

I. Advanced organizer

- A. There are certain **experiences in life that transform the landscape of our day to day existence**, often in just a moment. Those moments that imprint. My long term memory is not great - I forget the ends of movies I've seen in the past, which means I can genuinely enjoy a good film more than once as long as it's been at least five years since I saw it. But when it comes to those life changing moments, the details stick. I recall a memory and I am transported to the chair I was sitting in - I know the color and texture of it. I see the way the light was in the room. I feel the weight of the phone in my hand as my sister told me the devastating news. As she described watching the ultrasound scans of her breasts and seeing mass after mass. I'll never forget the moment I understood she had a very serious cancer.
- B. I'm guessing if you've made it to adulthood, you too **have had at least one moment** like I describe that caught you by surprise, and changed the landscape in an instant. A moment that marks a transition - there was a before and there was an after.
- C. Well I'm starting by reflecting on these difficult, life-changing moments as we continue with our current teaching series we've been exploring called "Navigating the Maze: Finding God in the Midst of complexity". In this series we're exploring how we might find a way forward, connecting with God and one another through some of the complexities of life. Today's topic focuses on a difficult and important question in the life of faith: **Where is God in those terrible moments that transform everything?** What role does God play in the circumstances? These are the questions at the heart of **an area of theology known as "theodicy"**.
1. As some of you know, this year I've been participating in a certificate program through a local seminary on **Trauma and Spiritual Care**. This question of theodicy was the topic covered in our most recent class. As people of faith, if we are going to acknowledge the impact of trauma, and seek to provide care, we need a framework to think about it theologically. Our professor, Dr. Gregory Love, did a good job helpfully breaking down the ways Christians have navigated these issues. So today, I thought I'd share some of the learning I've been receiving in this class, with the hopes that you too will find it helpful.

II. (The Theodicy Paradox)

- A. First it's important to understand a bit more about why this issue is so complex; why navigating it can feel like a maze. I think it's helpful to start by acknowledging that at the heart of issues of theodicy there is a paradox. This **theodicy paradox** arises from trying to make sense of three faith-based statements that are seemingly contradictory when held together. Here are the three statements that theodicy is trying to puzzle through:
1. **God is all powerful.**
  2. **God is all good.**
  3. **Evil and suffering are real.**
- B. This is the theodicy paradox. How can these all be true at the same time? If God is so good and powerful, why doesn't God stop the suffering? Inevitably it's very difficult to hold all these things equally. Historically, some Christians have leaned into one or two of the statements and either not affirmed one of the other statements, or potentially have given it less weight. This has meant that Christian responses, as well as responses of people of faith from other traditions, often fall into different categories of response. Dr. Love suggested four such categories, that he believes most theodicy answers fall within, so I'm going to share those four kinds of responses, or theodicy models with you today.
1. So a couple things to note upfront: like our last teaching, this isn't going to be a **traditional sermon reflecting on a particular passage**. It's more of a theology overview

instead. Each of the points of view has places in Scripture that could support it and I'm happy to share those with you in another context.

2. Also, I'll name from the outset that in order to summarize the highlights of the curriculum for a whole class, I'm going to have to paint with pretty broad strokes. I won't be able to get into all the nuances of each view, but hopefully just hearing a little about each of the four models, you can get a sense of the framework, and I'm happy to follow up with more resources on any of them in the future.
  3. Finally, it's important to know from the outset that **none of these responses is perfect**. Each of them has strengths, and also some weaknesses or challenges to it; which is what makes navigating this theodicy question so complex. So if you're hoping I'm here to give you the "right answer" to theodicy, that's not my goal today. Rather, I'd like to present the four models and give you an invitation both to identify where you have seen these responses offered, as well as to think about your own response to the paradox. Which of these models is most helpful to you? Why? And has your perspective on these questions shifted over time? So as you hear these four models, I invite you to reflect on what feels familiar, what feels new, and what feels true for you and your own journey navigating theodicy.
- C. The first model I'll share is perhaps the most traditional answer for God's relationship to bad things happening. I'll call it the "**It's All Part of God's Plan**" response.
1. This point of view puts a strong emphasis on statement number one - that **God is all powerful**. And from this point of view, God asserts power over all circumstances. Everything unfolds in the way it does because **God designed it that way**. It is all in accordance with the Divine's forethought and planning. Whatever takes place must be the "will of God".
  2. Obviously this is assuring when good things happen - we can rest assured that we got that job because God wanted us to. It was all according to God's plan. But what about when terrible things happen? When we lose our job? When we get sick? When someone we love is killed in a random accident or a horrific act of violence? Does our faith assert that we must affirm this too is part of God's plan?
  3. Under our first model, the answer is essentially, "yes". We may not understand it - **God's plan may be hidden to us**, but God is still executing a good plan, even if we can't see how the plan exactly is good.
  4. One famous example of this traditional model comes from the voice of John Calvin, back in the 16th century. Calvin was one of the leading voices of the Protestant Reformation and his perspective still holds a lot of weight in some circles.
    - a) In his writing he gave an example where he imagined an incident in which a merchant wandered away from his group in the woods and was attacked and killed by robbers. While some might think of that as bad luck, for Calvin, it had to be within the plan of God. *"Yet this remains a fixed principle in our hearts, that there will be no event which God has not ordained."*
    - b) So for Calvin - you and I can't predict the future. We can't know that the merchant is going to be murdered on the road; but God's aware, and in some way, God has even planned it.
      - (1) So why would God plan such a horrible thing? Christians like Calvin have offered a number of ideas:
        - (a) Perhaps the suffering takes place as **punishment for sin**. This is the "he must have deserved it" analysis.

- (b) Or perhaps God allows something **seemingly bad to happen to one person in order to help another.**
  - (c) Or ultimately, Model 1 simply answers the why question with **“I don’t know. It’s a mystery.”** God’s “ways are above our ways”, as it says in Isaiah. Essentially, in Model 1 everything happens for a reason and we may not see the reason, but God does and we can trust that God has a good reason even for things that seem terrible to us. That’s the heart of model 1. **God is in control - we should trust God’s hidden plan.**
- D. The Second Theodicy Model is closely related to the first. It takes another one of the reasons that a good God who is in control of everything might allow suffering and makes it the core idea of the model. We’ll call this model **“God is Teaching Us Something”**.
1. In this model, suffering or evil is understood to be a tool that the Divine uses to shape the character of a person. One of the books we read for the class illustrated this point of view. Jerald Sittser’s beautiful and heart-wrenching book ***A Grace Disguised*** has a subtitle that speaks to the idea behind the second model: **“How the Soul Grows Through Loss”**.
    - a) Sittser’s story was terrible and tragic. He was driving his family on a family trip in their van when they were hit head on by a drunk driver. He instantly lost the three most important women in his life from three different generations - his mother, his wife, and his young daughter were all killed in the accident. His three other young children lived and instantly Sittser became a widower and a single dad of three severely traumatized kids.
    - b) Sittser’s story is one of reckoning with his grief in the face of such catastrophic loss. He powerfully describes the depth of his pain in the wake of that loss, and also the ways he experienced grace that comforted and eventually transformed him and his pain. The story is rich, profound and far from trite. But at the heart of it is the idea behind this second model, that ultimately, even if what happened to Jerry Sittser was terrible, the Divine was connected to him, **using the terrible circumstances to grow him and his character.** In other words, God was using suffering for teaching purposes.
  2. This is the heart of model 2 - suffering is a tool to help the should grow. **God uses it to teach us something.** Model 2.
  3. Now before we go on to the third or fourth theodicy models I want to share some observations about these first two models, which share a lot in common and are probably the two most common theodicy models out there.
    - a) Probably the biggest strength of both of these models is the sense of **meaning they bring to painful circumstances.** In the face of profound loss - it can be incredibly comforting to believe that meaning triumphs over meaningless-ness - that there is a reason for our suffering, even if we can’t see it. It can feel good to know that God has got it under control, even though we can’t understand the details. It can feel helpful to know that even a painful circumstance is leading to something positive like growth of character.
    - b) These models also align **clearly with the perspectives taken by many of the voices in Scripture.** It’s not hard to find support in the Bible for the belief that God is in control, even in hard times. The same is true for the idea that God uses hard things to teach us something.
    - c) Still, there are also some downsides to these models, particularly for me in the way that they could be understood to **emphasize the first statement** in the theodicy paradox particularly - that God is all powerful, and **minimize the third statement** - the painful

reality of evil and suffering. These models sometimes can seem a bit callous in the face of suffering; they seem to try to minimize its impact. The belief that God plans for the merchant to be murdered might be helpful theoretically to the theologian, but it can feel pretty terrible for the wife who lost her husband that day, or the young child who lost his parent. **Could the God who planned their loved one's killing really be understood as good?** Or does leaning so hard into the powerfulness of God make it harder to affirm the *goodness* of God? What kind of good God makes terrible things happen to teach us a lesson? Some might understandably not see that God as good, but as sadistic; even monstrous.

d) This view also, **doesn't leave a lot of room for human agency**. Where is our free-will in a universe in which every thing we do and every choice we seem to make is part of what God has already planned?

e) While it's true that many people of faith have found either or both of these models helpful and comforting in seasons of loss, it's also true that the challenges with these models are significant, so much so that for **many other folks, faith becomes untenable**.

(1) A biography on Apple founder **Steve Jobs** tells a story about Jobs, as a thirteen year-old. Apparently at that time he read an article in *Life* magazine about starving children. Troubled by it, he brought it to church to consult his Sunday school teacher. The teacher affirmed their understanding that God knows everything before it happens so yes, God must know about those starving kids, too.

(a) At this Steve concluded that a **God who foreknows and ordains evil must be immoral**, and he rightly wanted nothing to do with that God. He never returned to church again.

E. So the downsides of these models have clearly left some, like Steve Jobs, to reject faith altogether. But they have **also led some Christians and folks of other faiths to think differently** about God's relationship to suffering. This brings us to the third model we'll consider - one that is more contemporary. We'll call this one **"God is horrified by suffering, but God alone can't stop it."**

1. This model is found in more contemporary strains of theology such as process theology, among others. In this view, the future is not fixed with God knowing all that will happen and orchestrating it themselves. Rather the future is open, it's a cooperative unfolding act with a fully loving God acting in relationship with creatures who are co-creating their reality.

a) This perspective answers the theodicy paradox by affirming the goodness of God, as well as the reality of evil and suffering, but **lets go of the belief in an all-powerful God**. For these thinkers, God is not "*all-powerful*". There are limits on the Divine's power. God *could* be understood to be the *most* powerful force in the universe, but God's power still has limitations.

b) This view doesn't minimize the impact of suffering and evil. Scholar Wendy Farley in her work names clearly that **some terrible things are just too terrible to ever conclude that they could be just punishment or useful teaching tools**: torture. Catastrophic natural disasters. Children in Gaza having their homes and families destroyed by bombs. These realities, like the starving children Jobs was troubled by, are not consistent with a loving God who could prevent those realities but doesn't.

c) For these thinkers **God is absolutely horrified by tragic atrocities and resisting them**. But God can't prevent acts of suffering or evil from happening.

- d) Thomas Oord is a post-evangelical thinker who is one of the more prolific writers from this point of view. The title of his book on this model of theodicy is “God Can’t.”
  - e) Oord’s thesis in the book is this: *God can’t prevent abuse, tragedy, and evil....A loving God simply cannot do some things. Preventing evil is one of them. God could not have stopped the evil you and others experienced. We should not blame God for the evil things [we are troubled by], because God could not have stopped them. To put it more precisely, God can’t prevent evil singlehandedly.*
  - f) For thinkers like Farley and Oord, the Divine’s power is relational and persuasive - God has the power to inspire and to connect with humans in love, to urge them to actions that pursue empathy, love and justice. So that persuasive power can catalyze those humans to act in direct ways in the world that combat evil and suffering. But **God’s power does not itself directly intervene in the natural world in a supernatural way.** God doesn’t stop a car crash or miraculously heal a terminal disease. God simply can’t participate in human history in that kind of way.
  - g) Perhaps one of the biggest strengths of this model is its understanding of Divine compassion. Not only, in this view, is God not responsible for our suffering; God is just as horrified by it as we are. God is weeping with us when we suffer. God can meet us in the places where explanations for our losses all fall short. God is the empathetic heart at the center of the universe, validating the injustices and tragedies we experience as real and just as terrible as we feel them to be.
  - h) This model has a high view of human agency, articulating clearly that God needs humans to cooperate with the Divine’s persuasive loving way to enact good and fight evil in the world. We are the hands and feet of God and what we do has real impact to alleviate suffering and bring healing. Personally there’s a lot about this model that resonates for myself and I’m guessing a number of us in this community as we seek to engage in faith-fueled activism.
  - i) But there are **potential challenges to this view too.** While many of us may affirm that by and large, we do not see the Divine defying natural laws, what do we make of any experiences that **don’t conform with what can be understood logically or scientifically?** In model 3 there’s not much space for God to break through in surprising ways that we can’t otherwise explain, but that for various reasons, our experiences of faith have seemed to point to. **What are we supposed to do with those seemingly miraculous supernatural experiences in a model that says that God can’t operate in that kind of way?**
  - j) This view also does not have a clear articulation of **what a future hope looks like.** Without a God who can directly intervene to confront evil, it’s not clear that there is an actual hope for a time where “**death will lose its sting**”, as Paul speaks to in Corinthians. Perhaps this is not needed, and the real benefit of faith is accompaniment in loss in the present rather than hope in the future, but to me, at least, **that’s a core part of what it means to follow Jesus - to experience both the solidarity in suffering we see on the cross, as well as the hope of resurrection and new life that Easter points to.**
- F. Which brings me to the fourth and final theodicy model Dr. Love shared with us. This model is perhaps the most complex and nuanced, but I’ll do my best to summarize it quickly. This model I’ll call, “**God suffers with us, and God will overcome.**”
1. This model borrows ideas from all of the others and tries to hold them in tension. Like model 3, this model affirms that suffering and evil are real and they do not come from God.

But from models 1 and 2, there is still a belief that God has at least some capacity to intervene in human experience and is accompanying us in a story with an ending that is redemptive and hopeful.

2. **Nicholas Wolterstorff** is a philosopher and theologian who wrote a book that displays this model - one in which the author explains his wrestling in the wake of losing his son, a twenty-something young man who died in a mountain climbing accident. Wolterstorff describes his response to traditional models like 1 and 2 as well as number 3.
  - a) *"I cannot fit it all together by saying, "[God] did it," but neither can I do so by saying, "There was nothing he could do about it." I cannot fit it together at all...I do not know why God did not prevent Eric's death. To live without the answer is precarious. It's hard to keep one's footing...I have no explanation. I can do nothing else than endure in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries. I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and resurrector of Jesus Christ. I also believe that my son's life was cut off in its prime. I cannot fit these pieces together. I am at a loss. I have read the theodicies produced to justify the ways of God to man. I find them unconvincing. To the most agonized question I have ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess."*
  - b) Wolterstorff enters the heart of the theodicy paradox. **He wrestles and he isn't able to come to a satisfying answer for why God didn't stop his son's death.** Like model 1, Wolterstorff must confess that the answer to this question is a mystery, that God's ways are above our ways. But he relates to this mystery differently than some folks in model 1, who seem to cite mystery as a way of not needing to wrestle with hard realities. This version of accepting the mysterious honors the difficulty of holding all three statements as true and allows the questions to be as difficult as they are.
3. Still, model 4 does not end in cynicism and despair either. For people like Wolterstorff, **though there is no answer to the why, there is meaning to be experienced.** There is comfort to be found and there is hope.
4. This model holds that God suffers with humanity, and affirms that this is the heart of what we see in the Jesus-centered faith as the Divine, out of love, chooses to lay down the Divine power, and experience the human frailty of the incarnation, and the depth of suffering experienced with us in the crucifixion. In this model, it is Jesus' life and ministry of embodied love, as well as his surrender to the cross that best displays God's relationship to suffering - God does not minimize our suffering but enters into it fully, "fellowshipping with us in suffering" as Paul once said. God's love is a suffering love. This is a love Wolterstorff understood more deeply than ever before in the wake of his son's death. He may have not understood any reason behind his suffering; but he knew he didn't suffer alone. In love, Jesus suffered with him.
5. But the Divine doesn't stop there. This view may affirm like model 3 that generally we experience the power of God as a persuasive power of love that inspires and is embodied through the actions of the humans; what we Christians often call the Holy Spirit. But it also leaves room for God to intervene in ways that defy logic, or can't be explained by natural laws - that are more mysterious. It still holds space for God to break through at times into human reality in ways that our logical brains can't fully make sense of.
6. This view affirms that in some way we can't understand **God did that in the resurrection of Jesus.** And in the same way, we may see at times **similar breakthroughs in our time,** even as history moves towards a time where the Divine will in some way have final victory

over suffering and evil. This view still holds the hope that **there will be a time where justice reigns once and for all and suffering is no more.**

7. So to clarify - Model 4 is a lot like Model 3, with a core difference, as I understand it being its **attempt to hold onto a more powerful vision of God than model 3 does**, including the hope that while suffering persists now, in the end **that powerful God will bring redemption and deliverance.**
- G. So how do these four models map with our own experiences? How might they actually help us make our own path through this theodicy maze?
  1. I can only speak for myself. As a project for my class I was asked to map my own theodicy using these models. As I did that, I recognized the ways I've interacted with different models in my life.
    - a) When I was young, I, like Steve Jobs, was the kid who asked complicated questions at Sunday School, and didn't receive helpful answers. Having experienced childhood trauma at a young age, I personally felt the disconnect between my own experiences of pain and the model 1 and 2 answers I was given at church, which led me to feel disconnected from that expression of faith. **So when I hear models 1 and 2 I am aware of how those approaches were unsatisfying to me;** those pathways through the maze did not lead me to a helpful place.
  2. I have also had experiences where I have been moved by God's suffering heart - have been **healed from places of trauma even by experiencing the sacred empathy of the Divine for my losses.** The idea of God suffering with us that model 3 holds up feels very true to me.
  3. Yet, in my decades now of journeying in faith and finding a particular resonance with the Jesus-centered tradition, I have experienced things I cannot fully account for. **I feel like I have seen too much to say confidently "God can't" ever intervene in my reality in miraculous ways.** Neither can I let go of my hope that at the heart of our tradition is the belief that God is redeeming the impact of evil, and that in some way that redemption will one day be complete in a real way.
  4. **In the wake of my sister's cancer diagnosed, I experienced the power of a God who suffers with.** I also saw that power present to my sister. Though she does not identify as Christian, she is deeply spiritual and I believe she too experienced the power of a Divine that suffered with her and also wanted to **collaborate with her toward healing and hope and new resurrection life.** In the last five plus years since she has been living with this disease, I have continued to see the divine present both in the places of grief and pain, and also working towards hope and healing, sometimes in seemingly miraculous ways.
- H. For the class, I mapped myself at this time somewhere in the landscape of model 4, knowing I may articulate that differently than other thinkers in that model. This is what I chose to name about my own theodicy path. I share it as we end as an offering if it's helpful, not a prescription. You don't have to agree with my theodicy statements. This is where my personal journey has brought me, and I recognize it has been evolving and will continue to grow. But I hope you might find all of this helpful in your own connection to God in the midst of suffering.
  1. ***God is altogether good.***
  2. ***The Divine's power generally operates within natural laws, but there is also room for that which cannot be fully understood ("the supernatural").***
  3. ***The origin of evil and suffering is mysterious.***
  4. ***God is against evil and in solidarity with creation in suffering.***

**5. The Divine works to redeem the impact of suffering and evil in this life and the life to come. There is hope beyond suffering.**

- I. Like I named at the beginning, I'm not here to give you the ultimate answer for where the Divine is in the midst of suffering. I can only speak from what I have seen and come to believe is true. But I can also remind us of the hope our tradition speaks to. Let me end with this word of one vision of that hope, as shared in Revelation 21.

1. **3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 'He 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."**
2. **5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" - Revelation 21:3-5. Amen.**

**Questions for conversation and Reflection**

1. Which of these models do you resonate with? Which are challenging for you?
2. How have you connected with God in experiences of suffering? How does that shape your point of view?
3. When you experience suffering, what is helpful? What is hopeful?