

NEW YORK TIMES Bestseller

TIMOTHY  
KELLER

*Belief in an Age of Skepticism*

The Reason  
for God

With a New Preface



# THE REASON FOR GOD

*Belief in an Age of Skepticism*

TIMOTHY KELLER



PENGUIN BOOKS

## TWO

### HOW COULD A GOOD GOD ALLOW SUFFERING?

*“I just don’t believe the God of Christianity exists,” said Hillary, an undergrad English major. “God allows terrible suffering in the world. So he might be either all-powerful but not good enough to end evil and suffering, or else he might be all-good but not powerful enough to end evil and suffering. Either way the all-good, all-powerful God of the Bible couldn’t exist.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“This isn’t a philosophical issue to me,” added Rob, Hillary’s boyfriend. “This is personal. I won’t believe in a God who allows suffering, even if he, she, or it exists. Maybe God exists. Maybe not. But if he does, he can’t be trusted.”*

**F**OR many people it is not the exclusivity of Christianity that poses the biggest problem, it is the presence of evil and suffering in the world. Some find unjust suffering to be a philosophical problem, calling into question the very existence of God. For others it is an intensely personal issue. They don’t care about the abstract question of whether God exists or not—they refuse to trust or believe in any God who allows history and life to proceed as it has.

In December 2004, a massive tsunami killed more than 250,000 people around the rim of the Indian Ocean. Over the following weeks, newspapers and magazines were full of letters and articles asking “Where was God?” One reporter wrote: “If God is God, he’s not good. If God is good, he’s not God. You can’t have it both ways, especially after the Indian Ocean catastrophe.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the confident assertion of the columnist, the effort to demonstrate that evil disproves the existence of God “is now acknowledged on (almost) all sides to be completely bankrupt.”<sup>3</sup> Why?

Evil and Suffering Isn’t Evidence *Against* God

Philosopher J. L. Mackie makes this case against God in his book *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford, 1982). He states it this way: If a good and powerful God exists, he would not allow pointless evil, but because there *is* much unjustifiable, pointless evil in the world, the traditional good and powerful God could not exist. Some other god or no god may exist, but not the traditional God.<sup>4</sup> Many other philosophers have identified a major flaw in this reasoning. Tucked away within the assertion that the world is filled with pointless evil is a hidden premise, namely, that if evil appears pointless to me, then it must *be* pointless.

This reasoning is, of course, fallacious. Just because you can't see or imagine a good reason why God might allow something to happen doesn't mean there can't be one. Again we see lurking within supposedly hard-nosed skepticism an enormous faith in one's own cognitive faculties. If our minds can't plumb the depths of the universe for good answers to suffering, well, then, there can't be any! This is blind faith of a high order.

The fallacy at the heart of this argument has been illustrated by the "no-see-ums" illustration of Alvin Plantinga. If you look into your pup tent for a St. Bernard, and you don't see one, it is reasonable to assume that there is no St. Bernard in your tent. But if you look into your pup tent for a "no-see-um" (an extremely small insect with a bite out of all proportion to its size) and you don't see any, it is not reasonable to assume they aren't there. Because, after all, no one can see 'em. Many assume that if there were good reasons for the existence of evil, they would be accessible to our minds, more like St. Bernards than like no-see-ums, but why should that be the case?<sup>5</sup>

This argument against God doesn't hold up, not only to logic but also to experience. As a pastor, I've often preached on the story of Joseph in Genesis. Joseph was an arrogant young man who was hated by his brothers. In their anger at him, they imprisoned him in a pit and then sold him into a life of slavery and misery in Egypt. Doubtless Joseph prayed to God to help him escape, but no help was forthcoming, and into slavery he went. Though he experienced years of bondage and misery, Joseph's character was refined and strengthened by his trials. Eventually he rose up to become a prime minister of Egypt who saved thousands of lives and even his own family from starvation. If God had not allowed Joseph's years of suffering, he never would have been such a powerful agent for social justice and spiritual healing.

Whenever I preach on this text, I hear from many people who identify with that narrative. Many people have to admit that most of what they really needed for success in life came to them through their most difficult and painful experiences. Some look back on an illness and recognize that it was an

irreplaceable season of personal and spiritual growth for them. I have survived a bout with cancer and my wife has suffered with Crohn's disease for years, and we would both attest to this.

I knew a man in my first parish who had lost most of his eyesight after he was shot in the face during a drug deal gone bad. He told me that he had been an extremely selfish and cruel person, but he had always blamed his constant legal and relational problems on others. The loss of his sight had devastated him, but it had also profoundly humbled him. "As my physical eyes were closed, my spiritual eyes were opened, as it were. I finally saw how I'd been treating people. I changed, and now for the first time in my life I have friends, real friends. It was a terrible price to pay, and yet I must say it was worth it. I finally have what makes life worthwhile."

Though none of these people are grateful for the tragedies themselves, they would not trade the insight, character, and strength they had gotten from them for anything. With time and perspective most of us can see good reasons for at least *some* of the tragedy and pain that occurs in life. Why couldn't it be possible that, from God's vantage point, there are good reasons for all of them?

If you have a God great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in the world, then you have (at the same moment) a God great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know. Indeed, you can't have it both ways.

### Evil and Suffering May Be (If Anything) Evidence *for* God

Horrendous, inexplicable suffering, though it cannot disprove God, is nonetheless a problem for the believer in the Bible. However, it is perhaps an even greater problem for nonbelievers. C. S. Lewis described how he had originally rejected the idea of God because of the cruelty of life. Then he came to realize that evil was even more problematic for his new atheism. In the end, he realized that suffering provided a better argument for God's existence than one against it.

*My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of "just" and unjust"?...What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?...Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on*

*saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies.... Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple.*<sup>6</sup>

Lewis recognized that modern objections to God are based on a sense of fair play and justice. People, we believe, *ought* not to suffer, be excluded, die of hunger or oppression. But the evolutionary mechanism of natural selection *depends* on death, destruction, and violence of the strong against the weak—these things are all perfectly natural. On what basis, then, does the atheist judge the natural world to be horribly wrong, unfair, and unjust? The nonbeliever in God doesn't have a good basis for being outraged at injustice, which, as Lewis points out, was the reason for objecting to God in the first place. If you are *sure* that this natural world is unjust and filled with evil, you are assuming the reality of some extra-natural (or supernatural) standard by which to make your judgment. The philosopher Alvin Plantinga said it like this:

*Could there really be any such thing as horrifying wickedness [if there were no God and we just evolved]? I don't see how. There can be such a thing only if there is a way that rational creatures are supposed to live, obliged to live.... A [secular] way of looking at the world has no place for genuine moral obligation of any sort...and thus no way to say there is such a thing as genuine and appalling wickedness. Accordingly, if you think there really is such a thing as horrifying wickedness (...and not just an illusion of some sort), then you have a powerful...argument for the reality of God].*<sup>7</sup>

In short, the problem of tragedy, suffering, and injustice is a problem for everyone. It is at least as big a problem for nonbelief in God as for belief. It is therefore a mistake, though an understandable one, to think that if you abandon belief in God it somehow makes the problem of evil easier to handle.

A WOMAN IN MY CHURCH once confronted me about sermon illustrations in which evil events turned out for the good. She had lost a husband in an act of violence during a robbery. She also had several children with severe mental and emotional problems. She insisted that for every one story in which evil turns out for good there are one hundred in which there is no conceivable silver lining. In the same way, much of the discussion so far in this chapter may sound cold and irrelevant to a real-life sufferer. "So what if suffering and evil doesn't logically

disprove God?” such a person might say. “I’m still angry. All this philosophizing does *not* get the Christian God ‘off the hook’ for the world’s evil and suffering!” In response the philosopher Peter Kreeft points out that the Christian God came to earth to deliberately put himself *on* the hook of human suffering. In Jesus Christ, God experienced the greatest depths of pain. Therefore, though Christianity does not provide the reason for each experience of pain, it provides deep resources for actually facing suffering with hope and courage rather than bitterness and despair.

### Comparing Jesus to the Martyrs

The gospel narratives all show that Jesus did not face his approaching death with anything like the aplomb and fearlessness that was widely expected in a spiritual hero. The well-known Maccabean martyrs, who suffered under the Syrian rule of Antiochus Epiphanes, were the paradigms for spiritual courage in the face of persecution. They were famous for speaking defiantly and confidently of God even as they were having limbs cut off. Contrast that with the demeanor of Jesus, who is depicted as profoundly shaken by his impending doom. “...He began to be deeply distressed and troubled” saying, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Mark 14:33-34). Luke describes Jesus before his death as being in “agony” and describes a man with all the signs of being in physical shock (Luke 22:44). Matthew, Mark, and Luke all show Jesus trying to avoid death, asking the Father if there isn’t some way out of it (“If it be your will...take this cup from me”—Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). Finally, on the cross itself, Jesus does not, as the Maccabean martyrs, confidently call onlookers to be faithful to God. Rather, he cries out that God has forsaken him (Matthew 27:46).

On the cross, Jesus suffered a three-hour-long death by slow suffocation and blood loss. As terribly painful as that was, there have been far more excruciating and horrible deaths that martyrs have faced with far greater confidence and calmness. Two famous examples are Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, who were burned at the stake at Oxford in 1555 for their Protestant convictions. As the flames leapt up, Latimer was heard to say calmly, “Be of good comfort, Mr. Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a candle by God’s grace, in England, as I trust never shall be put out.”

Why was Jesus so much more overwhelmed by his death than others have been, even more than his own followers?

## The Suffering of God

To understand Jesus's suffering at the end of the gospels, we must remember how he is introduced at their beginning. The gospel writer John, in his first chapter, introduces us to the mysterious but crucial concept of God as tri-personal. The Son of God was not created but took part in creation and has lived throughout all eternity "in the bosom of the Father" (John 1:18)—that is, in a relationship of absolute intimacy and love. But at the end of his life he was cut off from the Father.

There may be no greater inner agony than the loss of a relationship we desperately want. If a mild acquaintance turns on you, condemns and criticizes you, and says she never wants to see you again, it is painful. If someone you're dating does the same thing, it is qualitatively more painful. But if your spouse does this to you, or if one of your parents does this to you when you're still a child, the psychological damage is infinitely worse.

We cannot fathom, however, what it would be like to lose not just spousal love or parental love that has lasted several years, but the infinite love of the Father that Jesus had from all eternity. Jesus's sufferings would have been eternally unbearable. Christian theology has always recognized that Jesus bore, as the substitute in our place, the endless exclusion from God that the human race has merited. In the Garden of Gethsemane, even the beginning and foretaste of this experience began to put Jesus into a state of shock. New Testament scholar Bill Lane writes: "Jesus came to be with the Father for an interlude before his betrayal, but found hell rather than heaven opened before him, and he staggered."<sup>8</sup> On the cross, Jesus's cry of dereliction—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—is a deeply relational statement. Lane writes: "The cry has a ruthless authenticity... Jesus did not die renouncing God. Even in the inferno of abandonment he did not surrender his faith in God but expressed his anguished prayer in a cry of affirmation, 'My God, my God.'"<sup>9</sup> Jesus still uses the language of intimacy—"my God"—even as he experiences infinite separation from the Father.

## Redemption and Suffering

The death of Jesus was qualitatively different from any other death. The physical pain was nothing compared to the spiritual experience of cosmic abandonment.<sup>10</sup> Christianity alone among the world religions claims that God became uniquely and fully human in Jesus Christ and therefore knows firsthand despair, rejection,



loneliness, poverty, bereavement, torture, and imprisonment. On the cross he went beyond even the worst human suffering and experienced cosmic rejection and pain that exceeds ours as infinitely as his knowledge and power exceeds ours. In his death, God suffers in love, identifying with the abandoned and godforsaken.<sup>11</sup> Why did he do it? The Bible says that Jesus came on a rescue mission for creation. He had to pay for our sins so that someday he can end evil and suffering without ending us.

Let's see where this has brought us. If we again ask the question: "Why does God allow evil and suffering to continue?" and we look at the cross of Jesus, we still do not know what the answer is. However, we now know what the answer isn't. It can't be that he doesn't love us. It can't be that he is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he was willing to take it on himself. Albert Camus understood this when he wrote:

*[Christ] the god-man suffers too, with patience. Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to him since he suffers and dies. The night on Golgotha is so important in the history of man only because, in its shadows, the divinity ostensibly abandoned its traditional privilege, and lived through to the end, despair included, the agony of death. Thus is explained the "Lama sabachthani" and the frightful doubt of Christ in agony.*<sup>12</sup>

So, if we embrace the Christian teaching that Jesus is God and that he went to the Cross, then we have deep consolation and strength to face the brutal realities of life on earth. We can know that God is truly *Immanuel*—God *with us*—even in our worst sufferings.

### Resurrection and Suffering

I think we need something more than knowing God is with us in our difficulties. We also need hope that our suffering is "not in vain." Have you ever noticed how desperate the families of lost loved ones are to say that? They work to reform laws or change social conditions that led to the death. They need to believe that the death of their loved ones has led to new life, that the injustice has led to greater justice.

For the one who suffers, the Christian faith provides as a resource not just its teaching on the Cross but also the fact of the resurrection. The Bible teaches that

the future is not an immaterial “paradise” but a new heaven and a new earth. In Revelation 21, we do not see human beings being taken out of this world into heaven, but rather heaven coming down and cleansing, renewing, and perfecting this material world. The secular view of things, of course, sees no future restoration after death or history. And Eastern religions believe we lose our individuality and return to the great All-soul, so our material lives in this world are gone forever. Even religions that believe in a heavenly paradise consider it a consolation for the losses and pain of this life and all the joys that might have been.

The Biblical view of things is resurrection—not a future that is just a *consolation* for the life we never had but a *restoration* of the life you always wanted. This means that every horrible thing that ever happened will not only be undone and repaired but will in some way make the eventual glory and joy even greater.

A few years ago I had a horrible nightmare in which I dreamed that everyone in my family had died. When I awoke my relief was enormous—but there was much more than just relief. My delight in each member of my family was tremendously enriched. I looked at each one and realized how grateful I was for them, how deeply I loved them. Why? My joy had been greatly magnified by the nightmare. My delight upon awaking took the terror up into itself, as it were, so that in the end my love for them was only greater for my having lost them and found them again. This same dynamic is at work when you lose some possession you take for granted. When you find it again (having thought it was gone forever) you cherish and appreciate it in a far deeper way.

In Greek (specifically Stoic) philosophy there was a belief that history was an endless cycle. Every so often the universe would wind down and burn up in a great conflagration called a *palengenesia*, after which history, having been purified, started over. But in Matthew 19:28 Jesus spoke of his return to earth as *the palingenesis*. “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things (Greek *palingenesis*), the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne.” This was a radically new concept. Jesus insisted that his return will be with such power that the very material world and universe will be purged of all decay and brokenness. All will be healed and all might-have-beens will *be*.

Just after the climax of the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam Gamgee discovers that his friend Gandalf was not dead (as he thought) but alive. He cries, “I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself! *Is everything sad going to come untrue?*”<sup>13</sup> The answer of Christianity to that question is—yes. Everything sad is going to come untrue and it will somehow be *greater* for having once been broken and lost.

Embracing the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and Cross brings profound consolation in the face of suffering. The doctrine of the resurrection can instill us with a powerful hope. It promises that we will get the life we most longed for, but it will be an infinitely more glorious world than if there had never been the need for bravery, endurance, sacrifice, or salvation.<sup>14</sup>

Dostoevsky put it perfectly when he wrote:

*I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood that they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.*<sup>15</sup>

More succinctly, C. S. Lewis wrote:

*They say of some temporal suffering, "No future bliss can make up for it," not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory.*<sup>16</sup>

This is the ultimate defeat of evil and suffering. It will not only be ended but so radically vanquished that what has happened will only serve to make our future life and joy infinitely greater.