Bad Things, Good People, and God

A Guide for Teens

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Introduction

Congratulations!

By picking up this book, you've—perhaps unintentionally—joined a discourse that has been happening . . . well, since people could talk. And complain. So, by "congratulations" of course I mean I'm terribly sorry.

That all said, bad things happen. We know this.

But *why*?

This is a question that has nagged theologians and philosophers—people like you—for centuries. *Millennia*, actually.

Basically forever.

But should it be such a difficult question? If we believe in a God who loves us, shouldn't evil just . . . disappear? Shouldn't it be as simple as saying, "I believe," or, even better, having God say, "I got this," and then—poof!—all of our pain, our hurt, the brokenness of the world, is gone.

Of course, this isn't the case.

And if we're being honest, most of the answers that have been offered for this question aren't exactly . . . comprehensive. It doesn't help that you have to contend with the Bible, centuries of theological hot takes, lived experiences,

and, you know, the nagging doubt that none of this is real and we're all just floating through the universe untethered from *anything* . . .

Let's take a deep breath.

Just because there isn't an easy answer (any answer?) to the problem of evil—why bad things happen—doesn't mean we need to live in a state of constant anxiety or dread. It is not an overstatement to say this is *the biggest question of faith*. It's also a question that all of us must wrestle with, cobble together some semblance of an answer, and claim our place as theologians in the world.

Yes, *theologians.*

Because what you have to say *matters.* Your theology *matters.* Your view of the world reveals another glimmer of truth—some small answer—to these big questions.

So, what do you think?

Are you ready to think through one of the biggest questions of faith?

Along the way we'll look at the Bible, give a serious side-eye to some of the "classic" attempts at answering this question, think about sin and suffering, and come out the other side without a single scratch.

(Well, no promises on that last bit. You might be reading this in a hammock, get so excited by your new insights that you rush off to tell somebody, and fall to the ground. But be assured: the book itself will not cause you harm.)

A quick warning: by the end, you're going to have more questions.

It's inevitable.

But the questions will make things a little clearer. Hopefully they'll give you a glimpse of a path forward.

Because we're all doing this one step at a time.

Are you ready?

Houston, We Have a Problem

Some words are just fun to say.

Like, *juniper*. That's a good one—it feels like a fun word, doesn't it? Oh! What about . . . *barista*? Say that one out loud right now—*barista!* See, you're having fun. You're smiling. You can't help it. The world is your oyster.

Hey, want to know a word that isn't any fun at all and, let's face it, is pretty much the worst word ever invented in the entire history of language?

Theodicy.

Nope. Don't like that one.

Saying *theodicy* is like biting down on tinfoil. It's like somebody is getting ready to hand you a big bowl of popcorn and just as you reach for that buttery, salty goodness, they dump it on the ground intentionally.

Theodicy is a rude word. A harsh word. A confusing word.

No thanks.

But if we're going to talk about suffering—about why bad things happen—we need to also talk about theodicy. As gross a word as it is, it's also the word that is used by theologians to describe the conversation that asks why things like sickness, poverty, death—all of it—exist in the world and how God is involved.

Do you need to know this word? Not really. It's a fancy word, strutting around with its nose in the air. That said, if you happen to be at coffee hour and you see your priest or pastor and you say, "Sometimes I find myself considering *theodicy* and just find myself so . . . vexed," that's what you call a "power move."

Perhaps less importantly, it's also the word that starts our conversation.

Bad things happen. People suffer. This is theodicy.

If we break the word down, we get two Greek words—*Theos* and *dikē*. *Theos* is translated as "God" and *dikē* is often translated as "trial" or "judgment." So, when you put those together, the word "theodicy" is about asking big questions—about "justifying God."

This might seem strange—why would we need to justify God? Isn't the point of, well, being God that you *don't* have to justify God's self? That what you do is what you *do* and people are left to simply deal with the repercussions?

Well, yeah. That's the crux of the problem, isn't it?

Let's do this a different way.

What are some words you would use to describe God?

Take a second, but here's a few:

"Loving." "All-knowing." "The Good Shepherd."

You likely came up with some different ones but these, typically, give us a pretty good look at who and what God is. The problem materializes when something bad—either big or small—happens. For some people, it's easy to chalk that up to "God's will" (don't worry, we'll talk about that one later . . .) or the idea that, if God wants something to happen it's going to happen, so buckle up and *learn something* from all this pain and grief. Now, normal people who are not complete psychopaths would hear that argument and think, "Hmm. This doesn't seem to add up. Let's check our math."

A Good and Loving God Who Is Omniscient, Omnipresent, Omnipotent	+	The Mere Existence of Hungry Children	=	Yeah, Only a Complete Psycho Wouldn't Have Any Questions

We, friends, are not complete psychos. And I'm betting you have questions.

These questions—which, again, have troubled humans for the entirety of our existence—are what make up theodicy. They are questions that have some general boundaries, a few similarities, but they are also wildly personal, completely dependent on your experiences.

We all have working theodicies. We all have questions. The trick is knowing how we think—we call that *doing*

theology, kids—and whether that conception of God is harming us or those around us.

Because while there aren't many answers in this little book, I can say this without a doubt: God is not in the business of harm.

If God is not in the business of harm and there are still all these bad things happening—seemingly every second of the day—then we must deal with the question of theodicy. Of suffering. Because, let's face it, the world isn't supposed to be this way. And for those of us who risk a life believing and following God, we must contend with the fact that, unlike God, evil provides its own evidence.

This doesn't mean that God isn't real.

And it doesn't mean that we don't experience God in deep and meaningful ways.

But it does mean that, for us to grow in our faith—for it to mature—we need to spend time wrestling with big questions. And like Jacob, who wrestled with God, it's not necessarily something that will leave us unmarked (Genesis 32:22–32). There is a very good chance that, after reading a book like this, you will not be able to "un-see" the problem of theodicy.

It might not seem like it, but that's a good thing, especially as your faith becomes more nuanced. The excitement of a life of faith is tied up in the risk of tackling these sorts of questions. Think of it this way: being a seven-foot-tall professional basketball player competing against high school kids sounds like fun, but at some point, dunking on

everybody is going to get boring. The same goes with faith. The longer we're in it, the longer we're connected to this whole Jesus thing, the more we're going to want to see the hoop raised.

> **Jesus Christ**, son of God, fully human. Born in Palestine, sometime around 1 CE, died by execution via the Roman Empire (again, sometime around) 33 CE and then—depending on who and what you believe—rose again three days later and proceeded to become the basis for a faith tradition that has 2.38 billion followers. Kind of a big deal.

But it's not necessary! For many people, this sort of theological growth—the idea of wrestling with God and walking the rest of your life with a jacked-up hip bone—is . . . not a priority. So instead of dealing with the big questions, they develop pat theological responses that don't come close to providing a real answer.

You've likely experienced this already.

Somebody passes away and . . . *God must've needed another angel.*

Somebody gets sick and . . . *God has a plan.*

Something destructive happens and . . . *God is trying to teach you something.*

No, no, and *no.*

No!

Listen, it's completely okay if this sort of answer makes you feel better. There is something calming about believing we're all tied up in a massive divine plan that can't possibly be understood. The little bumps (and the big ones too!) become temporary inconveniences on our path to heaven. Or, as one famous Christian music group once said to a room full of teenagers, "God doesn't know the ends without planning the means."

> Speaking of famous Christian music groups and bad theology, a certain author of a certain book may or may not have yelled out "No!" to this stance and was politely asked to leave. Allegedly.

That sort of theology is easy. And it can remain easy for a long, long time. But it ultimately has an expiration date. There's no telling when easy theology—those quick-fix answers—will no longer fit. At some point they won't. And then you will be left to reckon with a God who is willing to allow war and famine, sickness and abuse *now*, because in the afterlife you will find peace. A God who seems to only care about what happens to you in the end, not during the beautiful, messy moments of the life you're living right now.

The question is: What do you want?

Do you want the easy, temporary answer?

Or do you want to risk something? Do you want to tangle with the wild and sometimes unsafe—but always good—God and see what happens? See where you end up.

It's okay if this makes you nervous. That's normal. And perhaps the way we should all do theology is to show up, to open ourselves to the possibilities God has in store for us, and say the most dangerous words any Christian can say:

"I'm ready, God. Let's do this."

In the Beginning . . .

Let's start at the beginning.

And by "the beginning" I mean, literally, "*In the beginning . . .*" (Genesis 1:1).

Creationism—or the idea that God made the earth, all of us, everything—is both a beautiful theological concept and one that comes with a host of theological problems and contradictions to modern science. And the way it is sometimes referred to today—as a literal, historical account—is not only a recent construct but also, despite all the press it gets, not something most Christians *believe*.

Let's not start with the negative (which, admittedly, is hard when you're talking about theodicy) but with the beauty of creation.

Have you ever stood on a beach at sunrise?

Have you ever hiked to the top of a mountain and paused just to take in the majesty of it all?

Consider the miracle of our bodies, our abilities to create, think, play, laugh, and love.

Even if you don't believe in a literal seven-day creation, the theology of the Genesis story can be beautiful. It reminds us that God is the bringer of light and the One who turns chaos into order and, so many times, that order leads to shocking beauty. It's a reminder that God sees us—everything in the world—and calls it *good*.

> *God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good.* (Genesis 1:31a)

It isn't an accident that this is the first story in the Bible. So let's pause and reflect on a different verse from the same chapter in Genesis:

> *God created humankind in [God's] image.* (Genesis 1:27a)

You might be thinking: "Oh, great! I've heard this one before. Why are we pausing here? What more could I possibly learn from these seven words which—hey, don't think I didn't notice—*aren't even the entire verse*?"

First, your mind is sharp and wonderful.

Second, these words are the building blocks for a theological concept called *imago Dei*, or the idea that humans have been created in the *image* of God. Our moral, spiritual, and intellectual natures are unique characteristics that point to the divine nature of God. It's God, found inside of us. It's our ability to love deeply, to create fantastically, to live lives that are introspective—to follow God and search for ways to transform ourselves, the entire world.

It's the desire to draw closer to God.

Another way to think about this is that God's self-actualization comes through humanity.

It's okay. You can say it: "*What in the . . . ?*"

Those unique characteristics that humans share? That's a way to see and understand God a little better.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann believed that we should think about the *imago Dei* as a starting point for how we act—how we carry out God's work in the world. Moltmann believed we were all a work in progress, moving toward our original *imago Dei* status that was found in the Garden of Eden.

> **Jürgen Moltmann** (b.1926) is a theologian who is best known for books such as *Theology of Hope* and *The Crucified God*. Moltmann's theology says that God suffers *with* humanity, while simultaneously promising humanity a future that is ultimately hopeful—something guaranteed by Christ's resurrection. His time in World War II and a single question—*Why did I survive?*—haunted him and were a starting point for much of his theology.

Creationism isn't just a wacky view held by people who don't believe in science and like to make theme parks with names like Creation Land, complete with life-sized versions of Noah's ark and a bunch of hilarious anti-dinosaur "facts."

Yes, it's easy to dunk on that sort of kitsch—to write it off. But know that a theology of creation can also point us to God in beautiful, life-changing ways.

That doesn't mean it isn't without problems.

On the most basic level, the first question we must ask is: If God created the world and everything in it, does that mean that God also created evil? Or if God made order out of chaos, does that means God also created chaos? And if not, was there something before . . . God? And even if we somehow make it through that gauntlet of Big Questions, we'll eventually have to ask whether God sees evil, pain, and grief as *necessary* to how the world functions—to what it means to be human. To quote Abraham: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Genesis 18:25).

It goes deeper, too—isn't this fun?

Hey, here's another term that is guaranteed to get your priest, pastor, or youth director looking at you with a combination of respect, suspicion, and low-key horror: *creation ex nihilo*.

Creation ex nihilo is the idea that God created the world from nothing. Again, if you are of the theological stripe that doesn't put much stock in the biblical creation story, the good news here is . . . this isn't going to bother you! However, for much of orthodox Christianity, this question is one to keep you up at night.

The concern is that, if God is the creator and ultimate source of everything in the universe, God is *the source of*