

Conversations about God, Suffering & Evil

A. How can we reconcile that God is good, in control, and full of love when we experience and see suffering and evil in this world and in our lives?

Key Foundations

1. Determine whether or not you believe the Bible to be the truthful, without error, word of God.

Briefly, there are four primary reasons that we can believe the Bible to be true...

Archaeological evidence

There has never been one archaeological finding throughout the history of the world that has contradicted the Bible. In fact, the Bible has actually helped archaeologists in their findings. Multiple times, there have been people groups and cities mentioned in the Bible that historians doubted ever existed, until archaeologists discovered findings that proved the Bible to be true.

Prophecy evidence

This may be the strongest argument of them all. Most would agree that a very high measure of credibility would be given to a person or book that accurately predicts future events in great detail. The Bible contains over 1,000 fulfilled prophecies. There has never been one prophecy made in scripture that was not accurately fulfilled. There is no other "holy book" that compares to making the attempt of prophecy as we see in the Bible.

Belief of the Historical Church

Throughout history, the Church has considered the Bible to be the infallible, inerrant Word of God, as evidenced in the willingness of countless followers to give up their lives. To be certain, there is a difference between the martyrs of the early church (who actually saw with their own eyes) and martyrs of all religions today who give up their lives (or blow themselves up).

The early Church consisted of people who saw with their own eyes what we read in the Bible. They knew it to be true, and no one in their right mind would give up their life for something that they knew was not true. Today, we must believe, by faith, that what we read is historically accurate. The significant fact is that 11 of 12 disciples that followed Jesus and saw with their own eyes (i.e., knew to be true) were willing to die excruciatingly painful deaths because of what they believed.

Manuscript Preservation

There is common theory that the accuracy of the Bible has been reduced over time as the Bible was communicated from one generation to the next. However, the Dead Sea Scrolls practically squash that theory. In 1947, Bedouin herdsman found (in a cave near the Dead Sea) ancient manuscripts of nearly every Old Testament book dating back to 150 B.C. with an over 99.5% accuracy with today's manuscripts.

Additionally, there exist today over 24,000 ancient manuscript copies of the New Testament, with an accuracy to each other of over 99.5%. The next texts that most would agree to be historically true and reliable are Homer's *Iliad* (of which there are 643 copies in existence) and Caesar's *Gallic Wars* (of which there are 10 copies in existence).

2. Discover the truth about God (i.e., His character, who He is, how He relates to you).

a. Is God sovereign (in control of all things)?

“Only I can tell you what is going to happen even before it happens. Everything I plan will come to pass, for I do whatever I wish.” *Isaiah 46:10*

The Lord shatters the plans of the nations and thwarts all their schemes. But the Lord’s plans stand firm forever; His intentions can never be shaken. *Psalms 33:10-11*

I am the one who creates the light and makes the darkness. I am the one who sends good times and bad times. I, the Lord, am the one who does these things. *Isaiah 45:7*

Look now; I myself am He! There is no god other than me! I am the one who kills and gives life; I am the one who wounds and heals; no one delivers from my power. *Deuteronomy 32:39*

“Who makes the mouth?” the Lord asked him, “Who makes people so they can speak or not speak, hear or not hear, see or not see? Is it not I the Lord?” *Exodus 4:11*

The Lord makes one poor and another rich; He brings one down and lifts one up. *1 Samuel 2:7*

In his heart, a man plans his ways, but the Lord determines his steps. *Proverbs 16:9*

Not even a sparrow, worth only half a penny, can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. *Matthew 10:29-30*

Fire and hail, snow and storm, wind and weather that obey him. *Psalms 148:8*

“I kept the rain from falling when you needed it most, ruining all of your crops. I sent rain on one town but withheld it from another. Rain fell on one field, while another field withered away.” *Amos 4:7*

Now the Lord had arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights. *Jonah 1:17*

We may throw the dice, but the Lord determines how they fall. *Proverbs 16:33*

For everything comes from Him; everything exists by His power and is intended for His glory. To Him be glory evermore. Amen. *Romans 11:36*

b. Is God just?

O God, you take no pleasure in wickedness; you cannot tolerate the slightest sin. *Psalms 5:4*

God is a judge who is perfectly fair. He is angry with the wicked every day. *Psalms 7:11*

He will judge the world with justice and rule the nations with fairness. *Psalm 9:8*

Your throne is founded on two strong pillars - righteousness and justice. Unfailing love and truth walk before you as attendants. *Psalm 89:14*

"For I, the Lord, love justice. I hate robbery and wrongdoing." *Isaiah 61:8a*

"Do you think," asks the Sovereign Lord, "that I like to see wicked people die? Of course not! I only want them to turn from their wicked ways and live. *Ezekiel 18:23*

c. Is God righteous?

God is light and there is no darkness in Him at all. *1 John 1:5*

d. Is God perfect and holy?

Day after day and night after night they keep on saying, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty - the One who always was, who is, and who is still to come."
Revelation 4:8

e. Is God loving, merciful, and gracious?

The Lord says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you. *Psalm 32:8*

The steps of the Godly are directed by the lord, he delights in every detail of their lives. Though they stumble, they will not fall. For the Lord holds them by the hand.
Psalm 37:23-24

You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book. *Psalm 56:8*

But you, O Lord, are a merciful and gracious God, slow to get angry, full of unfailing love and truth. *Psalm 86:15*

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! His faithful love endures forever. *Psalm 118:1*

Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for a child she has borne? But, even if that were possible, I would not forget you! See, I have written your name on my hand. *Isaiah 49:15, 16*

For the mountains may depart and the hills disappear, but even then I will remain loyal to you. My covenant of blessing will never be broken," says the Lord who has mercy on you. *Isaiah 54:10*

God showed how much He loved us by sending His only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through Him. This is real love - not that we loved Him, but that He loved us and sent His Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. *1 John 4:9-10*

f. Does God love you?

"I have loved you deeply," says the Lord. *Malachi 1:2*

I have loved you with an everlasting love. *Jeremiah 31:3*

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God. *Romans 5:6-11*

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit. *Romans 8:1-4*

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. *Ephesians 2:8-10*

3. Discover the truth about you (i.e. your character, who you are, how you relate to God).

Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it. *James 4:17*

As the Scripture says, "No one is good - not even one. No one has real understanding; no one is seeking God. All have turned away from God; all have gone wrong. No one does good, not even one. *Romans 3:10-12*

For the sinful nature is always hostile to God - it never did obey God's laws, and it never will. That is why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God. *Romans 8:7, 8*

For I was born a sinner - yes, from the moment my mother conceived me. *Psalms 51:5*

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. *Romans 3:23*

I don't understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do the very thing I hate. I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong, and my bad conscience shows that I agree that the law is good. But, I can't help myself, because it is sin inside me that makes me do these evil things. *Romans 7:15-17*

4. Discover the truth about the state of our world, and the effects of sin upon it.

"Since you listened to your wife and ate from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat, the ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. *Genesis 3:17-18*

Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope,²¹ the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. *Romans 8:20-21*

5. Discover the truth about God's heart and plans for redemption, reconciliation and restoration.

"Look! I am creating new heavens and a new earth- so wonderful that no one will even think about the old ones anymore. ...And the sound of weeping and crying will be heard no more." *Isaiah 65:17-18*

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. *2 Corinthians 5:17-19*

For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross. This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault. *Colossians 1:19-22*

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." *Revelation 21:1-4*

6. Discover the truth about God's ability to use all things, even that which is evil, to accomplish that which is good.

Remember how the Lord your God led you through the wilderness for forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would really obey his commands. Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people need more than bread for their life; real life comes by feeding on every word of the Lord. *Deuteronomy 8:2-3*

I have refined you, but not in the way that silver is refined. Rather, I have refined you in the furnace of suffering. *Isaiah 48:10*

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "they are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." *Jeremiah 29:11*

And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. *Romans 5:3-5*

And since we are his children, we will share in his treasures- for everything God gives to his Son, Christ, is ours, too. But, if we are to share in his glory, we must also share in his suffering. *Romans 8:17*

And we know that God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. *Romans 8:28*

Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweigh them all. *2 Corinthians 4:16-17*

Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything. *James 1:2-4*

These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold- and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. *1 Peter 1:7*

The Bible has much to say about suffering. There are countless stories of suffering and God's purposes in each story. While David, Job, Daniel, Hosea, Jonah, the disciples, Paul and countless others experienced tremendous suffering for their love of God, Joseph's story is my favorite story of faithfulness in suffering. Though he did not know why he suffered the way he did, he did not lose faith in God. He believed God controlled his suffering and waited patiently as God's purposes unfolded. His story is found in Genesis chapters 37-50. The defining moment is the following verse that proclaims Joseph's understanding of God's role in his

suffering. This verse is also a perfect example of how man's "free will" and God's sovereignty can co-exist for the good of man and the glory of God.

You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. *Genesis 50:20*

We can only find peace in the midst of suffering when we understand that God is in complete control. Nothing comes our way without first passing through his loving hands. This is the test of our faith. Our lives include great pain and there is much that we do not understand. We must trust that God has a purpose in it all. Only then will we find peace in the presence of pain.

"Just as I have sent all these calamities upon them, so I will do all the good I have promised them. I, the Lord, have spoken." *Jeremiah 32:42*

Finally, I point to the greatest example of injustice in all of Scripture. Over 2,000 years ago a sinless, innocent man who had not broken one law (neither by thought, word, or deed) in his entire life was brutally beaten and executed as if he were the worst of all criminals. We often can't understand why bad, evil, and unjust things happen to us or others in this world, and it seems as if God certainly must not have anything to do with those things when they happen. But, if the scriptures are clear that God was in complete control of the most unjust event in human history, the execution of Jesus, then we must know that God is also in control of our sufferings. We know that, to Jesus' family and followers, it seemed impossible that God could make anything good come out of the intentional unjust execution of a righteous man. We also know that Satan thought he had finally won. But, God had a plan, and that plan was to use the death and sufferings of His Son to pay for the sins of the whole world, and then on the third day, to raise Jesus from the dead, which would defeat sin, death, and Satan for all time, and to redeem (i.e. buy back) mankind and restore us to fellowship with Him. If God can use Jesus' sufferings for good, then He can certainly use our sufferings for good, too. "God often uses what He hates to accomplish what He loves." – Randy Pope

Wasn't it clearly predicted by the prophets that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his time of glory? *Luke 24:26*

But you followed God's prearranged plan. With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to the cross and murdered him. *Acts 2:23*

But it was the Lord's good plan to crush him and fill him with grief. *Isaiah 53:10*

In fact, everything they did occurred according to your eternal will and plan. *Acts 4:28*

B. How do we explain this to our kids?

God is perfectly good, righteous, just, and holy. God is love. God has a plan for us and is in control of everything that happens in our lives and in this world.

We (mankind) were once in perfect unity and relationship with God. We (mankind) disobeyed God by trying to be our own god, and as a result, sin, evil, and decay entered into the fabric of every human being

and into the world, itself. Sin separated us from God and has infected and affected everyone and everything. Unable to reverse the affects of sin and/or save ourselves, we became lost and without hope.

God, in His infinite kindness and grace, did the unthinkable and what we thought was impossible. He built a bridge to connect us back into relationship with Him. He rescued us. The price of our rescue was immense. God sacrificed His Son by offering Jesus up to take our punishment for sin, and then in exchange, Jesus gave us His righteousness so that we could, once again be acceptable to God and able to stand in His presence.

So now, through Jesus, we have been reconciled to God, but the affects of sin remain in this world. We live with them every day. **We don't really know why God allows such bad things to happen, but we know and have God's promise that the horrible, tragic, and evil things that happen to us and in this world, are not without purpose.** He has a plan, and we can take comfort that God is able to use the tragedies of life and the evil and unjust things that happen in our lives and in this world to accomplish good.

One day (in this life or in eternity), we'll understand why God allowed so many bad things to happen and what it was that He was accomplishing in those bad things, and when we do finally understand, we'll bow before God and praise Him because His plans are good... all of them.

"My thoughts are completely different from yours," says the Lord. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts." *Isaiah 55:8-9*

Oh, what a wonderful God we have! How great are His riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is to understand His decisions and His methods! For who can know what the Lord is thinking? Who knows enough to be His counselor? For everything comes from Him; everything exists by His power and is intended for His glory. To Him be glory evermore. Amen. *Romans 11:33-34, 36*

But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." *1 Corinthians 2:9*

C. Verses of Comfort in Suffering

Below are some incredible verses that we can cling to and embrace when we are in the valley of suffering. Know that God is not only WITH you, He is FOR you. He loves you, and He has a purpose in your sufferings.

"He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart." *Isaiah 40:11a*

"Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." *Luke 12:32*

Do not be afraid as you go out to fight today! Do not lose heart or panic. For the Lord your God is going with you! He will fight for you against your enemies, and he will give you victory! *Deuteronomy 20:3b-4*

Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord is the one who goes before you. He will be with you; he will neither fail you nor forsake you. *Deuteronomy 31:8*

The eyes of the Lord search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. *2 Chronicles 16:9a*

The Lord's promises are pure, like silver refined in a furnace, purified seven times over. *Psalms 12:6*

The Lord says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you. *Psalms 32:8*

The steps of the Godly are directed by the Lord, he delights in every detail of their lives. Though they stumble, they will not fall. For the Lord holds them by the hand. *Psalms 37:23-24*

Trust me in times of trouble, and I will rescue you, and you will give me glory. *Psalms 50:15*

When they walk through the valley of weeping, it will become a place of refreshing springs, where pools of blessing collect after the rains. *Psalms 84:6*

But the Godly will flourish like palm trees and grow strong like the cedars of Lebanon. *Psalms 92:12*

And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee saying, "This is the way, walk ye in it; when you turn to the right hand and when you turn to the left. *Isaiah 30:21*

Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. *Isaiah 41:10*

When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through difficulty, you will not drown! When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. *Isaiah 43:2-3a*

For the mountains may depart and the hills disappear, but even then I will remain loyal to you. My covenant of blessing will never be broken," says the Lord who has mercy on you. *Isaiah 54:10*

To all who mourn in Israel, he will give beauty for ashes, joy instead of mourning, praise instead of despair. For the Lord has planted them like strong and graceful oaks for his own glory. *Isaiah 61:3*

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "they are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." *Jeremiah 29:11*

"I will repay you for the years that the locusts have eaten..." *Joel 2:25*

"The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." *Zephaniah 3:17*

And we know that God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. *Romans 8:28*

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him. *1 Corinthians 2:10*

"I am leaving you a gift- peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give you isn't like the peace the world gives, so don't be troubled or afraid." – Jesus *John 14:27*

"Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But, take heart: I have overcome the world." - Jesus *John 16:33*

Without wavering, let us hold tightly to the hope we say we have, for God can be trusted to keep his promises. *Hebrews 10:23*