the reality of God's goodness by primarily looking at the theological framework of Lewis on the existence of evil, while engaging a variety of other works. The hope for everyone who reads this is that they, too, would understand the tangible hope God offers through Jesus Christ amidst the presence of cyclical, soul-crushing catastrophe.

¹ Defense of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil (*Merriam-Webster*).

In the introduction to *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis sets out to address the issue evil poses by acknowledging a dialectic.² The tension of conflicting notions poses a seemingly intractable trilemma: the Christian faith posits an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and entirely-good God, *yet* evil exists. Lewis highlights this quandary by raising the following question: “If the universe is so bad, or even half so bad, how on earth did human beings ever come to attribute it to the activity of a wise and good Creator?”³ The contradiction, at least at first glance, is clear: how could evil be a derivative of a supposedly all-good Being? Why would God, if He were all-good and all-powerful, not eliminate suffering and evil? With this, Lewis identifies the existing tension between the two observations raised in the dialectic. The two seemingly oppositional premises are linked, for Lewis, by the endowment of free will to human beings. Although free will is understood to be a good gift, having free will means having the ability to choose, and the act of choosing deductively concludes that there must be a variety or at least two different things to choose from.

“Again, the freedom of a creature must mean the freedom to choose: and choice implies the existence of things to choose between. A creature with no environment would have no choices to make: so that freedom, like self-consciousness (if they are not, indeed, the same thing), again demands the presence of the self of something other than the self.”⁴

The language of his argument is important. Lewis asserts that freedom necessarily incorporates the ability to choose. He is not concerned with understanding whether the endowed gift comes

² Any systematic reasoning, exposition, or argument that juxtaposes opposed or contradictory ideas and usually seeks to resolve their conflict : a method of examining and discussing opposing ideas in order to find the truth (*Merriam-Webster*).

³ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 3.

⁴ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 20.

arbitrarily from the will of God; Lewis simply maintains that free will is undoubtedly the very reality of God's gift to human beings. God, biblically understood, is a Being with the ability to choose, and by having this ability, He has imparted this nature to other creatures who now share this freedom, although not to the same degree as God's freedom (e.g. God is omnipotent, humans are not). The freedom of choice is where the danger arises. I am not saying there is an inherent fault with God's gift; there is no issue with the gift. However, free will gives humans the ability to choose or reject God, to obey or disobey. This is a fundamental attribute of humanity.

Adding to the understanding of free will, Lewis addresses many hypotheticals people concoct to question the intentions and good nature of God. In his first chapter on divine omnipotence, the emphasis is placed on reality as opposed to non-reality. Lewis does not use this exact wording, but he suggests that one must be careful postulating when it pertains to the decisions and intentionality of God because, as created beings, there is an inherent difference in wisdom and perspective. Lewis addresses our humanity and then goes on to point out the semantics of the many questions posed toward God.

“You may attribute miracles to Him, but not nonsense. This is no limit to His power. If you choose to say ‘God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold that free will from it’, you have not succeeded in *anything* about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words ‘God can’. It remains true that all *things* are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities...nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.”⁵

The focus, for Lewis, is the *real* established by God. A questioner may ask: “If God cannot commit an evil act, can God not do all things?” A proper response, along Lewis' line of thought, would be that the idea is nonsensical. It would be like asking God to draw a square circle. The questioner is

⁵ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 18.

trying to expose a perceived limitation, whereas Lewis would characterize a square circle as a nonentity. Because a square circle does not exist, the questioner merely verbalizes nonsensical, abstract ideas that are in no way *real*, thus wholly irrelevant when attributing them to the capacities and character of God.

Later in the thesis, I will further address the real problem abstract alternatives pose to the coherency of arguing against the goodness of God.

When thinking about the idea of a creator and a created being, an example that seems fitting is a relationship between parents and children. This, very much so, mirrors the joyful, loving, creative will of God, in that He wants to share His love with other beings. Lewis states that “Love, by definition, seeks to enjoy its object.”⁶ As it often is, children may rebel against their parents. Despite knowing the potential for evil they may experience from their child, parents still conceive knowing there, too, is potential for great love. The example captures the similarity between an earthly parent and God by acknowledging a being who exists before another, and the pre-existing being desiring to share love with another (a person, in this case), not necessarily out of selfish motives but so that they both may delight in the love that exists between the two. Although some parents conceive with not-so-pure intentions, Lewis clarifies how the term “selfish” is not proper or fitting when referring to the character of God.

“God is Goodness. He can give good, but cannot need or get it. In that sense all His love is, as it were, bottomlessly selfless by very definition; it has everything to give and nothing to receive.”⁷

⁶ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 149.

⁷ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 43.

Lewis' understanding of God as needless precludes attributing selfishness to God. God has nothing to gain; He seeks to give what He has by giving life to created beings. With this, the endowment of free will to humans is not only important to the proliferation of love-filled relationships, it's necessary. Love flourishes in choice; coercion kills it. If God were a tyrant, He would (or should, in theory) kill all beings who rebel against Him, and there would be no opposition to His will, *yet* He has not. He allows for individuals to rebel, giving them the dignity of choice, even if it results in a life rejecting the Giver of life. They can disregard the bodies *He* crafted for them with *His* dust, and the breath *He* gave to them from *His* mouth.⁸ God gives each individual the freedom of choice, and unfortunately, the reality is that many choose a life apart from Him.

In addition to this, another important part of understanding Lewis' theology is understanding the nature of the self. Lewis does not approach theodicy merely from a theological standpoint. In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis recounts his acute grief following the death of his wife. Despite his theological prowess and fervor for God, her death left him heartbroken and greatly disturbed. Lewis grapples with the weight of loss and poignantly processes his loneliness amidst Joy's absence. In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis addresses a common cry of the human heart when depression and suffering invade the mind and call into question the will to live.

“Some comparison between one state of being and another can be made, but the attempt to compare being and not being ends in mere words. ‘It would be better for me not to exist’—in what sense ‘for me’? How should I, if I did not exist, profit by not existing?”⁹

⁸ Genesis 2:7.

⁹ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 27.

The proposition, despite coming from a place of genuine heartache, is nonsensical. The self cannot profit without itself. Although Lewis is not attempting to curtly dismiss painful pleas, he rebukes the validity of such a statement by exposing its logical incoherence.

Additionally, Lewis emphasizes the difference between the wisdom of a creator and the wisdom of a created being. By understanding this discrepancy, one can grasp the profound difference in wisdom, which can ultimately lead to a proper posture of deference towards God. In *The Problem of Pain*, the opening of Lewis' chapter on divine goodness underscores that if God is wiser than humans, His view of good and evil may be slightly than what we might expect.¹⁰ This does not mean that good and evil are not clearly outlined in the Bible for humankind's understanding, but rather what one might perceive as solely evil may be redeemed by God, in His great wisdom and power, to achieve a proper, *good*, non-evil end. Again, this does not suggest that God creates and wields the forces of evil to somehow "do good." However, this does capture God's ability to take the evil and the brokenness of the world to accomplish His good purposes.

I hope that these ideas have preliminarily contextualized the main body of what will come in subsequent sections. As the subtitle and introductory chapter have made clear, the guiding theologian of this thesis is the atheist-turned-Christian, C.S. Lewis. In reference to Lewis throughout my thesis, I work with the assumption that the ways of God are higher than the ways of humankind. However, it would be foolish to use this statement as a simple cop-out to try and avoid addressing convoluted theological matters. With this in mind, it is still necessary to note that failure to acknowledge the grand difference in wisdom between God and His created beings would conceive a fundamentally fallacious attempt at understanding the nature of theodicy. With this

¹⁰ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 28.

said, the central argument is that there are rational grounds to believe in the Christian God, despite the existence of evil and suffering. To achieve this end, my work incorporates illuminating valuable contributions many have made to this discussion already, by looking at a variety of nuanced discourses from philosophers, theologians, and pastors.

Chapter 2

Wait--Evil with an All-Good Creator?

Theodicy arises in response to the existence of evil. It is a defense of God's goodness and providential power, despite the existence of evil and abject suffering. To better understand theodicy, it is proper to start with the indictment that demands it. This chapter will assess two important objections to Christianity (and theism in general) from an atheistic standpoint based upon the existence of evil.

-The Indictment Against the Christian God-

A common theme among the accusations is the insistence that evil and the Christian God are mutually exclusive. For many atheists, they find it a contradiction to say that both exist. What follows is the layout of a famous argument that calls into question the existence of the Christian God based on evil's existence.

For 20th-century Australian philosopher J.L. Mackie, the existence of evil poses a troubling trilemma for Christians. The three constitutive premises of the trilemma are: God is all-good; God is omnipotent; and, evil exists. Mackie highlights this idea in his essay, "Evil and Omnipotence."¹¹ Following the outline of the trilemma, Mackie puts more definitive terminology ("additional principles") in place to rid all ambiguity.

"These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent

¹¹ Mackie, J. L. "Evil And Omnipotence," 200–212.

thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible.”

Since the Christian God is understood to be wholly good and omnipotent, Mackie’s trilemma indicts Christianity based on evil’s existence.

Mackie, anticipating counterarguments, suggests several ways a person could respond to the trilemma rationally. However, he does not suspect that any Christian would endorse his perceived ways out of the trilemma. Mackie outlines what he thinks would be the responses of Christians and theists; nevertheless, Mackie attempts to expose perceived errors of the counterarguments that seem plausible to Christians and theists, *prima facie* (at first glance). If one concedes that God is, in fact, *not* good or *not* omnipotent, the trilemma disappears. This is to say that God would not eliminate evil in the world because He is not truly good, or it would mean God cannot eliminate evil in the world because He is not truly omnipotent. Both ways out of the trilemma contradict doctrinally sound readings of the Bible and are not faithful ways of responding to the existence of evil.

Additionally, Mackie suggests two other ways of rationally circumventing evil’s existence. One option is to deny the existence of evil. Of course, evil is inherent to the Christian worldview, so denying the existence of evil is certainly not a proper response for the Christian. The other option Mackie suggests is that maybe the goodness of God is not opposed to the kind of evil that exists in the world. This, again, is not true at face value, according to Christian doctrine, and it would take a great investment of time to cite all of the biblical passages that express God’s repugnance and heartbreak towards the evil that exists in the world. However, as I will explore later in this thesis, the last option posed by Mackie may fit into a Christian response to the trilemma.

-Responding to Mackie's Trilemma-

Although Mackie's trilemma serves as a cogent argument against the existence of God, his argument deals with only three premises, while neglecting the full nature and character of God. My response to the proposed evidence against the existence of God by Mackie is one that focuses less on the logical consistency and more on the overall soundness of his argument. Mackie simply does not consider the quintessential attributes of God to persuasively offer an indictment against God.

The issue evil poses to the Christian faith is confronted head-on in *Why Suffering?*, a book co-authored by Christian apologists Ravi Zacharias and Vince Vitale. Zacharias addresses the problem in the first chapter with specific reference to the often-cited trilemma seen in Mackie's argument.

“What if we interject just one more assertion into consideration that the Christian faith *also* makes—that ‘God is all-wise’? Is this really more of a *quadrilemma* than a trilemma? God is all-powerful, all-loving, and all-wise...and evil exists. Maybe even a *quintilemma*? God is all-powerful, all-loving, all-wise, and *eternal*...and evil exists in *time*.”¹²

With this, Zacharias highlights the lack of a holistic approach to the “problem of evil” by those who merely see the problem as a trilemma, like Mackie. If someone is to aptly critique the Christian faith, they ought to at least consider *all* of the characteristics attributed to God, as opposed to picking two and pointing an angry finger towards God without taking into account all His divine attributes traditionally used to describe His nature and personality throughout scripture.

By adding a biblical axiom to the trilemma, the severity of the indictment is lessened, if not rendered entirely irrelevant. When Zacharias brings to the trilemma another assertion found in

¹² Zacharias, Ravi, and Vince Vitale. *Why Suffering?*, 9.

the Bible, God is rendered all-wise, the nature of the indictment dramatically changes. It would be one thing to say, like Mackie, God is good and all-powerful; yet evil exists. If we are left with these three premises, it is no wonder that we would fairly critique God by calling into question His goodness, His omnipotence, or even His existence. The fundamental fallacy of Mackie's argument is its inability to address God's wisdom and His eternal nature. The wisdom and eternality of God are of equal importance to His omnipotence and benevolence, yet they are entirely ignored by Mackie. There is no hierarchy of traits; all of God's characteristics must be taken into account because they constitute the whole of who God is. To not take into account the whole of His divinity is to not see the biblical picture of God with clarity.

Having said this, I will now provide a further explanation of the insufficiency of Mackie's argument. I have already deemed his argument flawed by not taking into account the wisdom and eternal nature of God, but I will unpack this idea further. Ravi Zacharias exposes a fundamental flaw in Mackie's philosophical equation by correctly observing that his trilemma fails to factor the complete nature of God. Thus, Zacharias adds the following assertions to more fully capture the character of God: God is all-wise and God is eternal. His proposed premises come from the same place Mackie took his premises, the Bible. If someone plans on attacking the God of the Bible, it would be myopic to take three premises from the Bible and establish an argument based on such limited insight. Ultimately, to call into question the God of the Bible, as Mackie does, while ignoring key biblical truths, makes for an unsound argument. Now, let us turn to another atheistic argument against the existence of God.

-Alternative Argument from Atheism-

American philosopher William L. Rowe penned an essay in 1979 from the perspective of “friendly atheism,” as he called it, where he expounded upon the rational grounds of atheistic belief, and the problems involved for theists when acknowledging the existence of intense evil and suffering.¹³ A key part of Rowe’s conclusion is that there are still rational grounds for people to believe in God. This is part of what leads him to call his brand of atheism, “friendly atheism.” However, Rowe still lays out what he finds to be a convincing comparative argument that suggests there are better grounds for the atheist than the theist. For now, I will present Rowe’s argument, and then I will provide a rebuttal.

Rowe’s famous essay, titled “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” thoughtfully shares a defense for atheism based on evil’s existence. The famous example he shares in his essay paints a picture of abject, *seemingly*-meaningless suffering.

“Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. So far as we can see, the fawn's intense suffering is pointless. For there does not appear to be any greater good such that the prevention of the fawn's suffering would require either the loss of that good or the occurrence of an evil equally bad or worse. Nor does there seem to be any equally bad or worse evil so connected to the fawn's suffering that it would have had to occur had the fawn's suffering been prevented. Could an omnipotent, omniscient being have prevented the fawn's apparently pointless suffering?”¹⁴

For Rowe, the answer is *yes*. Similar to Mackie’s argument, if God could not have prevented this suffering, He would not truly be omnipotent, or He would surely not be good. The imagery is unsettling and evokes emotion; yet, the agony of intense suffering set forth by Rowe is not a false

¹³ Rowe, William L. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 335–341.

¹⁴ Rowe, 337.

representation of things that take place on an everyday basis in the world. Following the conclusion that this form of suffering is, in fact, preventable without sacrificing a greater good or provoking some greater evil, he concludes that this first premise is *true*. Although Rowe concludes that the premise is true, he does concede to lacking proof.¹⁵ Because one cannot know that the fawn's suffering would not lead to a greater good or prevent a greater evil, it would be fallacious to attribute the conclusion of the first premise as a proof against the existence of God. Rowe suggests that only omniscience would give us the capacity to establish the first premise as a proof; yet, since no human is omniscient, we cannot say with certainty that we have ruled out *all* possibilities and reasons why the fawn's suffering would not be pointless.

After conceding a lack of proof, Rowe further develops his argument by guiding the reader to question the strength of both sides of the argument so that they may judge the case for themselves. Ultimately, Rowe posits that it is far more plausible to believe there are instances of suffering *not* tied to a greater good or prevention of greater evil than it is likely that all instances of suffering and pain are linked to setting up instances of greater good or preventing the proliferation of greater evils. With this, the argument suggests that it is more rational to believe in the non-existence of God rather than to hold the belief that God exists. In other words, Rowe is more convinced by the grounds for atheism rather than theism when taking into account the evil, yet he acknowledges the ability for theists to rationally believe in God. This non-oblitative form of interacting with contrary systems of thought is where Rowe coins his worldview "friendly atheism."

¹⁵ Rowe, 337.

-Responding to Rowe's Atheistic Rationale-

The formation of William Rowe's argument is very similar to that of J.L. Mackie's. Both arguments sustain a clear flow of logic, yet, their arguments do not take into account fundamental biblical axioms, despite their earnest pursuit to find an inconsistency with the God of the Bible. To illustrate my point, I will begin with an analogy involving a man looking through the back window of a large airplane.

It's the middle of the 20th century, and there is a gentleman who has never been on an airplane. His friend, who happens to be a pilot, takes him out to an airport to show him one of the planes he flies. The pilot, without giving his friend any information about what's inside the plane or the function of certain parts, asks him to look through a window, which happens to be one towards the back. The novice looks through the back window and sees a lot of boxes without labels and a variety of compartments with different numbers. He turns to his friend and exclaims, "Ahhh, it is a cargo plane!" Although this man has good reason to believe the plane is a cargo plane based on his look through the window, he has not observed the entirety of the plane. Now, his pilot friend would only have to show him another window, perhaps towards the front of the plane, to confound his previous notion. His conclusion based on the evidence was reasonable and even rational, but if he were to look through the rest of the windows, he would see a multitude of seats on the plane. It, in fact, was not a cargo plane; it was a plane built to carry people! The back window only allowed for him to see the flight attendants' section of the plane with various packages and compartments containing food and drink. Ultimately, the conclusion he came to was a false one because *he only considered his look through one window*, and upon seeing others of the same size and shape running down the rest of the plane, he concluded that it was a plane dedicated to the shipment of cargo.

I share this example to highlight the nature of Rowe's mistake. To only consider fragments of Christianity when seeking to show the contradiction of axiomatic assertions in Christian scripture is to make a mistake. Rowe ignores existent Christian doctrine and discourse. If Rowe desires to throw out Christianity as a whole, why not weigh *all* biblical truths that help form the totality of Christian thought? An argument that merely picks and chooses parts of an opponent's claims, while ignoring the other, equally important claims inherently linked to the others, is bound to be fallacious and deeply problematic.

It is essential to look through the other windows of the plane to understand the nature and purpose of the plane. By only looking through one window, it is easy to come to a conclusion that crumbles with the knowledge of the other parts of the plane. By the same rationale, when opposing a particular worldview—or any argument at all—one should seek to understand the whole before making assertions based on incomplete information.

The techniques of both atheist philosophers fail to differentiate between logic and reasoning, according to Zacharias.¹⁶ The problem has to do with the foundations that led to the logical analysis, not the validity of the logic itself.

“Worldviews must be put through the sieve of our reasoning process to examine if we have done justice to the facts and to the logic or have merely forced conclusions from them that amputate other realities.”¹⁷

As I have mentioned previously, the “other realities” are namely: God's wisdom and His eternal nature. The following section seeks to unpack the importance of these features, as they reveal the overarching issue with the responses provided by Rowe and Mackie.

¹⁶ Zacharias and Vitale, 14.

¹⁷ Zacharias and Vitale, 15.

-The Whole Picture Matters-

I have asserted that it is essential to be cognizant of all God's characteristics, according to the Christian tradition, when attempting to disprove the existence of the Christian God, and now I will explain why ignoring certain characteristics of God—as Mackie and Rowe do—matters. Could God have a reason we are not aware of to allow for evil's presence?

In Scripture, God's understanding surpasses what could be fathomed by human beings. His omniscience is not arbitrarily ascribed to him by modern-day Christians; it is, rather, biblically grounded.

“Great is our Lord and mighty in power;
his understanding has no limit.”¹⁸

In another biblical passage, God is said to know even the number of hairs on each person's head.¹⁹ How do we compare the knowledge of an all-knowing God to the knowledge of a finite, created being? As created beings, we ought to perform such a comparison with humility and reverence in the light of who God is and who we are. However, comparing that which is infinite to that which is finite should leave us speechless. In the prophetic book of Isaiah, God succinctly asserts this dichotomy between the ability of the infinite God versus the ability of finite creatures.

“‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,’
declares the LORD.”²⁰

The definitive features of humankind are distinctly different from those of God. Thus, there is a profound contrast between the knowledge of humankind and the knowledge of God. After

¹⁸ Psalms 147:5. All verses are New International Version (NIV), unless noted otherwise.

¹⁹ Matthew 10:30.

²⁰ Isaiah 55:8.

acknowledging the wisdom of God, it would make sense that He should be able to at least convey some reason *why* He allows for evil and suffering to exist—if not flourish—on earth. This desire to know the intentions of God seems reasonable at first glance, but there are a plethora of other questions we could ask God, while we currently do not have the answers. Why are we so dogmatic about having the answer to this query? In *Why Suffering?*, Vince Vitale draws on an analogy to reveal a greater truth about God’s relationship with His created beings.

“When my brother Jay takes his cat Sonny to the vet, Sonny doesn’t understand why Jay needs to allow her to suffer the pain of the needle. And when Jay sits down on the couch and tries to explain to her that this suffering is important so that she won’t get a terrible disease, Jay doesn’t get very far. This is not because of some lack of ability on my brother’s part. It’s not because he’s not a good enough communicator. Sonny simply isn’t the sort of being that can comprehend why Jay does many of the things he does. Sonny’s ability to understand is limited with respect to the being that is caring for her...Our ways are higher than Sonny’s ways. Why, then, should we be surprised when God’s ways are higher than our ways? Why should we be surprised if fully understanding God’s ways requires capacities that—at least for now—finite creatures like us do not possess.”²¹

By understanding our nature in comparison to that of God’s, we are forced to acknowledge the disparity. There are just simply some things we do not understand and cannot understand. In an age of overwhelming access to answers, we have become increasingly unsettled when we cannot find an answer to a question we have. Perhaps the increasing number of those who suffer from anxiety is symptomatic of this reality. We have become profoundly uncomfortable with the unknown. So uncomfortable that we have pursued the subject (God) behind the unknown object (the answer as to why there is evil), with an ultimatum that demands an answer. If a satisfactory human answer is not received, we abandon the subject (God) altogether. By doing this, we neglect God’s wisdom imparted in the book of Proverbs.

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart

²¹ Zacharias and Vitale, 193.

and lean not on your own understanding.”²²

We rely on our knowledge and forget the relational quality our Creator invites us into, namely, trust.

In Rowe’s essay on the existence of evil and variations in atheism, he asserts in his second premise that “an omniscient, wholly good being *would* prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.”²³ Because Rowe asserts in the first premise that there are instances of suffering God could have prevented if He were truly good and omniscient, he concludes that an omniscient, wholly good God does not exist. What I would like to point out is Rowe’s use of the word “*would*” in the second premise of his argument, provided above. To suggest God *would* behave a certain way or *ought* to act a certain way based on how He is understood in the Bible, is a reasonable assumption. However, his argument could be simply stated as: I do not see what good could come out of that bad situation, therefore God does not exist, given the Christian understanding of God. This is problematic. The foundation of Rowe’s argument leans on his own understanding, while not considering the possibility that an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God may see a situation differently than a finite, created being. Even when the situation seems utterly incomprehensible to the created being, as Rowe’s suffering fawn demonstrates, God has already declared through the prophet Isaiah that His thoughts are not our thoughts and that His ways are not our ways. What part of that are we slow to understand? Of course, God has given us logic and sensory capacities to understand and process information. We

²² Proverbs 3:5.

²³ Rowe, 369.

are truth-sensing beings by our very nature. This is characteristic of humanity, yet it is erroneous to equate the wisdom of God to the wisdom of man. As Vitale writes, “It should give us serious pause if we assume that God can have good reasons for something only if we know what those reasons are.”²⁴ Rowe’s argument is founded upon this very error, an error he cannot commit if his refutation of God’s existence is to have good standing.

The purpose of both atheistic arguments serves to enlighten the reader with the rational case for atheism, while undermining the Christian position, and more generally, the theistic position. My point is that for both Mackie and Rowe, it is incumbent upon them to work within the framework of traditional Christian belief insofar as their arguments are intended to refute the biblical idea of God. Their failure to do so jeopardizes the validity of their respective criticisms because it does not fully acknowledge the nature of the biblical, Christian God, thus arguing against a form of pseudo-Christianity. The following quote from Rowe will be a point of push-back for the following paragraph.

“Intense human and animal suffering, for example, occurs daily and in great plentitude in our world. Such intense suffering is a *clear case of evil*” (emphasis mine).²⁵

Despite Rowe’s adamancy, there is no clear case of evil, at least, according to the logical scaffolding of his worldview, atheism. His statement does not refute the Christian idea of God he is attempting to refute. Rowe makes a truth claim that there is unjustified evil in the world, and he makes this claim on the grounds of the atheistic worldview. Although I agree with Rowe regarding evil’s existence, his assertion that God and evil are fundamentally incompatible with each other is

²⁴ Zacharias and Vitale, 198.

²⁵ Rowe, 368.

not convincing. In a book written by Robert Morey in 1994, *The New Atheism and the Erosion of Freedom*, Morey provides key insight into the reality of the atheistic worldview.

“Everything ultimately came from Nothing
Order came from Chaos
Harmony came from Discord
Life came from Nonlife
Reason came from Irrationality
Personality came from Non-personality
Morality came from Amoralty”²⁶

These beliefs make up the atheistic reality and carry troublesome implications. In a universe with no moral lawgiver, according to atheism, who can call something evil? From where does one get the idea that they can use the word “should” or “ought”? Who says one “should”? What moral imperative demands this of them, and who promulgates it?

There is arguably not an atheist more popular today than the Oxford intellectual, Richard Dawkins. In his book, *Out of Eden*, Dawkins shares the essence of the atheistic worldview.

“In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.”²⁷

If we are, as Dawkins asserts, mere DNA, and DNA neither “knows nor cares,” then how does Dawkins conclude that *he* can know this? He defines the essence of his being as mere matter that cannot know anything, yet he claims to know this very reality. Truth does not come from a being

²⁶ Robert A. Morey. *The New Atheism and the Erosion of Freedom*, 98. I am indebted to *Why Suffering?* for providing me with this excerpt.

²⁷ Richard Dawkins. *Out of Eden*, 133. Additionally, *Why Suffering?* deserves credit for introducing me to this excerpt revealing the naturalistic philosophy of Richard Dawkins.

of “blind pitiless indifference” living in a world with “no design.” Could he contradict himself any more than this?

The point of sharing the implications of adopting an atheistic worldview is to highlight the flawed philosophical foundations of J.L. Mackie and William L. Rowe, whose arguments are at the forefront of this chapter. Rowe claims that evil exists, but on what grounds can he logically justify his observation? He indicts the Christian God, yet his worldview denies the very existence of that which he accuses God of allowing.

There is a clear and observable presence of evil in this world, yet the atheistic worldview denies that such evil serves any meaningful purpose. The Christian worldview, on the other hand, gives us the ability to make some sense of evil and understand the reality it creates for all individuals. The atheistic worldview provides no alternative to making sense of evil. The criticism coming from both Mackie and Rowe fails to acknowledge the wisdom of God, thus ignoring a key feature of biblical Christianity.

After evaluating the nature of atheistic arguments against the Christian God, it seems clear that the God of the Bible and the existence of evil are not mutually exclusive. However, the nature of this reality is charged with tension when suffering and oppression overwhelm us and lead us to ask, “Why, God, why?” A biblically nuanced philosophical approach to the existence of evil points us in the direction of reverence and submission to a God who knows far more about our situation than we ever could.

-The Timescape of Evil-

Finally, I would like to address those who ask why God did not get rid of evil, once and for all. Initially, it is important to recognize that when we ask this question we assume the

irresponsibility of God and question His fitness for the divine role. This, by no means, is meant to suggest that we should not ask such questions; Christians are called to be as *shrewd* as snakes and as *innocent* as doves.²⁸ Therefore, God calls his followers to think critically, all while remaining within the innocence of child-like faith. Here I will seek to clarify how time is relevant to understanding evil.

As denizens of Western Christian culture, we linearly experience time.²⁹ Experiences that were once in the future rapidly transition into past events, while the present serves as the meeting point that ushers the future into the past. That which *is* and that which *will be* inevitably become that which *was*. Thus, all things come to pass with the reality of time's linear function.

Evil, like our existence on earth, is time-bound. According to the Christian credo, at every moment, we are moving at a constant speed towards eternity. The reality is that some will arrive at eternity before others, but we all move towards the death of the body with each passing moment. The New Testament teaches that evil was destroyed when Jesus Christ was raised to life after being put to death by crucifixion. With this act, death and evil were denied the final say and God established tangible hope in the incarnate God who was raised to life after death. The sacrificial love of God manifested in the messianic promise triumphed over death and shows us the reality of evil today as a limited, time-bound phenomenon.

Evil *is*, and evil *is not*.

By saying *evil is*, we assert that evil is most certainly a *current reality* and in no way an illusion. Pain is real. Suffering is real. Wickedness is real. Saying evil is not real has some very serious implications, and it is a worldview no human heart can truly accept. The second clause of

²⁸ Matthew 10:16.

²⁹ Other worldviews, particularly ones from the East, think of time circularly.

the paradox asserts that *evil is not*. By this I mean, evil is not an everlasting reality. God has promised an end to evil, thus, humans will know a time when *evil is*, and eventually we will say “*evil is not*.” Therefore, a bird’s eye view of all reality presents evil as an *is* and evil as a *not*. This is the Christian understanding of evil’s timescape.

Chapter 3

The Issues with Alternatives

It is common for those who argue against the existence of the Christian God to advance hypotheticals and postulated alternatives focused primarily on imaginations. This chapter will address a variety of those alternatives that arise when discussing the existence of evil in light of God's purported goodness. I hope to illuminate how it is intellectually short-sighted to forsake the Christian understanding of evil for the atheistic worldview.

-Atheistic Alternatives-

Atheism is typically thought of as a belief system grounded in facts and reality; meanwhile, theistic worldviews are often criticized as deluded daydreams. This, regardless of how widely-believed, is simply untrue. As a counterpoint to atheism, this section will provide a more in-depth look at what we have already addressed as atheism's inability to acknowledge evil's presence. The paragraphs to follow will outline a variety of difficulties wedded to the atheistic worldview and will raise concerns about the validity and durability of such a system of thought.

According to the atheistic worldview, there is no moral lawgiver. But without a lawgiver, there is no law. And when there is no law, there can be no overarching perspective by which to judge whether something is good or evil. If there is no good nor evil, there can be no right and wrong. These are the convictions an atheist must live by, if they are to commit to their philosophical framework. It is, however, hard to believe with good reason that any human could truly live by these convictions. If one person were to strike another person on the head, for no

apparent reason, the one who received the blow would rightfully be appalled and angered that someone would do such a thing for no justified reason. However, let's say the person who received the blow is an atheist. Would knowing this really change our expectations of their reaction? No, it would not, and it wouldn't because human beings are morally-wired. It is hard to imagine any person so unfeeling and detached to the point of not being the least bit angered when another strikes them on the head for no reason. For the atheist, there is no reason, necessarily, behind the blow given to the individual, because, logically speaking, an atheistic worldview presupposes the lack of any moral reason or purpose in any action. The only rhyme or reason, as Dawkins says, is found in the poetry of DNA that beats to the pre-determined tune of genetic makeup.³⁰ Human intuition leads us to believe there is something truly *wrong* about hitting someone over the head for no reason, but for the atheist, intuition must be subdued by "reason." Let's look at another example, but this one will take real events and contextualize the actions within the "moral" understanding of pragmatic free will, according to atheism's roots embedded in *naturalism*.³¹

Between 1978 and 1991, serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer murdered, dismembered, and sexually assaulted 17 young men. It is without a doubt one of the vilest, most horrific cases of serial murder in United States history. Dahmer would lure men into his home and then proceed to get them drunk and drugged before sexually assaulting, murdering, and dismembering their bodies

³⁰ Dawkins, 133.

³¹ A theory denying that an event or object has a supernatural significance
specifically : the doctrine that scientific laws are adequate to account for all phenomena
 (Merriam-Webster).

(in every order imaginable) over the course of his killing spree. To the atheist, the case of Jeffrey Dahmer is one that presents us with a genetically-rare primate. Scientifically speaking, Dahmer simply thwarted the lives of incompetent blobs of protoplasm unfit for the realities of survival. In what sense could an atheist call Dahmer's actions "evil"? Perhaps the atheist could argue that his actions are "bad" but not in the sense that there is some external, moral imperative. Dahmer's actions could only be called "bad" insofar as it denotes him eliminating the utility and procreative ability of the other individual's lives. However, in the grand scheme of the atheistic worldview, all leads to death, so Dahmer only expedited the termination of the lifespans of certain individuals.

However, for most *theistic* philosophies, Dahmer's actions are clearly problematic. I would find it hard to imagine any individual who would not be deeply disturbed by such ideas and images. There are some, to whom, this may not be upsetting, but that would hardly remain the case if they became one of Dahmer's victims. The atheistic worldview is frightening because it is completely without the ability to adjudge right from wrong on such matters. Some may say, "We should all be allowed to do whatever we want, as long as we don't harm anyone." This, despite being an *a priori* viable ethic, falls apart when someone comes to define the word "harm." Although this may appear to work for the atheist, the majority of people are going to define the term differently. What is harmful to one person may not be deemed harmful by another. Ultimately, this social ethic does not work. It is even more problematic when we come to think of any moral statement. If an atheist were to approach another and say "you *ought* not to do that," ("that" being a certain action) then in what sense *ought* that person not do that certain action. To use the word "ought" or "should" suggests the existence of some implicit moral law. Of course, one could use these words to denote what is pragmatic to proliferation and procreation within the naturalistic model, but these words are often used to suggest there is some real moral weight inherent to a decision.

As we have already seen, the atheistic worldview leaves us with a hollow, mechanical understanding of life. The case of Jeffrey Dahmer is repulsive to any intuitive sense in the human body, and the atheistic worldview cannot denounce nor adjudicate such matters. To pose the question atheistically, how can meaningless stardust communicate to more meaningless matter that its actions somehow have meaning, and in fact, are deplorable? It cannot, rationally.

The same could be said of Nazi Germany's actions during the Second World War. Throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, the Nazis went on a full-fledged attack against the Jewish population of Western Europe. In just more than a decade, the Nazi regime had murdered over six million men, women, and children of Jewish heritage. My focus here is not to understand how the Nazis justified their systematic slaughter, but rather I hope to reveal how there is no way of condemning the Nazi's actions from an atheistic worldview. Although many atheists attempt to find morality in secular humanism,³² morality is not foundational without God because humans are not the creators of *absolutes*. The issue with "godless morality" is that there are no universal grounds by which the Nazis can be adjudicated immoral. If morality is established by arbitrary personal will, what right does someone in the United States have to tell another in Germany that their moral framework is wrong? If an atheist were to look at the case of the Holocaust and tell Nazi Germany that what it did was wrong, what sense would that make? For one to say the Nazi's actions are wrong, as an atheist, presupposes a moral authority of one over another, which begs the question: how is someone's morality *more right* or *less right* than another's? Who establishes this moral superiority? (Perhaps, moral superiority could be based upon naturalism and its

³² A philosophy that usually rejects supernaturalism and stresses an individual's dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason (*Merriam-Webster*).

paradigm steeped in evolutionary survival of the fittest. The most fit group decides the morals of the land, and what it even means to be the *most fit* or *greatest*.) Morality sought out by atheists is a trivial task that ends in arbitrary futility. They look for absolutes, while denying the giver of absolutes, God. In the words of Ravi Zacharias,

“to the Christian theist, good and evil have a point of reference. With the naturalistic starting point, good and evil are either emotionally sensed or pragmatically driven, both of which fall victim to the reasoning processes of our diverse cultures. This is a glaring inconsistency within naturalism.”³³

As we have seen, one of the many issues with atheism is that it simply cannot offer a coherent understanding of the world. It attempts to subdue every intuition humans have while attempting to offer a picture of reality that simply does not come close to meeting the reality of lived human experience. Additionally, the naturalistic framework promulgates the irrationality of human thought, while it attempts to lay out a coherent worldview itself—grounded in presupposed human rationality. Ultimately, naturalism, and the many atheists who abide by its worldview, cut off the branch they are attempting to sit on. They claim to be wise; yet, they call wisdom a random collision of atomic particles. Perhaps, C.S. Lewis put it best in his work *Present Concerns*:

“You can't, except in the lowest animal sense, be in love with a girl if you know (and keep on remembering) that all the beauties both of her person and of her character are a momentary and accidental pattern produced by the collision of atoms, and that your own response to them is only a sort of psychic phosphorescence arising from the behaviour of your genes. You can't go on getting any very serious pleasure from music if you know and remember that its air of significance is pure illusion, that you like it only because your nervous system is irrationally conditioned to like it. You may still, in the lowest sense, have a 'good time'; but just in so far as it becomes very good, just in so far as it ever threatens to push you on from cold sensuality into real warmth and enthusiasm and joy, so afar you will be forced to feel the hopeless disharmony between your own emotions and the universe in which you really live.”³⁴

³³ Zacharias and Vitale, 19.

³⁴ Lewis, *Present Concerns*, 76.

Disharmony is found in the lived experience of the atheist, and Lewis suggests no one can truly live by the axiomatic posture of naturalistic atheism. There is a disharmony because the naturalistic understanding of the world is not true.

-Problematic Abstract Alternatives-

Now that we have briefly addressed the worldview held by those who most fervently critique Christianity on the grounds of evil's existence, it is time to look at a variety of hypotheticals that are often introduced onto the battlefield of theological and philosophical debate, precisely where the existence of evil is wrestled with. When discussing the nature of evil and God's omnipotence over such evil, it is typical to hear one say, "Well, why couldn't God just [fill in the brackets]?" If God is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, couldn't He do anything He pleases? Especially something as simple as just getting rid of evil? If God is the most powerful, then what's the hold-up? One glaring issue with such remarks is that if God were to eliminate all evil it would include eliminating humanity. For all who acknowledge the existence of evil, even non-Christians, there are clear cases of flaws within human nature that reveal a proclivity for malevolence. If God were to eliminate evil, it would inherently incorporate the termination of humanity as we know it, and thus the questioner will have unintentionally wished herself out of existence. Now someone may say, why didn't God eliminate the evil inside us and around us, while maintaining human existence? In response to that, just because we can think of another way things "could have been," does not mean that those ideas are grounded in reality. Ultimately, these alternatives are mere abstractions of what we know through lived experience. These "alternatives" are in no way real, which is why the question is being raised in the first place. I hope that this

section clearly illuminates the problem with proposed alternatives, in general, and with specificity, while highlighting the very *real* omniscience, omnipotence, and goodness of God.

- **Why didn't God create a universe without evil?**

The question is fair. Why didn't He? Some may even phrase it, "Why *couldn't* God?" However, the latter presupposes an inability on God's part to create a world without evil, thus denying God His omnipotence. By understanding the character of God, it is with confidence we can say God *could* have created a world without sinless beings. There is some dissent regarding the nature of God's potential creations; yet, I believe the Bible displays God's ability to do all logically possible things if He wills it to be so.³⁵ Given God's omnipotence, we will address the question, "Why *didn't* God create a world without evil?" The simple answer is: He did. However, to leave it at that would be curt. Most people, even with a vague form of biblical literacy, know that God created a sinless world comprised of two human beings, Adam and Eve. As the story goes, they fell into sin by using their own free will to disobey the command of their Creator. The sin of humanity is not the fault of God, it is humankind that is culpable. Adam and Eve willingly disobeyed God and were led by the temptation of the serpent (Satan) in the Garden of Eden. Logically, there had to have been some sort of "fall" before the fall of humanity because there was a depraved creature in the garden (the serpent). Scripture does not specifically tell of Satan's fall, but one can deduce that it came before the fall of humanity and led to the temptation of God's human creatures.³⁶

³⁵ To substantiate this point, here is a list of biblical verses supporting this view: Luke 1:37, Matthew 19:26, Genesis 18:14.

³⁶ There are a few places in Scripture where Satan's fall from grace seems to be referenced, but there is not much clarity to be ascertained from the verses (Luke 10:18 & Isaiah 14:12-15).

As we have seen, God did not create humanity in sin. Rather, God gave humans the capacity to do good or evil. As I outlined this briefly in the introductory chapter, God endowed each creature with a will to make decisions, and having decisions means having choices. In light of this knowledge, some have suggested that God was the real Being who led humanity to sin. Along their train of thought, God led them into sin by giving humans the very capacity to sin. This idea is more specifically directed at God's commandment to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If God knew that His created beings would sin when He commanded them to not eat of the tree, what kind of "loving" God would command the very thing He knows His creatures will fail to do? The second book of C.S. Lewis' space trilogy, *Perelandra*, provides salient insight into the existence and reason behind such a command. In Lewis' book, while discussing the fictitious god of their world, the protagonist, Dr. Ransom, attempts to get at the heart of the seemingly arbitrary command.

"I think He made one law of that kind in order that there might be obedience. In all these other matters what you call obeying Him is but doing what seems right in your own eyes also. Is love content with that? You do them, indeed, because they are His will, but not only because they are His will. Where can you taste the joy of obeying unless He bids you to do something for which His bidding is the *only* reason?"³⁷

According to Lewis, God's arbitrary command was the very thing that provided the potential for abundant love. It is easy to obey when one knows the command will benefit oneself; however, what will be done when the reason behind the commandment is not understood in its entirety? With the case of the first humans, God's command resulted in the sin of Adam and Eve, but God was not finished with humanity after their disobedience.

³⁷ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 101.

Ultimately, no human knows the all-encompassing answer to why God chose to make the world the way He did. Who can know the mind of God? However, the Bible lays out God's intentions of incorporating humans of free will into His creation, even though they often use their free will for evil. Despite this dilemma, Christian Scripture teaches that all events fall under the reign of God's sovereign will. Regardless of the evil done, God will redeem that which has been lost in temporality.

- **If God foresaw the evil actions of His creation, why did He not at least intervene?**

Although we would like to think God would come to our rescue at every point in our lives to save us from our troubles, that is not the case. Given a biblical understanding of God, it is clear He knew what His creation would do, so isn't that a flaw on God's part? The short answer is *no*, but we'll take more time to dive into what we as humans can understand of God's ways, as they pertain to this question.

The pain and suffering of life is not a trivial matter. I say this as a human who has suffered and felt pain; yet, even more than what I have to say, God hates the pain and suffering of the earth because we are His beloved creation. What Christianity boils down to is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the manifestation of God's hatred towards sin and death. The fifth chapter of my thesis, "The Complex Good," will deal more directly with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and its redemptive power regarding this matter, so for now, I will leave us with a passage from John's gospel.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."³⁸

³⁸ John 3:16-17.

Jesus was not merely sent into the world to alleviate the temporal issues of this lifetime; Jesus sacrificed Himself to save the souls of humankind for eternity. God saw a bigger picture. Although we do not understand, and never will in full, perhaps God knew there would be a greater glory that could come from such a fall. To that I say, *felix culpa*.³⁹

- **Why can't all of us just exist without evil?**

It may appear that this question is the same as the first, but my hope is to look at the nature of existing amidst evil from a different perspective. The question itself identifies “all of us” as the subject that would potentially be better off “without evil.” Now, it is very important to highlight what is presupposed in the question itself.

The phrase “all of us” focuses on a very real subject, everyone. To be even clearer, we will say this means specifically everyone currently existing. Then, the question posits that “all of us” would be better off if evil didn't exist. This sounds logical; however, as we have already mentioned, to exterminate all evil, if we are going to acknowledge evil exists, it will eventually result in the worldwide extermination of all human life. Although there are many secular attempts to see humans as *good-natured*, a Christian understanding of humanity acknowledges the evil that resides within every human heart. Additionally, the idea of life without evil is almost unfathomable. Despite its incomprehensibility, Christians believe that this reality will ultimately come to fruition for those who are followers of Christ. Each person will keep their soul, that is, their self, while shedding the body and inheriting a new, glorified one.⁴⁰

³⁹ Fortunate fault —used especially of original sin, which is redeemed by the coming of Christ (*Merriam-Webster*).

⁴⁰ Philippians 3:21 and Matthew 16:25-27.

The question also insinuates that the questioner would have preferred to be born in a sinless world, but that is not the reality by which they came into the picture. Sin is one of the very reasons we came into the world. To wish away evil's existence prior to our birth is to drastically change the order of all things, and ultimately, it denies even the existence of the questioner himself. Vince Vitale illustrates this well in the book *Why Suffering?*:

“Would it make sense for you to wish for that life rather than your current life even though your hopes, aspirations, projects, loves, relationships, memories, psychology, and biology would all be radically different, even though not a single day you would experience in that life would be much like any day you have actually experienced? Regardless of whether this better-situated person would technically be you, wishing for that life instead of your current life seems worryingly similar to wishing yourself out of existence.”⁴¹

By taking away the necessary conditions that provided for one's unique life, that life is replaced by another who is, in fact, not them. Humans enter life through a chain of actions that inherently incorporates evil, and somehow they expect to just come about in a world where trillions of those actions never existed and never will?

Life is unique. Life is precious. When speaking of abstract alternatives, we are speaking of non-real imaginations of what we think reality could have been yet is not. None of the hypotheses are grounded in concrete reality; they are merely abstractions of what actually exists.

⁴¹ Zacharias and Vitale, 70.

Chapter 4

The Complex Good

This chapter attempts to explore Lewis' idea of the *complex good* by understanding his development and rationale of the complexity inherent to our world. In addition to this, I attempt to illuminate the biblical foundations that undergird the Christian perspective on the pain and suffering that seemingly undermine the validity of Christian doctrine.

None are foreign to pain, even the most righteous. However, God will work all things together for good. No evil scheme can thwart God's ability to redeem.

-Evil Redeemed for Good-

The word "repurposing" seems fitting when referring to the complex good of God. This idea can be illustrated by the death of a loved one. Although God may not have desired the death of a loved one, God can use death, which is the result of evil,⁴² and use it as an opportunity to allow for someone close to the loved one to experience great sorrow that might bring them to realize there is nothing in the world that will satisfy them apart from God. This would bring the individual to a proper and true understanding of the world, by repurposing a painful means. The means incorporates human beings' free will, a free will that is often used for evil, but the end that God has for it is truly good, righteous and just. This illustration intends to understand how God

⁴² Romans 6:23.

might show someone in their pain what is good, leading them to a good end. Christians, like Lewis, believe this good end to be the Will of God fulfilled.

Elsewhere in his work, Lewis identifies how the *self* is summoned away from itself by what it longs for.⁴³ Regardless of what it is, the self is drawn to something, and one must be careful and aware of what it is that is drawing the self. This inherent feature of human beings can bring about great evil or great good. Again, this reminds us of the free will God bestows to humankind, with the choices and consequences that are inherently tied to it.

We will now set out to grasp, in a more direct way, what Lewis means when he refers to the complex good. For Lewis, the complexity of God's goodness arises from man, not God.⁴⁴ As we have previously mentioned, God has given free will to men. Evil is a result of the disobedience of man outlined in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. God's law, which favors our best interest, was disobeyed early on, and this naturally led to punishment, pain and death. Now we must discern the way forward. Acknowledging the reality of this situation, Lewis encourages readers not to drown themselves with hypotheticals, but rather to concern themselves with what is self-evident and true:

“But it must always be remembered that when we talk of what might have happened, of contingencies outside the whole actuality, we do not really know what we are talking about.”⁴⁵

Lewis is not attempting to rid the world of abstract ideas, as we discussed back in Chapter Three. His concern relates to the aforementioned understanding of the self in relationship to God. There

⁴³ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 154.

⁴⁴ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 80.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 80.

is a discrepancy in wisdom and perspective, as addressed in the section on Job, and by fiddling with abstract ideas, we confuse ourselves and justify arguments based upon formulated contingencies that do not reflect reality. After Lewis lays aside false contingencies, identifies key features inherent to the self, and acknowledges the reality of suffering brought about by free will, Lewis leads his readers down a path to see how all things are worked out according to the goodness of God, a traditional Christian axiom.

The working out of this process is cloaked in obscurity and the commotion of daily life, incorporating both goodness and iniquity. To properly understand the biblical roots of this notion, it is fitting to look to an important book in the New Testament of the Bible, Romans. In the eighth chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul writes to the Romans and says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”⁴⁶ With this, it is clear that evil will be done on earth, good will be done on earth, and God will weave all stories together with a redemptive thread. The agents of good and evil, regardless of their intentions, will have their work accomplish the purposes of God, but as Lewis notes, whether you serve at Satan’s post or God’s is of eternal significance.⁴⁷

The complex good is truly most complex by precisely this: God’s redemptive use of pain. To illustrate how Lewis sees God’s doing this, let me draw on an example. With physical pain, one experiences a sensation that makes them aware of a problem that is occurring with their body. The pain, although extremely uncomfortable in most cases, allows for the individual to know something is going on in the body that *is not good*. I use the word “good” to mean conducive to

⁴⁶ Romans 8:28.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 112.

prolonged life or general health. Of course, there are some circumstances where pain may be attributed to growth or other non-life-threatening bodily mishaps. Along the same general tendencies of physical health, spiritual health can be guided by pain and suffering. The use of pain, then, can be to direct one toward what is truly healthy for the soul. According to Lewis, “The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems to be well with it.”⁴⁸ Following this thought, it would be necessary for one to experience pain; otherwise, their misguided understanding would leave them blind and foolish as they attempt to find contentment in the transitory things of earth that are not concerned with the beauty or love of God. This notion of pain as a guide lends itself to the development of Lewis’ complex good, a good that mysteriously involves all things seen and unseen, good and evil.

In an article by French philosopher Paul Ricœur titled “Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology,” Ricœur asserts that “it is the lament, the complaint of the suffering righteous person or people, that overthrows the notion of the compensation for evil by good, just as was the case with the idea of retribution.”⁴⁹ His point here is that the problem of pain seemingly cannot be explained when pain is inflicted on a “righteous” person. For Ricœur there is no just cause that can explain such a phenomenon. The article rebuts Lewis’ idea of the complex good, though Ricœur does not mention Lewis or his idea specifically. Despite Ricœur’s popularity, I find that his argument is faulty in its assumption that there are even *some* who are undeserving of pain, as the excerpt from his essay suggests. However, Ricœur’s attempt to challenge assumptions common to classical Christian theology misses a fundamental biblical truth. The largest book of the Bible,

⁴⁸ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 90.

⁴⁹ Ricoeur, Paul. “Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology,” 641.

Psalms, incorporates the poetic cry of the psalmist who laments that “All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.”⁵⁰ One might argue that this observation from the psalmist only serves its purpose in identifying a people from a particular time, however, Paul in the New Testament, over 500 years later, refers to this verse to address the wickedness of his contemporaries, as well.⁵¹ In addition to this, Paul calls himself the *chief of sinners*.⁵² It is abundantly clear throughout all of Christian thought that none are righteous. Righteousness is accredited to those of faith throughout Christian Scripture, but none are referred to as faultless except the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. All are deserving of punishment according to Christian doctrine, thus refuting Ricœur’s argument that there is some real issue with Christianity because “righteous” people undergo suffering. “No one is good—except God alone.”⁵³

-The Book of Job-

Of all biblical literature, the book of Job is one of the most confounding. There are undoubtedly other esoteric passages in the Bible; however, Job’s story recurrently prompts readers to question the justice and goodness of God. The book of Job is 42 chapters dense and contains frequent dialogue between Job and his peers. Prior to these dialogues, the book of Job pays attention to an event taking place in the heavens.⁵⁴ In the heavens, “the sons of God” came before

⁵⁰ Psalms 14:3.

⁵¹ Romans 3:8-12.

⁵² 1 Timothy 1:15, KJV.

⁵³ Mark 10:18.

⁵⁴ I use “heavens” to denote the spiritual realm.

God, and Satan is described to have come along, as well.⁵⁵ God asks Satan where he came from, and Satan responds that he has been roaming the earth. Given this information, God brings to Satan's attention the righteousness of God's servant, Job. Satan challenges God's observation and asserts that Job only praises God and walks uprightly because God blesses Job so abundantly with comfort and prosperity. By the end of the brief conversation, God allows for Satan to take everything away from Job, but Satan is not allowed to kill him.⁵⁶ Thus, what ensues is Job's suffering. His children die, his livestock are wiped out, his fortunes run dry, he gets nasty sores all over his body, and as a result, he laments ever having been born. The suffering of Job highlights a classic question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" The question, from beginning to end, remains at the forefront of the book waiting to be answered. However, the question is never answered directly.

Job's peers accuse him of erring, yet Job remains confident that he is not receiving divine retribution for any wrongdoing. This leads Job to cry out to God for answers. Although Job oscillates between trust and dejected bitterness, Job engages in an act of faith that endures throughout the narrative. How is that? *Job never stops praying*. It would be a mistake to neglect this crucial fact. Despite feeling mistreated and questioning God's ways, Job never ceases to petition and extend his communicative offering unto God.

Although Job never understands why he must suffer, he ultimately repents of ever having questioned God. Job is made aware of his own ignorance through the revelatory encounter with God, and he is subsequently brought to a point of profound epistemic humility. Job's repentance comes in the last chapter of the book:

⁵⁵ Job 1:6.

⁵⁶ Job 2:6.

“I know that you can do all things;
 no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
 You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’
 Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
 things too wonderful for me to know.

“You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak;
 I will question you,
 and you shall answer me.’
 My ears had heard of you
 but now my eyes have seen you.
 Therefore I despise myself
 and repent in dust and ashes.”⁵⁷

The book of Job is exceptionally important when addressing the existence of evil and suffering. God does not give Job a dense theological response pertaining to a particular theodicy, but rather God prompts Job with a series of rhetorical questions. The questions reveal how there are far more things Job does not know, than he knows. Although Job considers himself righteous and sees no reason why he ought to suffer, he is not in an epistemic position to justly question the intentions of his Creator.

This sort of behavior remains characteristic of people today. For example, popular New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman devotes an entire book to the question of why humans suffer. In his book, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question -- Why We Suffer*, Ehrman suggests that God is in a tricky position. The title clearly asserts that the conundrum is “God’s Problem.”⁵⁸ Like many skeptics of the faith, evil is seen as *God’s* problem. Ehrman insinuates, God ought to be found culpable because he doesn’t answer a question we think he ought

⁵⁷ Job 42:1-6.

⁵⁸ Ehrman, Bart D. *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question -- Why We Suffer*.

to answer. I find this conclusion preposterous, given that I could think of a host of other questions the Bible does not answer. God is not responsible for answering every question the human brain can construct. If this were a task of God, I am afraid human beings would never be able to approach Him, given that the questions would increase indefinitely without bound. The finite mind would not be able to comprehend an infinite list such as this. The Bible is the revealed Word of God that equips humanity to see the Truth of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Providing an answer to every question imaginable would only trivialize the saving work of God through Jesus. Rather than suggesting it is *God's fault*, for not providing an answer we find satisfactory for a question, perhaps God is after something much bigger, something only divine wisdom could orchestrate. Perhaps God intends to save the souls of humanity rather than answer the insatiable appetite of intellectual rapacity. Perhaps, we defer to divine revelation?

There is much more to unpack regarding the book of Job, however, the biblical narrative most fundamentally shows how *God's revelation serves as a means of vindication*. Job questions the intentions of God, thinks he deserves an answer to why he suffers and places himself on the same epistemic level as God. If anything, we should walk away from the book of Job with a humble heart, understanding that Job saw God, and for him, that was enough.

-The Paragon: Jesus Christ-

Like Job, throughout Christian Scripture evil surrounds and inflicts its tortures on even the most righteous. The obvious example is the suffering of the blameless Christ. How could one overlook the hardships of a man who had never done anything wrong? Many books of the Bible refer to the nature and character of Jesus Christ, highlighting the purity of His goodness more than any other person in all Christian scripture. In the book of First Peter, verse 22 of the second chapter

states, “[Jesus] committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”⁵⁹ Paul in Second Corinthians has similar words to describe Jesus, saying, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”⁶⁰ The phrasing of the sentence is important to understand. The first “he” refers to God the Father (a part of the whole triune God). The “him” refers to Jesus (The Son of the triune God). Jesus “becoming sin” does not make Him sinful. Rather, when He bore the sins of humanity He demonstrated the greatest sacrifice in history. This phraseology could be pictured by the image of a tree. To imagine His becoming sin, Jesus can be understood as a healthy tree, with healthy roots, that has branches (representing sin) grafted onto the tree. The branches did not come from the roots’ growth (Jesus’ goodness), but from another source unnatural to it, hence the need for grafting. Jesus took on the unnatural (to Him) sins of man and wore them as His own. Not as sins He had committed, but as a Man upon whom all the world’s sins were put. Additionally, the author of the book of First Peter calls the blood of Jesus “precious” and calls Him a “lamb without blemish or defect.”⁶¹ Undeniably, the Christian tradition upholds Jesus as a Man without sin, yet, He suffered terribly.

The extent to which Jesus suffered is remarkable. However, it is not unusual to hear many say, “I couldn’t believe in a God who would just sit back and watch all of His creation suffer.” The assertion makes sense; a god of that sort seems callous and unfeeling, yet, this is not the type of God Christianity claims allegiance to. The Christian God, according to orthodox teaching, cared so deeply for the life and salvation of His creation that He became a human being and shared in

⁵⁹ 1 Peter 2:22.

⁶⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:21.

⁶¹ 1 Peter 1:19.

the sufferings of earthly life. It is believed that Jesus was fully man and fully God, preserved in hypostatic union, and mysteriously so. If, then, God humbled Himself to the point of becoming one of the very beings He created, how could He be a recipient of the evil He, supposedly, has power over? The answer is truly bewildering, yet, Christians cling to it dearly. God loves the world so much that He was willing to take the blame for all the wrong they had ever done, thus serving as a ransom for the human race.⁶²

Evil seems to trouble every individual, but how did evil intersect with the life of Jesus? Jesus knew grief and sorrow well. One of Jesus' close friends passed away while He was in another town with His disciples. When reunited with the family of His friend, Lazarus, He wept.⁶³ When Jesus taught in front of many people, there were often many who opposed His teachings and set themselves against Him by their words and actions towards Him. On several occasions, people (the very people Jesus came to earth to save) attempted to stone Him.⁶⁴ He was confronted by people with many sicknesses, and He interacted with those who were considered possessed by evil spirits. Time and time again, denizens of the towns would attempt to touch Jesus without His consent; while there was no ill intent, presumably, people attempted to get near Jesus because they believed He could heal physical maladies with the simple contact of their body to His clothing. An instance of this is captured well in the Gospel of Luke:

“And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.”⁶⁵

⁶² John 3:16.

⁶³ John 11:35.

⁶⁴ John 10:31.

⁶⁵ Luke 8:43-44.

In this instance, healing powers went out of Jesus to stop the woman's bleeding. The woman had faith that touching Jesus' clothing would heal her. This is understood several sentences later when Jesus says that her faith had healed her, not simply the fact that she touched His robe.

Jesus was not only acquainted with death and social stressors, He was also a victim of extreme injustice. Towards the end of His life, Jesus was put on trial for crimes He did not commit. Townspeople falsely testified at the trial. Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea, found Jesus not guilty, yet had Him flogged and eventually had Him crucified, fearing potential uprisings. With this, it is clear that God did not look down coldly at the oppressed of the world; the Christian God loves so abundantly that He identified with the oppressed and poor by becoming oppressed and poor Himself, in the person of Jesus.

Another layer to Jesus' suffering was His isolation and loneliness. To start by mere conjecture, living as fully God and fully man (hypostatic union) would create a situation of severe misunderstanding. I am not suggesting Jesus was impossible to understand, but rather it would be more likely to misunderstand Him, given His confounding nature. In the beginning of the Gospel of John, the Gospel starts with a famous description of Jesus as "the Word."

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."⁶⁶

The text from John highlights the eternal nature of Jesus and further substantiates Jesus' characterization as one of the loneliest individuals to ever exist. Following the implications of the first few sentences of John's gospel, Jesus, *the Word*, left the comfort and bliss of Heaven by entering the mess of the world. There can be no full understanding of this transition from Heaven

⁶⁶ John 1:1-3.

to earth, yet mere postulation leaves one to believe there could be no greater sorrow than changing settings like Jesus did. An adjustment of this caliber is undoubtedly isolating and dispiriting, in every possible sense. Later in His life, following His baptism, Jesus ventured into a time of complete isolation while fasting in the wilderness.

“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.”⁶⁷

In addition to His isolation, He was directly tested by the devil while experiencing extreme hunger and thirst. Of course, this hardship was only 40 days, not a lifetime. Yet, despite only being a fraction of His time on earth, this circumstance gives direct insight into an incredibly trying time of Jesus’ life where He was all alone in the wilderness experiencing the reality of evil, face-to-face with the devil.

There are two more situations of which we are aware that transpire during Jesus’ earthly life which further extend the argument that Jesus’ life was isolating and lonesome. One matter pertains to the betrayal of His closest friends. The hours leading up to Jesus’ death were agonizing, even for anyone who reads the painful narrative. Of the 12 disciples who closely knew Jesus, Judas Iscariot was the one who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. The disciple forsook Him by leading a small band of state-sponsored militants to seize Jesus and bring Him before the Roman prefect. Unfortunately, the betrayal is not limited to the infamous Judas Iscariot, but also to one of Jesus’ closest friends, Simon Peter. Jesus knew Peter would abandon Him, even though Peter swore he would never, yet Peter abandoned Him during the hours before Jesus’ death.

“Then a servant girl, seeing [Peter] as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, ‘This man also was with him.’ But he denied it, saying, ‘Woman, I do not know him.’ And a little later someone else saw him and said, ‘You also are one of them.’ But Peter said, ‘Man, I am not.’ And after an interval of about an hour still

⁶⁷ Matthew 4:1-2.

another insisted, saying, ‘Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean.’ But Peter said, ‘Man, I do not know what you are talking about.’ And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.”⁶⁸

The sequence of events is heartbreaking. Jesus was abandoned by one of His closest friends while at a trial where He would later be unjustly sentenced to torture and death.

All was dreadful to this point, however, His ultimate isolation was experienced on the cross during His crucifixion at Golgotha. During the final moments of His life, Jesus cried out, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” This translates to, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”⁶⁹ Jesus’ cry signals the loss of relationship between Himself, the Son of God, and God the Father. As previously mentioned, Jesus had always been in relationship with the Father, but at this moment of extreme pain and suffering, God the Father had no relationship with Jesus, He was abandoned. As previously mentioned, Jesus’ becoming sin on the cross required that He take the punishment of sin, which is death and separation from God. The moment He became sin and took the guilt and blame of all humanity, Jesus was left abandoned by His Father, separated from divine fellowship at the darkest hour. Jesus knew isolation and loneliness more keenly than anyone, even though He did not deserve it.

In addition to all the hardships previously mentioned, Jesus encountered immense physical pain. After His sentencing, Jesus was sent by Pontius Pilate to be flogged. Given the customs of flogging, Jesus was bound to a pole and hit repeatedly with a gruesome device. Flogging involved a variety of objects used to hit the bare back of the “wrong-doer,” and many of the objects would

⁶⁸ Luke 22:56-62, ESV.

⁶⁹ Matthew 27:46.

have glass shards attached to the end to pierce the skin of the recipient, eventually shredding the skin and muscle off of the back. This brutal form of torture could result in death due to blood loss, and oftentimes, the recipients of these blows would faint because of the extreme pain and exertion forced upon the body. After Jesus' flogging, He was spit on and mocked by those around Him as He was forced to carry the large, wooden cross for a portion of the journey to the crucifixion site. With a crown of thorns on His head (placed on him by Roman soldiers), He bled severely as He trudged to the final moments of His life. What followed was His binding to the cross.

“Someone nailed to a crucifix with their arms stretched out on either side could expect to live for no more than 24 hours. Seven-inch nails would be driven through the wrists so that the bones there could support the body's weight. The nail would sever the median nerve, which not only caused immense pain but would have paralysed the victim's hands.”⁷⁰

Ultimately, death on the cross would result from the loss of oxygen in the blood by suffocation. The body would eventually bear all the weight on the chest when the legs could no longer provide any support and once the arms had become useless, coming out of the shoulder sockets. With conservative words, it is easy to say that He experienced some of the most extreme misery any person has ever undergone. He knew evil and suffering acutely.

How, then, should a sinful human (anyone, except Jesus) respond to the atrocities of evil when God was not even spared from the horror? If all humanity is deserving of pain, given that it is brought about by the wrongdoing of humans, then there can be no indignation because *all* are culpable. God did not willfully choose to inflict pain on humans. He gives humans the dignity of making their own decisions and those decisions intrinsically have, and continue to have, consequences, good and bad. Following Christian thought, if the greatest Person to ever live

⁷⁰ Jha, Alok. “How Did Crucifixion Kill?”

suffered the worst persecution possible, all other humans must prepare themselves to face the ills of the world as well, although Jesus spared humanity the worst of evil by taking it on Himself and defeating death.

But what about other people who were referred to as *good* in the Bible? Jesus referred to a man named John the Baptist as the greatest who had come before Him; yet, John the Baptist was decapitated.⁷¹ There is undoubtedly a deep sense of pain and suffering that was poured out on this “righteous” man, yet, he is among those who have still transgressed, and John is not somehow unaccountable for the evil he had done in his life. Lewis highlights this feature by emphasizing how people tend to assume time erases sin and wrongdoing, even though the action in-and-of-itself, regardless of when it was committed, is still timelessly wrong.

“We have a strange illusion that mere time cancels sin. I have heard others, and I have heard myself, recounting cruelties and falsehoods committed in boyhood as if they were no concern of the present speaker’s, and even with laughter. But mere time does nothing either to the fact or to the guilt of a sin. The guilt is washed out not by time but by repentance and the blood of Christ: if we have repented these early sins we should remember the price of our forgiveness and be humble.”⁷²

The complex good is encapsulated in stories such as John’s. Pain and suffering are no stranger to even the most righteous the world has to offer. *This* is the complexity of God’s goodness, and yet John’s story is one that has inspired generations of Christians to bear the hardships of life, knowing that God will work all things for the good of those who love Him, despite complexity and the puzzling nature of evil.

The greatest complex good ever worked out by God in all Christian Scripture was the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Although there are many other examples, like the life of John the

⁷¹ Matthew 11:11.

⁷² Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 54-55.

Baptist, Jesus' circumstances confounded those around Him and left all those in despair who once saw Him as a source of hope before His death. The records of Jesus' life depict the number of times He told his closest followers He was going to be killed and that He would be raised on the third day, but, those around Him did not understand. And those closest to Him would not understand until after His resurrection. The brutal torture and death of Jesus was a scene of seemingly unredeemable darkness. Surely, those who followed Jesus must have wondered how *any* good could come out of such a travesty of justice and death of their Teacher and supposed Savior. Some soldiers, mocking Jesus, yelled at Jesus something that must have expressed the deepest cry of Jesus' closest followers.

“[They] said, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’”⁷³

Jesus did not remove himself from the disaster; He remained hung up on the cross, breathing His last.

The days following the death of Jesus were somber. The Gospel of Luke provides insight regarding the thoughts and despair of those who directly placed their hope in Jesus but were grief-stricken in the wake of Jesus' crucifixion and burial. The Gospel records two men walking along a road to Emmaus, a neighboring town to Jerusalem, when Jesus comes alongside them during their journey. Although Jesus engaged with the men and asked what they were discussing, His identity was unknown to them. They responded with a question: “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”⁷⁴ The disbelief is palpable. How could this Man (Jesus, yet unknown to them at the time) not know the events that

⁷³ Luke 23:37.

⁷⁴ Luke 24:13-25.

had just taken place in Jerusalem? The conversation continued as the two men ventured along the road with Jesus to Emmaus. The men described how they had hoped Jesus of Nazareth would be the One who would redeem Israel, but with His recent crucifixion, they lost hope. The men eventually convinced Jesus to share a meal and stay the night with them after their journey. Then, the following ensued:

“When [Jesus] was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’”⁷⁵

The *goodness wrapped in the complexity* had not yet been revealed to them, until Christ made Himself known at the table. The story of the men traveling to Emmaus serves as an example of the complex good affecting those who *originally* saw only a complexity that offered no real, clear hope. *If then, God can take the slaughter of the Messiah and turn it into something good, can He not take all dark times and bring to them miraculous hope?*

Another instance of disbelief involves one of Jesus’ very own disciples. After the rumors of Jesus’ resurrection, some of His disciples were reporting that they had seen the risen Christ. Thomas, also known as Didymus, did not refute their belief, but said he would not believe unless he saw Jesus for himself.⁷⁶ Later, when the disciples were all together, Jesus appeared to them in a room where they were meeting in secret. Jesus specifically addressed Thomas by saying, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and

⁷⁵ Luke 24:30-32.

⁷⁶ John 20:24-29.

believe.”⁷⁷ Thomas, bewildered by what just transpired, exclaimed, “My Lord and My God!” Thomas did believe, but only because the resurrection, shrouded in mystery, was made unambiguous to him through a physical encounter with the risen Lord. What Jesus says after Thomas’ exclamation remains incredibly salient for those today:

“Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’”⁷⁸

The words of Jesus specifically address all future generations of believers and doubters. The complex good is revealed to Thomas through an empirically-based experience, yet, Jesus calls to action all those who will not have the same fortune to see the risen Christ on earth. These stories recount the revealing of God’s ultimate complex good: resurrecting the body of Jesus Christ to make a way for the life of all, triumphing over death. Although the wage of sin is death, the wage of faith in Christ is eternal life.⁷⁹

-Pain as Soul-Refining-

As discussed in the previous section, Jesus’ life is a testimony to how evil can be redeemed by God for good. This section of the chapter will focus on how the complex good, as a general theme related to evil’s presence and God’s sovereignty, can be soul-refining. One of the more famous works related to the problem of evil is John Hick’s book, *Evil and the God of Love*. Hick’s theodicy acknowledges evil’s presence as an important step in soul-making. However, the idea is

⁷⁷ John 20:27.

⁷⁸ John 20:24-29.

⁷⁹ Romans 6:23.

not unique to Hick. Church father Irenæus of Lyon was known for articulating a similar theodicy, one that sees pain and suffering as a necessary part for the purification of souls.

This idea is not far-fetched, as we hear it often, even in secular circles: “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger!” “You’ll come out a better person after this hard time!” However trite, these statements reflect widely-held beliefs across the United States regarding the purpose of pain and suffering. Given that many who are irreligious hold these beliefs, it leaves me to think people cling to such ideas because they provide a comforting way of understanding pain. For Christians, enduring pain is not an arbitrary axiom like it is for secularists, it is ingrained into the very life of God, Creator of all things.

So, how does pain and suffering cultivate the refining of one’s soul? It is one thing to offer hackneyed words to a friend going through a hard time, but what does soul-refinement look like? In *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis, by analogy, highlights the work of a surgeon:

“But suppose that what you are up against is a surgeon whose intentions are wholly good. The kinder and more conscientious he is, the more inexorably he will go on cutting. If he yielded to your entreaties, if he stopped before the operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless.”⁸⁰

Lewis’ point is that some of the worst pain is necessary to achieve a good end. Of course, Lewis’ example is not meant to deal with the question of how pain entered the picture in the first place, but rather how pain can be redeemed for good in a world rife with it. With the example of the surgeon, we are shown that a necessary procedure, like one done by a surgeon, incorporates pain, yet, the procedure will establish, if done correctly, a beneficent state of greater health. Ultimately, there is a short term pain to achieve a long-term peace.

⁸⁰ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 43.

This is comforting to know intellectually, but amidst pain, intellectual propositions do little to comfort those in pain. Suffering crushes the animate spirit within the human body. Christian theologian, William J. Abraham, in his book *Among the Ashes*, reflects upon the weight of grief after losing his oldest son. Towards the beginning of the book, Abraham states that amidst grief “we are reduced to rest and silence; we cannot say anything positive; the mystery involved is ineradicable.”⁸¹ That is to say, there is no intellectual antidote to the profound sorrow and loss we experience amidst grief. Could you imagine attending the funeral of your best friend and having someone hand you a book on the logical coherency of theism after the service? No one would do such a thing! Why? Because mere ideas cannot assuage the loss of a loved one’s unique and powerful presence. Although I’m sure the book would highlight the philosophical underpinnings of how there is great reason to believe there is a loving God, it would in no way care for the soul of the hurting individual.

Indeed, as the shortest verse in the entire Bible reveals this lesson—even Jesus wept.⁸² Although He knew Lazarus would be raised for the dead, Jesus did not hold back tears at the death of His dear friend. Grief and suffering, throughout human experience, have proven to be more complex. It is precisely the reason why we don’t send someone to a logician when they are depressed; we send them to a counselor. This is not to say that truth and clear-thinking are irrelevant to healing, they are paramount to healing. However, pain refines the human soul in a much more intricate way, perhaps, by the grace of God. Pain and suffering lead us into relationships with others, which then foster communities of mutual compassion and support. There are certainly a variety of ways by which people process pain, but communities tend to come

⁸¹ Abraham, William J. *Among the Ashes: On Death, Grief, and Hope*, 14.

⁸² John 11:35.

together for the well-being of those who are hurting. Why? To bring about healing through communal care. The method God used to care for His creation amidst their pain is arguably the greatest illustration of this experiential truth: the sending of the Messiah into the world. Christianity offers a Person to those who are hurting, not simply truisms regarding pain. Jesus Christ became human to dwell with humanity. However, Christ's mission was not to alleviate the temporal burdens of humankind, but rather their eternal burdens. If Jesus' primary concern was the earthly wellbeing of individuals, His ministry would have looked a lot different. He did not eliminate pain altogether. Since there still is suffering and pain on earth today, we could assume either Jesus did not have the power to fix the problem, or He did not care enough to fix the problem. But, this was not the concern of Jesus. Yes, He healed the temporal issues of many during His time on earth, but again, that was not His primary mission. Jesus' mission was to bring lasting salvation to lost souls.

We have already addressed why we hurt from a foundational standpoint: sin entered the world. Now, I would like to address what specifically hurts when we feel pain, understanding there are various kinds and degrees of pain. Additionally, I would like to understand the *why* more from an individual level. What makes particular events so painful for all people or certain individuals? Given the understanding of sin's pervasiveness in the world, we are now left to discern the causes and effects brought about by the intrusion of sin into God's creation. As a result of sin's intrusion, pain alerts us that something is not right. With this in my mind, it may be appropriate to identify pain as a helpful feature of creation. However, the hurt that is caused by pain is not mitigated simply because we know it can be useful.

Before diving into the *whats* and *whys*, as previously mentioned, it is important to base our understanding of pain within the lives of two distinct groups: Christians and non-Christians. Christian scripture makes it clear that none are exempt from earthly troubles.

“[God] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”⁸³

From a Christian lens, understanding pain’s functionality necessitates an awareness of this binary. If we are to take Christian doctrine seriously, we must acknowledge that life can only be found in the power of God, the Grand Sustainer of all things. By the very nature of exclusivity, everything apart from God is certain to die. How then, can pain function in the lives of Christians *and* non-Christians? Ultimately, pain can push both groups in the very same direction: redemption through Jesus Christ and the sanctification of the soul. However, pain will necessarily be viewed differently by both groups because of differing beliefs; albeit, *Christians* do not even hold the same view of pain and all its intricate implications, yet, fundamentally Christians lay claim to the revealed understanding of pain in the biblical canon.

The distinction I would like to make between both groups, Christians and non-Christians, is the first, let us call it, *inward movement*, of the individual. For the non-Christian, pain can serve the first inward movement by leading to the acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, Son of God. For the Christian, pain’s good result would be the inward movement of sanctification. This distinction particularly has to do with one step coming before another. Accepting the love of Jesus by believing in His divine sonship precedes sanctification. Thus, pain will be *soul-saving* for the non-Christian, if pain is to be redeemed for good by God. And, pain will be *soul-refining* for the Christian, if pain is to be redeemed for good by God. Both are life-giving, but one precedes the

⁸³ Matthew 5:45.

other and leads us to understand pain's role differently for these distinct groups. Given this understanding, I will now specifically address the role of pain in the life of the Christian and briefly look at some of the *whats* and *whys* regarding pain and its nature. Let's look at an example.

There's a man named Jeffrey, and let's say Jeffrey is particularly prideful. Like many others, Jeffrey likes to think he is smarter than most of his friends and better looking than most of them. One day Jeffrey and his friend Tom are hanging out and upon reminiscing the good ole high school days, Tom says to Jeffrey, "Jeffrey, you weren't very bright back then!" Although Tom's reference is to the past and his words could insinuate that Jeffrey is smart now, his words inevitably cut Jeffrey's inflamed pride. Therefore, Jeffrey's pride is the *what* that is experiencing the pain. The *why* behind this *what* is that Jeffrey thought too highly of himself, and the words of Tom revealed that Tom thought more lowly of Jeffrey than Jeffrey did himself, even when discussing past life in high school. The Bible warns repeatedly against the sin of pride. Two examples from the book of Proverbs highlight God's abhorrence of pride:

"To fear the Lord is to hate evil;
I hate pride and arrogance,
evil behavior and perverse speech."⁸⁴

Then a couple of chapters later...

"When pride comes, then comes disgrace,
but with humility comes wisdom."⁸⁵

Given these passages of Scripture, pain is the proper effect brought about the cause, Tom's words. Jeffrey's sin brought about the pain. A healthy self-esteem managed by humility does not grimace when the words of others touch the ego. However, a swollen ego managed by pride laments words

⁸⁴ Proverbs 8:13.

⁸⁵ Proverbs 11:2.

that give anything less than the height to which they esteem themselves. Of course, this is a less-serious example of pain; yet, it is one that emphasizes a very real aspect of life and identifies the causality with sin. Thus, it is our hope that pain in these scenarios refines and calibrates our affections to the standard God calls them to; it is there where we will find true flourishing.

Pain is impossible to ignore. We may grow numb to it or force ourselves to concentrate on other things amidst it, but pain always makes us acutely aware of its piercing presence. It was C.S. Lewis who said that pain sticks a flag of truth into the ground of a rebel fortress.⁸⁶ Because all of humanity is tainted by sin, pain perennially declares that there is something fundamentally wrong with the world. The act of self-surrender unto God that is essential to the Christian life necessitates pain because of our hell-bent penchant for immorality.⁸⁷ Additionally pain, in any degree, is valuable if it draws a human being closer to God. I am not trying to introduce some utilitarian idea of pain and its net benefits or losses, but rather I mean very explicitly that an experience with pain and suffering is good if it draws one nearer to God.

Many people, including non-Christians, recognize the benefit of trials and tribulations throughout life. Although I'm sure many would say that they would not like to undergo a painful experience again, they are often thankful for the experience because it brought them to a particular point where they are more pleased now. For Christians, what momentary affliction can compare to eternal glory and peace? How can one compare that which is temporal to that which is eternal? A comparison such as this cannot be quantified because time is a mere footnote to the powerfully

⁸⁶ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 122.

⁸⁷ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 98.

real expanse of eternity. The Apostle Paul certainly understood this when he wrote to the Roman church in the first century AD. He wrote,

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.”⁸⁸

What, then, does God seek to do with pain during our transitory stay on earth? As we have previously mentioned, the Christian life is marked deeply by *sanctification*.⁸⁹ God is the agent of change, graciously redeeming humanity through the inevitable hardships of life that have been brought about by sin. The beauty for Christians is that they can rejoice in trusting that God is doing something with the mess we have made!

Although suffering is inextricably linked to the Christian life, as Jesus promised it would be, Catholic theologian Peter Kreeft termed the opportunity out of this bittersweet reality, “teeth-gritting faith.” In his book, *Three Philosophies of Life*, Kreeft expounds on this idea.

“Teeth-gritting faith is valuable not because suffering is valuable in itself or because teeth gritting is valuable in itself but because such faith comes from the deep, eternal center of the person, the I, the will, not from feelings, not from the parts of the person that are dependent on the environment and what happens in the world. For the world will pass away, but the self will not. What the self decides in time is ratified in eternity. The stronger the choice for God at this obscure and unemotional center of the self, the surer and the deeper will be the eternal salvation of the whole self. The will is the custodian of the feelings and must learn to lead them, not follow them.”⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Romans 8:18-19.

⁸⁹ The state of growing in divine grace as a result of Christian commitment after baptism or conversion (*Merriam-Webster*).

⁹⁰ Kreeft, Peter. *Three Philosophies of Life*, 80.

Pain allows for the will to rise to the occasion, by providing the self with an opportunity to make a decision that bears eternal weight. The love of God is fierce and seeks to perfect us. God provides humanity with ample opportunity to accept His love and to double down on this eternal covenant mediated through a time-bound, turbulent sea. Thus, God uses pain to refine and prepare the human soul for eternal glory.

Although we might be quick to assume that God places trials in our lives to see how we will respond, C.S. Lewis insists that *we* are the ones who find out what we are made of, not God. This observation comes from Lewis' *A Grief Observed*, when reflecting upon his suffering after the death of his wife.

“God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who did not. In this trial He makes us occupy the dock, the witness box, and the bench all at once. He always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realize that fact was to knock it down.”⁹¹

Thus, even the deaths of loved ones can bring great spiritual growth and wisdom. As C.S. Lewis poignantly shares, the death of his wife brought him to understand the unshakable hope of God more fully. When our earthly delights and comforts are taken away from us, we soon see our desperate need for God.

-Clarifying God's Systematic Use of Pain-

Up until this point in the section, I have addressed the role of pain at the individual level. Pain can be used by God to bring about wonderful outcomes. However, I would like to illustrate how God can use the pain of an individual to bring about collective change. Although suffering

⁹¹ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 52.

more directly affects the life of the person actually experiencing the pain, this does not mean that specific circumstance cannot affect the lives of others. Take, for example, the situation of Christian martyrs. There are countless stories of individuals who willingly gave their life for the cause of Jesus Christ out of a willingness to testify to the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There have been Christian martyrs from the first century, even up until today. People all over the world suffer for following Jesus, particularly people who live in countries with limited religious liberty. The stories of martyrs are fascinating and often encourage and inspire others of the same faith. Why? It is precisely because they are willing to undergo severe pain for the sake of following Jesus. This act of faith proclaims that their devotion to Jesus Christ is far greater than any earthly trouble that could come their way. The level of pain endured gives these Christians a platform to transform the lives of others. God takes the wrongdoing, hatred and bigotry of unbelievers and gives Christians the opportunity to inspire others by their loving devotion through the pain. The pain, although it is surely refining for the individuals who experience it, allows for others to be refined because the sacrifice of the martyrs testifies to the worthiness of Jesus Christ. This testimony, then, works on the souls of others by revealing to them the beauty of Jesus symbolized through the martyr's blood.

Martyrdom would not be martyrdom without the severe level of pain and suffering. It is necessarily so. However, just because pain is a constitutive element does not make pain a *good* thing. Like any action movie, we don't praise the acts of the villain (or at least, I hope we don't). This is because the acts, in and of themselves, are despicable and the character of the villain, vile. Just because the villain is essential to the production of the drama does not mean the villain is *good*. Villains are most definitely bad, despite serving a vital part of many action movies. However, there could be no great heroism without the peril invoked by the villain. I will seek to

clarify because someone might critique my argument by saying, “well... somebody had to take the role!”

In philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s work, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, there are a variety of outlandish postulations made regarding the essence of the Christian worldview, and the invective is provocative.⁹² Žižek attempts to flip Christian thought on its head by questioning the very foundations of biblical Christianity, like questioning the importance of Judas Iscariot. He does not make any attempt to question the historicity of the biblical narrative, but he seeks to re-frame the orthodox understanding of the story.

In his work, Žižek claims that Judas is the real hero because he gave up his salvation for the sake of Jesus’ mission. Žižek suggests that Judas truly knew the messianic prophecies and was aware of Jesus’ unique role in dying to redeem humankind. The issue with Žižek’s assertion is that the biblical narrative makes it clear that none of the disciples knew the master plan of the omniscient Creator, God. Judas most certainly did not act out of an astute awareness of the biblical prophecies that foretold the coming of the Messiah. As illustrated in all of the gospels, Judas was greedy, dishonest and disloyal. Just because God, in his omniscience, placed Jesus Christ into the perfect setting for the fulfillment of His mission, does not mean that Judas deserves praise for his evil role. The content of his character cannot be justified by the role he plays in the Passion.

Additionally, Judas’ freewill was not suspended for the sake of accomplishing the purposes of God. There are instances in the Bible where it is said that God hardens the hearts of individuals, but this is not analogous to suspending anyone’s freewill. Judas most certainly acted on his own, and to say that God predestined Jesus to come into this very moment in history does not mean that anyone in particular, even Judas, was predestined for damnation. God’s plan of interjecting Christ

⁹² Žižek, Slavoj. *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*.

into the world does not necessitate forcing others to behave in a certain way. This is to simply say that God knew what others would do with their own freewill, given God's omniscience, and God placed Jesus Christ in history where God knew the atoning work of Christ would be accomplished. Thus, Judas condemned himself for betraying and forsaking the very person who came so that he might have the opportunity to repent and be saved. But, just as Judas wanted, he rejected the Messiah and hardened his own heart against God.

I will now attempt to provide another analogy to highlight a truth.

A boy, 10 years old, is kidnapped one day while playing with his friends in a neighborhood park. The boy, after being taken to the kidnapper's house 15 minutes away, is abused and held against his will in the kidnapper's home for several days. Although the authorities are alerted by the parents who grieve the loss of their son and fear the worst, there is no progress made in the search for the boy. However, one night while the kidnapper is asleep, the boy miraculously escapes the basement of the depraved kidnapper, by a series of ingenious actions on the boy's part. The boy, then, knowing the neighborhood fairly well, runs back home as quickly as he can in frantic tears. His parents receive the boy in joyful, heart-aching hysteria, and they alert the police of everything the boy shared with them regarding the location of the kidnapper and the abuse perpetrated on the boy. Subsequently, the kidnapper is arrested and put in prison, while the boy's return is told by every local and national news station in the country sharing the incredible story of the boy's escape from the kidnapper, against all odds.

According to Žižek, it would be right for us to praise the kidnapper because he is the *true* hero, despite what everyone makes him out to be. The kidnapper was the one who sacrificed his image and freedom for the sake of giving communities an incredible story: the escape and triumph of a young boy over an oppressor. This is analogous with my view of the biblical narrative because

Judas *did not know* that he would subsequently lose his soul at the cost of 30 pieces of silver.⁹³ In the same light, the kidnapper *did not know* that the boy would subsequently return to his home after making a miraculous escape and that the whole world would love the story. Of course, Žižek could object to my biblical hermeneutic, but given orthodox Christian views, the role of the kidnapper is analogous to the role of Judas Iscariot in the biblical narrative.

As I have previously suggested, it would be absurd to praise the kidnapper because he played a “vital” role in the making of this story, and rightly so. The triumph of the child is incredible because he overcomes the clutches of evil and gives society a great story of justice and restoration. Just as Žižek praises Judas, it would be ludicrous to hail the kidnapper as the real hero—the one who “sacrificed” his reputation and freedom to provide the setting for a great story. Thus, as I have mentioned earlier in the chapter, everyone will be involved in the working out of God’s will, but we will all have different roles. God is not handing out participation trophies based on merely existing; He is calling all unto Himself for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

It seems, then, that Lewis chose a fitting phrase for this phenomenon, “the complex good.” Indeed, it is quite complex; however, God does not expect humanity to understand every facet of its complexity. He calls people to trust in His goodness, even when it is unclear how God is bringing about a greater good amidst the vicious evils of the world.

⁹³ Matthew 26:14-16.

Chapter 5

Christian Pragmatism: A Response to Evil

It is easy to get bogged down with theories and logical puzzles when discussing theological responses to the existence of evil, but is there any pragmatic takeaway? How do we live out a life embracing the goodness of God, while suffering and waiting for the return of Jesus, according to Christian belief? The following paragraphs will seek to address the potential for realized pragmatism in the light of trusting God's goodness, despite the existence of evil.

-Becoming a Living Response to the Existence of Evil-

Evil manifests itself innumerable, so what is the way forward? Is there a way forward? Is there only room to regress into fear? Twentieth-century French social theorist Jacques Ellul believes there is a way forward through Christian social pragmatism. Ellul expounds upon this idea in his work *Presence in the Modern World*. The response to the reality of evil, for Ellul, starts by addressing the complex social situation, which for him, followed the aftermath of the Second World War. His chief concern is that Christians have lost sight of their responsibility amid a culture of conformity. Ellul's message is prophetically relevant and lights a path for those who seek to live based on faithful hope in Jesus Christ.

Although the reality of evil establishes an intrinsic tension within each human heart, Ellul addresses the social implications brought about by this personal reality. For Ellul, Christian social pragmatism boils down to this: Christians are called to create new ways of life, by the guidance of God's Holy Spirit. Despite seeming vague and almost cliché, the essence of Ellul's call to action

is *creative newness*. Ellul does not use this specific terminology; however, he calls Christians to action through what contemporary Christian thinker Andy Crouch would call “culture making.” This form of action is not meant to inspire thoughtless ideations of utopian fantasies, but rather Ellul, by way of Crouch’s culture-making idea, implores Christians to lead the way in establishing the norms of society. A social action of this sorts does not operate with any expectation that the wider secular culture will accept and approve of its presence. However, Ellul recognizes Christians as the only agents of true, meaningful change, and he insists that Christians bear the responsibility accordingly. Lest this proposal seem off-putting, I would like to highlight the implicit power dynamic at work in Ellul’s thinking. For Ellul, Christians are agents of true and meaningful change, not by their own virtue, but through the agency of the God they seek to follow and glorify in their actions. Christians are equipped with this power because they receive it from a transcendent source with real power. The power for life-giving change belongs to God, and is imparted to Christians by the Holy Spirit.

Ellul, anticipating the tendency of humans to idolize the establishment of a “new law,” cautions Christians to stay on guard lest they are led into the slavery of legalism. For this very reason, Ellul avoids coupling his guidance with any dogmatic list of necessary cultural practices. Christians are tasked with creating a *new order* to preserve society as a whole. His proposal for Christian social pragmatism comes from his acknowledgement of what he calls the global culture’s march towards death. In his cultural analysis, Ellul perceives that the global society is slowly progressing towards a state of suicide.⁹⁴ This form of suicide *is not*, in this context, a conscious

⁹⁴ Ellul, Jacques. *Presence in the Modern World*, 77.

effort to murder oneself, but rather the general population's blindness to its practices of self-harm. This self-destructive form of culture is in desperate need of Christian action.

Glossing Ellul, my point is that in the same way God became incarnate through the person of Jesus Christ and entered into the chaos of human society, Christians are called, in today's age, to be the medium for God's action in a world radically discontinuous with its own best interests and common goods. The scriptural charge given by Jesus on this matter is found in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew.

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."⁹⁵

In this passage, Jesus calls on those around him to be "the salt of the earth." Hence, the role of the Christian is to function as an agent of preservation.⁹⁶ With this ideal in mind, it is important to note, then, that efforts to *redeem* culture would be an attempt to usurp Jesus' role. The call of the Christian, emphasized throughout Scripture, is to be an agent of preservation in the world, not an agent of redemption. The role of redemption is left in Jesus' hands.

The 58th chapter of Isaiah further identifies the duty Christians have during their time on earth. It is not enough to merely attempt to influence culture, but rather there are other concrete ways God calls Christians to love others in more practical terms.

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,

⁹⁵ Matthew 5:13.

⁹⁶ This is a lesser-known feature of salt in the West today because of wide-spread access to refrigerators.

then your light will rise in the darkness,
 and your night will become like the noonday.
 The LORD will guide you always;
 he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
 and will strengthen your frame.
 You will be like a well-watered garden,
 like a spring whose waters never fail.
 Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
 and will raise up the age-old foundations;
 you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
 Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.”⁹⁷

The calling is clear: Christians must set the oppressed free and to fight against injustice. Perhaps, instead of asking God why He allows injustices to happen, we ought to ask ourselves that very question. Why do *we* allow for injustices to take place all around us without doing anything about them? Isaiah 58 is one of many passages that reveals God’s hatred for injustice and oppression. Christians are called to become a living response to evil’s presence on earth, and, in every task, God equips His people with the provision and strength to do just that.

The way of a self-destructive world culture leads to death, but the way of God leads to eternal life.⁹⁸ Therefore, the role of the Christian is to preserve the life of the world, to demonstrate concrete solidarity with the oppressed, while awaiting Jesus’ return to redeem what has been lost in perversion and death.

“It is a matter of committing to this enterprise, seeing concretely what the world is, and seeing ourselves concretely within the world. This is not the time for utopias and even less for political realisms. It is the time for awareness, which engages the life of each person. For, of course, those who become committed in this way accept that their entire life becomes engaged. They enter into an authentic drama, not a figurative one.”⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Isaiah 58:9-12.

⁹⁸ Matthew 7:14 & Romans 6:23.

⁹⁹ Ellul, 81.

The authentic drama awaits the Christian who first reclaims the authenticity of faith in Jesus Christ to care for others in all circumstances even as He cared for us in the gift of His own life.

-A Call to Hope-

Until the resurrection of those who put their faith in Christ, what are people to make of the overwhelming despair experienced on earth? C.S. Lewis suggests that it is simply wrong to be sad, unless it ushers us into repentance or serves a higher good.

“All sadness which is not either arising from the repentance of a concrete sin and hastening towards concrete amendment or restitution, or else arising from pity and hastening to active assistance, is simply bad...”¹⁰⁰

Lewis sees stagnant, self-absorbed sadness as a serious issue. The basis of this belief stems from his “apostolic injunction to ‘rejoice’ as much as by anything else.”¹⁰¹ In other words, it is counterproductive to sit in sadness if it does not move one to a change of heart, or compassion for others, and, in that sense, a life of rejoicing at God’s goodness and mercy. Of course, Lewis is not addressing clinical depression or other mental ailments, but rather he is targeting those who are slow to hope in the Lord and quick to cynicism, self-pity, and a lack of concern for others’ wellbeing.

Although Lewis admonishes those who are apathetic toward their sadness, he does affirm the notion that humans will always be discontent to some degree. Lewis argues that it is *just* and *good* for God to withhold the deep sense of security and contentment humans long for because it would teach humanity to put hope in the ephemeral, “false gods” of earthly existence. Thus, God

¹⁰⁰ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 61.

¹⁰¹ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 61.

scatters joy throughout the earth, bringing momentary hope and peace to the soul, but only for a time.

“Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home.”¹⁰²

Additionally, Lewis critiques the argument of those who say that each person’s experienced evil and suffering should be viewed as a sum of evil and suffering. His argument does not deny the mass amounts of evil and suffering that exist, but he establishes what he perceives to be the logical nuance to understanding the magnitude of suffering within human existence.

“Suppose that I have a toothache of intensity x : and suppose that you, who are seated beside me, also begin to have a toothache of intensity x . You may, if you choose, say that the total amount of pain in the room is now $2x$. But you must remember that no one is suffering $2x$: search all time and all space and you will not find that composite pain in anyone’s consciousness. There is no such thing as a sum of suffering, for no one suffers it.”¹⁰³

Again, Lewis’ logic is not an attempt to downplay the heartache and terror that evil inflicts, but it is an analytic refutation of an abstract measurement of the supposed degree by which humans suffer. Later in the same paragraph, Lewis speaks of how horrible the intensity of level x is, yet there can be no one who suffers a greater level. Thus, a sum of intensities is irrelevant insofar as it seeks to describe the precise degree of an individual’s suffering. A sum may help analyze the aggregate number of those who suffer, but never the existential *level* at which a single individual suffers.

In Lewis, the tribulations of today signify at least one thing, but there is still the work of redemption to be done. According to Lewis, if the troubles of the world are used as a means of

¹⁰² Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 116.

¹⁰³ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 116.

redemption, God's redemptive work is still at hand. Lewis believes that this will be the case until there is no more redeeming to be done.¹⁰⁴ Although the labor of salvation is not always apparent, it can undoubtedly be classified as essential to God's complex, yet *good* will for the earth and His image-bearing creatures—creatures who will eventually overcome the machinations of evil, if not in this life then in the world to come.

The resurrection of Jesus provides concrete hope, and Christian tradition teaches there *will* be a day when evil is no more. The final book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation, describes the heavenly battle between the forces of Satan and the forces of God, and ultimately, it prophesies the finality of evil.

“‘[God] 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.’”¹⁰⁵

The passage tells of a coming time when evil and suffering will be wiped away for eternity, establishing a new, sinless order. The power of this truth, although referring to a future state of affairs, can meaningfully impact common life today. Ellul argues that the reality of God's eternal victory over evil is inherently *more real* than the momentary afflictions of today. This idea functions in the same way as does Christians' identification of themselves as “saved” individuals—as persons who are “already” loved by God but who have “not yet” fully realized the promise of God's compassion in their lives. Being “saved” refers to eternal security found in the redemption brought about by Jesus Christ. However, to say someone is “saved” while they are still on earth is counterintuitive. How can someone be “saved” when they are still subject to the worst possibilities of earthly life? For Ellul, being “saved” therefore, is a complex “already” but still “not yet” reality

¹⁰⁴ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 114.

¹⁰⁵ Revelation 21:4.

fundamentally present in this life but ultimately based on a future state of affairs overseen by God's embrace of all His children.

“As a result, it means causing the future to intervene as an explosive power in the present, believing that future events are more important and true than present ones, and coming to understand and grasp the present by way of the future, governing it by the future in the same way that the historian stands over the past.”¹⁰⁶

This truth is best illustrated by the rhetorical power of a compelling story with a satisfactory ending. In the course of such a story, there are likely significant problems, even pain and suffering for the story's protagonist; yet, the pain and suffering are recontextualized by assigning to such difficulties a sense of meaning that is eventually revealed at the story's end. When restoration and joy triumph at the end of the saga, the pain and trauma remain a significant part of the story, *but* they are now viewed with a new sense of purposeful importance that, in this sense, render such suffering ultimately fleeting.¹⁰⁷ This is the case, even more so, with the Christian narrative. The end of the story is not merely of the same value as the beginning and middle of the story because the end *is the beginning* of a life lived with a sense of destiny that ultimately results in an eternity of joy. Since it is impossible to compare the finite with the infinite, the end of the Christian's life on earth is so magnificently glorious and valuable that no suffering or evil could ever outweigh what God has established for those who come to Him in faith through Jesus Christ. The ball is in our court. Christians *must* live in hope—indeed, hope is the virtue by which Christians contextualize every moment of their lives.

¹⁰⁶ Ellul, 32.

¹⁰⁷ I am indebted to Professor Phillip Cary of Eastern University who introduced and explained this idea to me over a conversation.

Original sin entered by free choice after the tempter asked, “Did God really say that?” In the same way, we doubt and interrogate God when *He has already spoken*. God has overcome evil, and Christians ought not to fear the chaos and suffering in this temporal existence because the eternal joy of life with God is of unsurpassingly greater value. Although the future *good* is shrouded in mystery, like the resurrection of Christ was, God calls all to believe, even when they cannot see clearly.

Evil will not have the final say; *God will*. Despite the complexity of God’s goodness, He has proven Himself faithful. Theologian William Abraham powerfully testified to this amidst the grief following the loss of his son:

“If one adds in, as I would, the crucial place of divine providence in life, and the even more crucial place of divine revelation in Israel and in Jesus Christ, then in fact I am more than ready to defend both the almighty power of God and the unsurpassed goodness of God as compatible with the experience I have been through.”¹⁰⁸

God’s goodness and power are not diminished by evil. No intellectual argument nor experiential reason rationally dismantles the case for the Christian God on the grounds of evil’s existence. Although the goodness of God may be complex, our trust is merited by His trustworthiness. His revelation is a means of vindication, and God has proven His redemptive power by taking the crucifixion of Jesus and raising Him in resurrecting power. Death has died, and we are promised eternal life through the One who conquered death.

The tangible hope of Christianity is found even in situations that seem hopeless. Amidst the tension of evil’s presence in the world, there *is* a way forward for those whose hope is in Jesus Christ. *Trust the complex good of God.*

¹⁰⁸ Abraham, 11.

“For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

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