

St Augustine Enchiridion ('Handbook')



St Augustine wrote a book called the *Enchiridion* (a Latin word which means 'handbook'). In it, Augustine asks himself the question of why there is evil and suffering in the world if God is good and all powerful. He gives three separate but related answers to the question:

1. Evil helps us appreciate good



Augustine's first answer is that the existence of evil helps people to appreciate the good in the world which otherwise they might not notice. Sometimes we don't appreciate the good things we have until they are not there anymore. Most of us don't appreciate how wonderful being healthy is, until we have the experience of being unwell.

'And in the universe, even that which is called evil, when it is regulated and put in its own place, only enhances our admiration of the good; for we enjoy and value the good more when we compare it to evil.'
St Augustine, *Enchiridion* 3:11

2. Evil is not a thing



Augustine's second answer is that God does not cause or permit evil because evil isn't even a thing. Evil is just the absence of good things. God makes a world full of good things but through our poor choices we sometimes cause those good things to become absent from the world. Another word for an absence is a 'privation'. When we experience evil and suffering we are not experiencing anything at all, we are just being deprived of the good things we have. God does not want us to be deprived of these good things but either our choices have led to these privations or God allows them for the sake of some greater good.

'For what is that which we call evil but the absence of good? Disease and wounds mean nothing but the absence of health; for when a cure is effected, that does not mean that the evils go away from the body and dwell elsewhere: they altogether cease to exist.'
St Augustine, *Enchiridion* 3:11

3. Evil makes us better



Augustine's third answer is God allows suffering precisely because he is omnipotent and good. He allows evil because in his goodness and power he is able to bring a greater good out of suffering. In this answer, St Augustine is saying that sometimes we arrive at a place of much greater happiness through overcoming evil and suffering, than we could ever have done without it. In other words, sometimes suffering is good for us!

'For the Almighty God, who has supreme power over all things, being Himself supremely good, would never permit the existence of anything evil, if he were not so omnipotent and good that He can bring good even out of evil.' - St Augustine, *Enchiridion* 3:11

EVIL & SUFFERING is **NOT** A PROBLEM FOR CHRISTIANS



The Meaning of Suffering is a Mystery

For Catholics, the meaning of suffering is a MYSTERY and it might be the case that God uses suffering to bring about GREAT GOODS that would not have been possible without it. In the biblical Book of Job, God tells the long-suffering Job that he is just not capable of understanding the reasons why God chooses to do, or not do, certain things.



The Goodness of God



When Catholics use this term for God, they mean that God is the cause of goodness in others. God's goodness is called essential – that is to say, it is an unchanging aspect of who God is: God is supremely good. This is probably the best way to think about God's goodness, especially if God is beyond the human ability to describe what he is really like. Catholics would say, we call God good because the things he made are good: light, sea, earth, sky, animals, plants and human beings. God finished Creation by looking on all that has been created and he 'saw that it was good'. This is what Catholics mean when they say that the world reflects God's goodness – they mean, they can tell that God is good, because the world God created is good.

John Hick



John Hick was a Christian philosopher. He argued that God deliberately made a world which was not perfect because only in an imperfect world could human beings learn and grow. In this view, God values human freedom so much that he wants us to learn for ourselves how to be good and loving; God doesn't give these things to us 'ready-made'. Hick argues that it is only through suffering that human beings can come to perfection and 'grow in God's likeness'. This is a bit like thinking of human beings as athletes in training. Physical exercise is painful and difficult but it ultimately leads to a much stronger, healthier body. In the same way, Hick says, suffering is painful and difficult but it ultimately leads to a much stronger, healthier soul.

Suffering as a sign of love



Many wise thinkers have pointed out that **love is impossible without suffering**. Loving another person means that you would do anything for them, even if it means sacrificing your own pleasures and comforts. There is also another way that suffering and love are connected and that is because nothing lasts forever. If you love anyone, or even a pet, there will come a time when one of these people or animals leaves you, or dies. Few human beings go through life without ever experiencing the pain of grief and parting, but the suffering we experience when we lose someone we love reflects the depth of love we felt for them. The more we love a person, the more painful it is when we leave them. **Suffering and love, therefore, cannot be separated.**

Suffering as a proof of commitment



Jesus makes clear that being a disciple always requires sacrifice and a cost: To show we are really committed to something, we must experience suffering. *'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'* (Mark 8:34)

Suffering as blessing

One of the most difficult ideas to understand is that suffering can somehow be a blessing. In Matthew, Jesus lists those people that are 'blessed' and includes some strange categories of people: those who are poor, those who mourn, those who suffer. We would not usually consider these things to be blessings, but Jesus is pointing out that God's way of seeing the world is not our way, and that those who are lowest in the world's eyes are often closest to God.

The suffering and death of Jesus

At the heart of all the Gospel accounts is something called 'the Passion narrative'. 'Passion' comes from the Latin word for suffering, and these parts of the Gospel describe the last week in Jesus' life when he was arrested, tried, tortured and crucified. This story is so sacred to Christians because they believe that the death and resurrection of Jesus saved all humanity from their sins. Therefore, the suffering of Jesus brought about something very good.

Knowledge Check



1. What does *Enchiridion* translate to?
2. What are the three answers St Augustine gives as to how God can be omnibenevolent and omnipotent and evil and suffering exist?
3. Define the key concept: Privation
4. What does John Hick argue?
5. How might suffering be a sign of love?
6. How might suffering be proof of commitment?
7. How might suffering be a blessing?
8. What happens to the 'suffering servant' in Isaiah 53?

Choose a Task



1. Create a detailed mind-map (try to make this visual)
2. Create a multiple-choice quiz (aim for at least 10 questions)
3. Create a poster/leaflet

Exam Question



Explain different Christian responses to the problem of evil [8]

One metaphor which can help us to understand the importance of Jesus' suffering can be found in the Old Testament description of the suffering servant. From the earliest centuries, Christians saw this passage from Isaiah as a PROPHECY of Jesus and the way in which his suffering would bring about blessings for others. In this passage, a figure called 'the suffering servant', who is described as an unattractive person, is rejected by his own people and cruelly punished by them. But the author of Isaiah says that he was experiencing the sufferings that others deserved, so that they would not have to experience them. The acceptance of suffering by the 'suffering servant' somehow brought about their salvation. This is what Catholics believe about Jesus too.

The Suffering Servant – Isaiah 53

'He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him...He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.'