

How Long, O Lord?

Reflections on Suffering and Evil

SECOND EDITION

D. A. Carson


Baker Academic
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Carson, D. A.

How long, O Lord? : reflections on suffering and evil / D. A. Carson.—2nd ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 10: 0-8010-3125-7 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-8010-3125-0 (pbk.)

1. Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Theodicy. 3. Good and evil.

I. Title.

BT732.7.C37 2006

231'.8—dc22

2006010847

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Denzill Raymer and Colin Hemer
in memoriam

My soul is in anguish.
How long, O LORD, how long?
Psalm 6:3 NIV

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Preface to the Second Edition

None of my other books has elicited as many moving letters from readers as this one. For the unavoidable reality is that if we live long enough, we will suffer—and this attempt to think about suffering and evil from within a biblical perspective helped some believers, at least, who were struggling through deep waters. So I am grateful that it is being republished in this revised edition.

The structure of the argument has not changed. Many of the illustrations have been brought up to date, and a number of other improvements have been attempted. Discussion of AIDS, for instance, needs not only updated statistics, but a number of other substantial changes. The NIV has been replaced by the TNIV.

Yet I have tried to preserve the level of discussion of the first edition, along with the balance of Scripture. Indeed, if you want to plunge into the biblical and theological material right away, skip chapter 2: not every reader wants to survey “false steps” before beginning to think through what the Bible says. Regardless of where you start, my hope and prayer is that this short volume will help a new generation of Christians, and others who may wish to listen in, think through questions all of us must face in this broken, beautiful, and twisted world.

D. A. Carson
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Preface to the First Edition

I had better say right away what this book is not about. It is not a quick answer to difficult questions about suffering. Nor is it (except implicitly) a defense of the existence of God. It is not even the sort of book I would give to many people who are suffering inconsolable grief. Still less is it an academic discussion of philosophical problems.

So what is it about? It is, first of all, a book written by a Christian to help other Christians think about suffering and evil. That means, for instance, that I am not primarily addressing unbelievers who think that the problem of evil and pain is so intractable that it calls into question the very existence of God. There are excellent books that treat the subject from that perspective, but this is not one of them. If you are an unbeliever, you are welcome to listen in. Indeed, you may find the “world” you are entering so compelling that you will want to become a Christian. But you are not the reader I have in mind as I write.

Primarily, this is a book of preventative medicine. One of the major causes of devastating grief and confusion among Christians is that our expectations are false. We do not give the subject of evil and suffering the thought it deserves until we ourselves are confronted with tragedy. If by that point our beliefs—not well thought out but deeply ingrained—are largely out of step with the God who has disclosed himself in the Bible and supremely in Jesus, then the pain from the personal tragedy may be multiplied many times over as we begin to question the very foundations of our faith.

Of course, not all doubts and fears arise from false expectations based on questionable beliefs. At the intellectual level, a Christian may be as orthodox as the apostle Paul, yet so lack the apostle’s spiritual maturity that when the first crisis hits all the orthodox “commitments” are again thrown into the melting pot. Nevertheless, it is hard to think of Christians agonizing over basic questions if their suffering has not, to say the least, been exacerbated by false expectations as to what God is like, what God

does, what place suffering has in this world. For instance, pain may pose the question, "Why me?" That soon gives way to "Why are you punishing me?" or "Why are you picking on me?" And that is only a whisper from far bleaker thoughts, articulated or not: "Maybe you aren't a God of love. Maybe you are capricious. Maybe you aren't fair, let alone holy. Maybe you aren't there." C. S. Lewis could describe his conversion by the memorable title *Surprised by Joy*; most of us Christians ruefully admit that there are times when our faith is surprised by grief.

This book, then, is designed to help. It does not offer a comprehensive guide to the problem of suffering; it develops only a few themes, somewhat arbitrarily chosen according to what has been of help to me and to some of those to whom I minister. Quite frankly, this little book, as I have already hinted, may not be of assistance to those whose despair is so bleak that they cannot bring themselves to read, think, and pray. But I shall be satisfied if it helps some Christians establish patterns and habits of thought that are so strong that when the hardest questions batter the soul there is less wavering and more faith, joy, and hope.

Because this is a book for general readers, I have largely avoided bibliographies and technical discussions. By and large, the books and articles I mention are those that I actually cite. Despite my best efforts, chapter 11 is a little difficult. If it is too daunting, skip it; but if you can absorb it, make the effort, for I am persuaded that the biblical truths outlined there have enormous potential for stabilizing the faith of God's people.

Much of the material in these pages was first developed for talks in America, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Kenya. I am grateful to many people for the questions they put to me, questions that have helped me to be more careful than I would have been, and to try extra hard to produce a book that would heal and nurture, and not merely inform. That I have not always succeeded is embarrassingly clear to me; if I have succeeded at all it is because I owe much to the probing of others, especially those who have suffered far, far more than I and whose lives have set an example for the Lord's glory and his people's good.

Pain and suffering often generate a profound sense of loneliness. We think we are cut off from everyone, we feel that no one can possibly understand. The truth is that it often helps to talk things over with other Christians. For that reason I have included a set of questions at the end of each chapter. Ideally they should be used in a study group. Reflecting on such questions in splendid isolation will not be nearly as therapeutic.

Soli Deo gloria.

D. A. Carson
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Part I

Thinking about Suffering and Evil

I

First Steps

Hard Cases

A pastor is cutting his front lawn. He looks up from his task just in time to see a heavy dump truck back out of his neighbor's driveway—right over the neighbor's eighteen-month-old son, who had been squatting behind the huge tires. The pastor accompanies the hysterical mother and ashen father to the hospital in the ambulance. There is no hope for the little boy; he has been crushed almost beyond recognition.

Where is God?

After five years of marriage, Jane wakes up in the night to find her husband Dan poking her, and pointing to his mouth. As she hauls herself out of sleep, she realizes that her husband has awakened to find he cannot speak, and is badly frightened. A quick phone call to the doctor issues in a swift trip to the hospital. The next day, the surgeons operate for cancer of the brain. They cannot get much of it. The trauma of the surgery is worse: it wipes out all learned memory. Dan no longer knows how to read and write; he cannot recognize his infant son. Yet somehow the operation has administered such a shock that the cancer stops growing. Dan's personality, however, has been altered; he is frustrated, angry, irritable, and needs someone to watch him twenty-four hours a day. After three years of minimal recovery, the cancer starts its insidious growing again, and kills Dan four months later.

Where is God?

A rural family with six children, four of them hemophiliacs, serves the Lord with joy and discipline. Then the AIDS crisis hits. Unknown to doctors and patients alike, the nation's blood supply is contaminated.

The four hemophiliacs must constantly tap into that supply. Two contract AIDS and are dead within three years. The third has tested HIV-positive; it is only a matter of time before the patient exhibits clinical symptoms, suffers, and dies. The fourth, age thirty, himself the father of three, has refused to be tested, but he knows that the chances are overwhelming that he too is a carrier, and that he will shortly leave his wife a widow and his children fatherless. He has almost no insurance, and no insurer will now give him the time of day.

Where is God?

I wish I could say I made up these stories. I didn't; they are about people I know. Only names and minor details have been changed. And all of us could tell our own stories. A colleague of mine and his wife served as foster parents for close to three decades. At one point they took in twin boys, just eighteen months old. This was the twins' sixth home. They were judged irremediably impaired (wrongly, as it turned out). They had been battered for crying in at least two homes, with the result that when they went to bed the first night in their new home they wept themselves to sleep without making a sound.

Where was God?

And then of course there are highly public catastrophes. Terrorists fly airplanes into the World Trade towers and into the Pentagon. The deaths of almost three thousand people are somehow made more shocking by the sight, on television, of people leaping from the ninety-fifth floor to escape the flames fed by jet fuel, by the spectacle of hundred-floor structures collapsing on themselves. A tsunami of gigantic proportions, caused by shifting plates in the ocean floor off the coast of Aceh in northwest Indonesia, causes horrific damage in several countries, and kills about 300,000 men, women, and children.

Where is God?

The truth of the matter is that all we have to do is live long enough, and we will suffer. Our loved ones will die; we ourselves will be afflicted with some disease or other. Midlife often brings its own pressures—disappointments, sense of failure, decreasing physical strength, infidelity. Parents frequently go through enormous heartache in rearing their children. My own mother was mugged at the age of 72. As a result, she fell and hit her head on the curb. Her family noticed mental deterioration and personality change within weeks; she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and went through all the predictable stages of that wretched disease. She died nine years later. Live long enough and the infirmities of old age eventually catch up with you, compounded by the fact that all your friends have gone and left you alone.

And these things represent the suffering that takes place in relatively stable societies. Add war, racism, genocide, grinding poverty, starvation.

Even television does not adequately portray the reality. The first thing to assault me on my first trip to a really poor Third World country was the stench.

There is now a vast literature on the Holocaust, in which 6 million Jews were systematically exterminated. Much of this literature treats the Holocaust as an aberration, a singularity that we must never permit to happen again, a horrific brutality that destroys meaning. We are told that we must not compare it with other orgies of violence lest we trivialize it. Yet the sad truth is far worse: in the twentieth century alone it is only one of a string of similar holocausts. Already 40 million people worldwide are infected with HIV. How many will die depends on how long it will take to develop an effective vaccine—but since there are about 5 million new infections a year, even the most conservative estimates put the total number who will die from AIDS in the tens of millions. Twenty to 50 million Chinese died under Chairman Mao. The same percentage of Cambodians died under Pol Pot as Jews under Hitler. We do not know how many Soviet citizens died under Stalin, but most historians put the number of Ukrainian deaths alone at about 20 million. The suffering inflicted by Idi Amin is incalculable. Almost a million Hutus and Tutsis were slaughtered in Rwanda.

What shall we say about “natural” disasters? Each year hundreds of thousands die of starvation; millions suffer from malnutrition. Twenty-five thousand died in the earthquake in Mexico City; two hundred thousand perished in a similar disaster in China—that is, two-thirds of the deaths in the more recent tsunami. And how many so-called natural disasters, especially starvation, are the result of uncontrollable “natural” forces, such as drought, and how many stem in part from evil structures that human beings have created—despotic governments, tribal warfare, unfair trading practices, unqualified avarice?

In any and all of these tragedies, in all of this pain, where is God?

It is a question frequently asked in the Bible itself. The psalmists, Jeremiah, Job, Habakkuk, Elijah—all find the apparent triumph of evil more than they can handle. “Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?” (Jer. 12:1). “Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power?” (Job 21:7).

Hard Thinking

For some people, the question is almost exclusively an intellectual one. If God is both omnipotent and perfectly good, how can he permit such evil? If he is willing but not able to check the suffering, then he is not omnipotent; if he is able but unwilling, he is not perfectly good.

The implication is that the very existence of evil calls into question the existence of God.

For others it is not the mere existence of evil that is the problem, but its abundance. It is *gratuitous* evil that is so shocking. One might argue that the presence of some evil is not damaging to faith, on the assumption that God leaves people free to rebel. But how can this sort of theory account for “natural” disasters, for the sheer quantity of suffering that bears no clear relation to good and bad people, to age and experience, to unambiguous punishment?

There are excellent books that address these intellectual questions. One of the more thought-provoking ones for the ordinary reader is the little volume by C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*.¹ Few will agree with all his arguments, but more will prove sympathetic to his later testimony, *A Grief Observed*,² written at the time his wife died. In recent years several Christian scholars have advanced highly sophisticated defenses of the rationality of Christian belief even in the presence of evil,³ and these have gained a fair bit of credibility in the marketplace of ideas. Occasionally in this book I will find it necessary to have recourse to such arguments; but they are not my chief focus.

The reason is pretty clear. The fact is that many believers are never troubled by such matters. There are millions of ordinary Christians who hold that God is omnipotent, that God is perfectly good, and that suffering abounds in the world. At many stages of their experience as Christians, they do not feel that there *is* a problem. They have brief theological answers that satisfy them: suffering is the result of sin; free will means that God has to leave people to make their own mistakes; heaven and hell will set the record straight. Or perhaps they have not really had to think about these matters much at all. They know God loves them, and that is enough. Why bother your head about things you cannot understand, let alone improve?

And then something takes place in their own life that jolts them to the core. Perhaps it is a first-year university course in philosophy. Perhaps it is an extraordinarily painful personal bereavement. Your father dies; your child contracts MS. Your spouse walks out with another partner. The job on which you had set your life’s hopes slips away and is offered to someone else. You are stricken with a terminal disease. You drift into depression, the slough of despond. Your Christian witness proves not

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

2. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber, 1966).

3. See Alvin J. Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). For useful surveys, see Stephen T. Davis, “The Problem of Pain in Recent Philosophy,” *Review and Expositor* 82 (1985): 535–48; Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 175–221.

only fruitless, but offensive to all your friends and colleagues. You lose your job, and with it your house and life savings. Suddenly, questions about suffering become vital.

In other words, profound anxiety about suffering and evil is person-dependent. This can be made clear by a simple model.⁴ Suppose John holds a set of beliefs that we shall call S . S may be consistent or inconsistent: for our purposes, it makes no difference. S is simply what John believes. Then, for some reason, to this set of beliefs John adds the rider R , which states that S is inconsistent. John now holds $S + R$ to be true, but this new set (call it S_0) is intrinsically unstable. John has fallen into an “epistemic dilemma”: he must either find a reason to drop his belief in R , thus replacing his new set S_0 with his old set S , or he must change some elements in S , or drop some of them, so that R no longer applies. By dropping some of these beliefs, his old set S becomes, say, S_1 . Again, whether S is truly consistent or not is for our purposes irrelevant. The point is that S_0 (the sum of $S + R$) is intrinsically unstable and the cause of endless anxiety. Sooner or later John will feel enormous pressure either to retreat to S (thus dropping R) or to rearrange his beliefs into S_1 (thus rendering R irrelevant).

We can fill this out with a hard example. Suppose John is an orthodox believer. His set S includes beliefs about the goodness of God, his power, and so forth. Then John travels in the Third World for a few months, for the first time in his life, and witnesses something of the scale of human suffering. Gradually he adopts R . He does not see how his beliefs about God and the world can be consistent. This causes enormous anguish. On the long haul, either he will come to see that R is invalid, and drop it (thus reverting to his traditional beliefs), or, under pressure from R , he will change some of the elements of S to make a slightly modified set, S_1 : he still believes in the existence and goodness of God, say, but not in his omnipotence.

In one sense, this model is altogether too cerebral, too rationalistic. In my experience, most Christians who suddenly become aware of the problem of suffering and evil simultaneously face a set of other pressures as well. Perhaps prayerlessness plays a part; perhaps the believer is afraid of losing the confidence and friendship of other Christians, and therefore bottles up questions without talking them out. Perhaps there are significant spiritual battles going on of which the believer is only dimly self-conscious. Sometimes depression ensues, which may be caused by a chemical imbalance; or lack of sleep compounds despair. Digestive problems, insomnia, and headaches may follow, circling back to make the original set of questions about evil and suffering all the more severe.

4. Adapted from George I. Mavrodes, *Belief in God* (New York: Random, 1970).

But even though all these related problems may intrude, at the heart of this sort of problem is the rider *R*—the dawning conviction that there is something wrong with one's belief system somewhere. And that is why it is important for Christians to have as stable a set of beliefs as possible on these matters *before* a personal tragedy or a fresh experience of life challenges them to adopt that painful *R*.

Two more factors must be understood.

1. Even if you never adopt that *R*—the conviction that your belief system is inconsistent—into the structure of your thought, that does not mean that you see *exactly how* the set of beliefs I have called *S* really does hold together. In other words, you may think your belief system is logically consistent without being able to specify *exactly how* it is logically consistent. You may allow all sorts of room for mystery. For instance, you may think that God is omnipotent, that God is good, that evil exists in the world, and that these beliefs, though consistent, hang together in a mysterious way you do not pretend to understand. There is nothing intrinsically illogical about such a step. But in my experience, if you locate what is mysterious at the wrong place, sooner or later the mistake will come back to haunt you. I shall take this matter up again in chapter 11.

2. More importantly, even if your set *S* of beliefs is not troubled with a rider *R* to the effect that *S* is inconsistent, it does not necessarily follow that *S* itself will offer you much consolation when you are suffering. The *presence* of the rider will cause you additional pain; the *absence* of the rider does not assure you of additional comfort. For the truth of the matter is that naked beliefs offer little consolation under the worst experiences of suffering and evil.

To put this in the terms of Christian experience: in the dark hours of suffering, Christians want more than the assurance that their beliefs are consistent. They draw comfort only from the living Lord himself, from the Spirit whom he has graciously given, from a renewed grasp, a felt experience, of the love of God in Christ Jesus (Eph. 3:14–21). That is not to say, however, that the set of beliefs is irrelevant. It is to say that, in addition to holding that Christian beliefs are true and consistent, the Christian, to find comfort in them, must learn how to *use* them. Christian beliefs are not to be stacked in the warehouse of the mind; they are to be handled and applied to the challenges of life and discipleship. Otherwise they are incapable of bringing comfort and stability, godliness and courage, humility and joy, holiness and faith.

But before we go on to think through how various biblical emphases can serve as comforting bulwarks when evil and suffering threaten to swamp us, it may be worth pausing to warn against several vaunted shelters that are thoroughly insecure. Thoughtful Christians should avoid them: they promise security, but they are destructive.

Questions for Further Study

1. Compile your own list of suffering—both what you see in the world around you and what you yourself have suffered.
2. Does the problem of evil and suffering ever disturb you deeply? If not, why not? If so, why?
3. From your present understanding, how do you think God's sovereignty and goodness are to be reconciled with the presence of much evil and suffering in the world?
4. Have you ever gone through a period of asking disturbing questions about the love or power of God? What precipitated it? What was most important in helping you through it?
5. From what does the Christian draw deep comfort?