

13 Weeks to

How to Hold the Happiness God Gives

Joy

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The “Odicy”

The ‘Odicy’ ” is a play on words. *Theodicy* is a branch of religious study that explores the question of why a good God allows suffering. *The Odyssey* is a poem, written by the legendary Greek author Homer, about a returning king’s journey to recover his queen and palace from interlopers. I like that the word *theodicy* sounds like *The Odyssey*. I also believe that theodicy is the real odyssey (no offense to Homer) because the best way to answer the question of theodicy—why God allows suffering—is to tell the odyssey of God’s story, or what we call “the great controversy.” The story of how God’s character of love holds up under the titanic weight of earthly suffering is a wild one, even outstripping a Greek myth for drama and complexity. I propose we call it “the odicy.”

So why address theodicy in a book about joy?

Because this book promotes a joyful response to life’s hardships, we first need to establish a rational basis for such a response. I want to help us to be cheerful but not delusional. After all, if earthly existence with all of its suffering is the end of the story, positive thinking rings hollow. The reason we rejoice, the reason we reframe the trials of life and even thank God for them, is because reality really is, ultimately, positive. Apart from that fact, positivity looks crazy.

You suffer, have suffered, and will suffer. You know and love other suffering people. You picked up this book to find out how to find positive emotions in the midst of all the suffering. That shift is God’s leading. You can’t truly rejoice in suffering without supernatural help and divine logic. So the first step in learning joy is understanding God well enough to trust Him, and trusting Him enough to give Him access to your heart. To do this, you must

ask why He allows suffering. You must have at least a basic understanding of “the odicy”—the epic story of how a good God came to allow the existence of evil and the suffering that flows from it.

Some people say we shouldn’t ask God why. “We will never know,” they sigh. “God is so mysterious.” And while we may not understand the particulars of why God allowed Joe to live but Tim died when his car was T-boned by a drunk driver, we can understand the big-picture dynamics and principles involved. Besides, Jesus asked why. Traumatized and confused, He cried out on the cross, “Why have you forsaken Me?” Don’t we also feel forsaken at times? Can’t we cry out for answers? Can’t God take it on the chin when we don’t understand Him and just say so? The human mind reflexively seeks to make meaning out of life. Doesn’t this God-given impulse imply the existence of meaning? Doesn’t God provide believable, logical, satisfying answers to our aching questions? Why would God bestow upon us the gift of reason, then tell us not to use it? Doesn’t God make sense? I think so, and because I do, the next few pages will be my attempt to share a sensible theodicy.

A sweeping overview

“The odicy” began with—and centers on—Jesus. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:1–3). The eternal, divine Jesus who made all things even made the angel Lucifer who ultimately betrayed Him. “All things have been created through him and for him” (Colossians 1:16, NIV). God created the angelic hosts with the power of choice. So long as they freely obeyed the law of unselfish love that governed the universe, the glories and joys of heaven would continue. But Lucifer perverted his God-given freedom into license. Lucifer, the “son of the morning” who stood in the direct, illustrious presence of God, basked in His approval and honor as a leader of the angels (Isaiah 14:12). When little by little he began to cherish a spirit of self-exaltation, God said of him: “Your heart became proud on account of your beauty” (Ezekiel 28:17, NIV). From there, Lucifer engaged in a revolt of epic proportions, rallying the angels against God and attempting to unseat Him from His throne.

We don’t know how long God labored to turn him around, but Lucifer proved intractable. More than this, he had brainwashed a third of the angels (Revelation 12). God

finally decided to cut His losses and go to war against His frenemy and his followers. Can you imagine? God loved Lucifer, but forced by circumstances to contain the damage of Lucifer’s now toxic influence, the Creator mounted an attack on His created one. After the attack, a deep well of grief brewed in the heart of God as He pieced together His losses.

The most significant injuries sustained in heaven’s war were the security and stability of the angelic hosts. The war had ended but not the war of emotions. Heaven was still in psychological tumult. The angels were bonded to Lucifer, but they loved God too. Like children of divorcing parents, they longed for harmony between the authority figures of their heavenly home. In earthly courts of justice, we disqualify relatives from serving on a jury for another relative’s trial on the basis of emotional bias created by a familial bond. The angels held that bias toward both God and Lucifer, and it tore them in two. While externally loyal to God, they remained internally conflicted. God dealt tenderly with this conflict, as He deals tenderly with ours. Out of His infinite patience and justice, and with creative genius, He approached the task of revealing the truth about the nefarious character of Lucifer-turned-Satan by shedding the dazzling light of divine love in yet brighter beams. In order to do this, He would create an order of being so much like Him that He could say, “Look at them, and you will see Me.” That’s us, humans. We’re God’s masterpiece, and in a sense, His weapon.

“So God created mankind in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27, NIV). *Image* means “reproduction” or “representation,” alluding to God’s desire for us to unveil His heart of steadfast love to “the principalities and powers in the heavenly places”—those emotionally scarred angels who had stood with God in the conflict (Ephesians 3:10). After all, even in the human realm, the accused need witnesses to speak on their behalf. In supreme humility, God said, “You are My witnesses” (Isaiah 43:12) and placed us on the stage of planet Earth as “a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men” (1 Corinthians 4:9).

Because love and freedom are inextricably entwined, because true love is a choice, all of God’s created beings possess a functional, self-directed free will. Knowing that free will can turn very, very bad and that Lucifer, now Satan, lurked on planet Earth to tempt us, God did what any responsible parent does: He created a contingency plan to provide for His kids in the event of a disaster. He vowed,

“Though the mountains be shaken
and the hills be removed,
yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken
nor my covenant of peace be removed” (Isaiah 54:10, NIV).

God’s “covenant of peace” is His eternal pledge to save us at any cost to Himself. When humanity fell into sin, God mobilized the covenant of peace by promising and then sending His own dear Son to join the human race. Jesus would become “the last Adam,” filling the office that Adam had left vacant (1 Corinthians 15:45). Jesus’ perfect life and atoning death would represent humanity before God to such an extent that God could save any who embraced them by faith. Because “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable,” the purpose of God to use humanity to reveal His self-giving love would still stand (Romans 11:29).

God’s method

What jumps out from this story so far is God’s method of dealing with evil. Rather than swoop in like a cartoon superhero to vanquish it, He takes the long but more thorough route; He inoculates His creation against sin by giving evil some space to reveal its true character. This method, though slower, more agonizing, and more tedious, accomplishes what a shock-and-awe, fire-and-brimstone decimation of God’s enemy fails to accomplish. It allows for sin’s true character to manifest itself. Ultimately, in allowing for the demonstration of the character of sin, God is being truthful.

He is also being effective. John Peckham says, “No amount of power exercised by a king would prove to his subjects that he is not unjust. No show of executive power could clear the name of a president accused of corruption. A conflict over character cannot be settled by sheer power but requires demonstration.”¹

This slow-but-thorough approach is doubly necessary because, with our fallen natures, we possess an inherent blindness to the true nature of sin. The only way God can fortify us internally against the sin that would defile heaven all over again is to allow its ghastly heart to be revealed. In order for that exposure to take place, sin needs a platform. God must allow Satan space and opportunity to act out the dictates of his malevolent soul.

God presides over the universe in awesome, life-giving majesty, yet even a cursory look at His creation shows a will other than God’s exerting itself continually in the death spirals

of disease, natural disaster, and man’s inhumanity to man. While God does reign, He allows the enemy’s work more freedom than we would like. But the freedom God grants to Satan coalesces with the divine purpose ultimately to place the universe on the solid ground of certainty about God’s love and Satan’s evil.

In considering “the odicy,” we must maintain a careful symmetry that blends divine sovereignty and human free will. If we emphasize sovereignty and minimize free will, we will conclude that the only will active in suffering is God’s. Everything becomes God’s will—no ifs, ands, buts, or qualifiers—making it seem as though God desires sin and suffering. Well-meaning Christians make this mistake often. “Well, it must have been God’s will,” we say to a mother at her child’s graveside. Wait! That child was walking to school, and a drunk driver ran her down. Satan tempted the driver to drink at eight in the morning, and the driver succumbed. God may not have intervened, but the horrifying nature of the child’s death reveals the devil’s will and heart, not God’s.

If, on the other hand, we emphasize free will and minimize sovereignty, we make it seem that God lacks power. I once counseled a couple who had been told by a pastor after their baby died that, essentially, the devil did it and God stood by watching, unable to stop him. In striving to avoid presenting the tragedy as God’s fault, the pastor hoped to comfort the parents by avoiding one imbalance, but he succumbed to another. As the parents considered the prospect of a universe in which the devil has unlimited free reign, they became even more distressed. God sees the sparrow fall. He “sits enthroned over the flood” (Psalm 29:10, NIV). He “works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11). It may be difficult for our finite minds to comprehend how this can be, but the limits of our human reasoning don’t alter the reality that God is both freedom granting and sovereign.

Innocent suffering

God allows the enemy space to create his chaos, but the sin and the suffering that convulse our aching planet don’t reflect the perfect will and heart of God any more than a messy child’s room reflects the will of a tidy parent. Why, then, does God overrule in some cases but not all? He certainly possesses the power to overrule, and He does at times. He opened the Red Sea and the Jordan River, raised people from the dead, gave sight to the blind, and healed all manner of diseases. To someone longing for a similar miracle, such stories can

seem like cruel taunts. It's easy to take it personally when God lets the devil have his way with us. This is especially true when we have done nothing to deserve this pain. The troubles we bring on ourselves don't pose the problem, but the *innocent* suffering that assaults our sense of justice. Can't God at least match the suffering with the sin? Can't He transfer the four-year-old's brain tumor to the skull of a terrorist? Can't He drive the hurricane out of the path of a poor man's hut and toward a rich man's vacation home? Can't He make things fair?

In terms of power, yes, He can; however, in terms of character, He can't. For God to confine sin within boundaries of justice would be to mask its true character. Sin is lawlessness. Sin is the reason a sweet, young girl bringing bread to her grandmother loses a leg to a land mine in Afghanistan. Sin is the reason a loving mother at church who ran the food pantry dies of cancer at forty years old. Sin is the reason innocent puppies die in puppy mills, and all "creation groans" (Romans 8:22). In order to reveal the heart of good and evil, God must allow sin to show its true, death-saturated colors.

In Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13:24–30, the farmer told the servants not to try to pull up the newly sprouted tares, lest the newly sprouted wheat be uprooted as well. He flatly admitted that "an enemy has done this," yet he enjoined a postponement of the enemy's eradication (verse 28). In the same way, God postpones His final dealings with evil because He will more successfully eradicate it in the end if He allows it to flourish temporarily. We are cautioned not to pass judgment "before the time" (1 Corinthians 4:5). Uprooting sin and its consequences now would lead to preventable, collateral damage and would fall short of accomplishing God's ultimate agenda of demonstrating the truth.

Here is the dilemma of "the odicy," as written by C. S. Lewis: "If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both."²

But there is a third option. Option three is that God is good and wants to end suffering; He is almighty and able to end suffering, but He is also love and has chosen, for a greater purpose, not to unilaterally end suffering until His mission is completed. That greater purpose is to reveal His unspeakable love and, in that glorious context, to unveil the true nature of sin, thus inoculating human beings against it for eternity.

Like the cancer patient opting to lose her hair to chemotherapy in order to destroy a tumor, or a doctor amputating a gangrenous limb, God can't solve the big-picture problem of sin without allowing some smaller-picture damage to occur. We may humbly trust Him, knowing that “God’s children must meet trials and difficulties. But they should accept their lot with a cheerful spirit, remembering that for all that the world neglects to bestow, God Himself will make up to them in the best of favors.”³

Dominions

Like any war, the great controversy entails rules of engagement that God, as a supremely moral Being, respects. We learn something of these rules when we examine the concept of dominions.

God had created the sinless Adam to “have dominion” over the earth, but through partaking of the forbidden fruit, he forfeited his dominion into the hands of Satan (Genesis 1:26; Psalm 8:6). The devil made this transfer clear when he later offered dominion back to Jesus, saying, “All this authority I will give You, and their glory; *for this has been delivered to me*, and I give it to whomever I wish” (Luke 4:6; emphasis added). Tragically, he has become “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), “the god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4), and “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). In other words, Adam forfeited the governance of planet Earth to Satan when he chose to partake of the forbidden fruit.

Something similar to supernatural dominions play out in earthly international affairs. The drug lord Juan Matta-Ballesteros had done his share of damage in trafficking drugs into the United States. Fed up with his various crimes, Honduran law enforcement agents and US Marshals raided his home in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, and sent in a team to cart him off for trial and incarceration. Ballesteros is still in the United States, serving three life sentences. After his arrest, Honduran protestors took to the streets, enraged that US Marshals came upon their soil to arrest and extradite a citizen, thus breaking the country’s constitution. Five people died in the melee. In the eyes of the protesters, the United States violated Honduran dominion by arresting and extraditing Matta-Ballesteros on Honduran soil.

In spite of Satan’s havoc-wreaking activities, God invades Satan’s dominion when we ask for His aid and when He knows it would be for the best. According to Daniel’s vision,

the Son of man, who created dominions, allows the beasts to have dominion for a time (see Daniel 7; Colossians 1:16). However, the Son of man ultimately receives this dominion back forever (Daniel 7:14). Through Jesus, the grand narrative will come to completion. Jesus in the capacity of our self-sacrificing, self-humbling, incarnate God will win dominion back and return it to us as He makes us “kings and priests” (Revelation 1:6; 5:10; see also Revelation 20:6). Jesus delegated dominion to us in Eden; He will return it to us in Eden restored, the new earth.

How will Jesus ultimately win the battle? This supernatural war rolls out on the battlefield of the psyche. The win goes to the one who obtains the loving allegiance of human beings. The battle is won not by power alone but by the power of love. The turf war is over the heads and hearts of God’s creatures. God must persuade us by allowing the enemy to have dominion for a time and by showing that He is love and that sin is not love.

This dominion won’t be regained through military might or prowess but through winning heart-level citizen loyalty. Jesus won the right to restored dominion on the cross, but to transfer that right back to us requires our consent, both collectively and individually. The legal arrangements for our reinstatement have been made, but our personal acceptance of the agreement ratifies the process. God has spent six millennia persuading human beings that He is worthy of their worship and obedience. Those who respond have a “right to the tree of life” (Revelation 22:14, NIV). Finally, a new humanity in Christ will take up residence in the new earth, Eden restored.

Talk about second chances!

In granting Satan dominion, God merely respects the very free will with which He created us. He respected and honored the free will of Adam as he relinquished the dominion of our fair planet to the hands of His enemy. Then He respected the free will of Satan as he turned our fair planet into a place of chaos and suffering. He respects the free will of each inhabitant of planet Earth as they make their choices, moment by moment, whether to yield to the invitation of His Spirit or the temptations of the devil. While God grants freedom, He uses the effects of that freedom for His own purposes, ultimately winning back dominion heart by heart until

“The kingdom and dominion,
And the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven,

Shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. . . .
And all dominions shall serve and obey Him” (Daniel 7:27).

God wins “the odicy” by allowing the truth about Himself and His enemy to be revealed in crystal clarity. This can’t be done while stifling, micromanaging, and harnessing Satan. God must let him play out his dark motives until they effectively dull the gloss of his pretty lies.

God doesn’t just tell; He shows. He demonstrated “His own love toward us” at the cross when Satan’s thirst for blood overwhelmed his attempts to hide his true motives (Romans 5:8). Caught up in the frenzy of crucifying Jesus, wholly intoxicated by his pure hatred of God, the devil exposed himself for who he really was. Against that black backdrop, the light of God’s love revealed itself in brilliant distinction.

God gave His dear Son to win back the human family. He made the ultimate sacrifice. The Cross is the ultimate statement and the unmistakable proof that God would withhold nothing good from us. “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32). If Jesus would sacrifice His union with the Father, even pour out life itself, would He withhold anything? If I would give you the keys to my house, would I withhold my thrift-store furniture? God proved His utter generosity when He gave Himself. Life on the earth is a muddy window through which we see some of God and some of His enemy, but the Cross is an open door. It leaves no doubt or confusion as to the heart of God. When we look to the events of life on earth for consistent, reliable information about God, we look to the wrong source for evidence. When we look to the Cross, we find a clear path forward.

Choosing joy

Many others have done a better job than I ever could of explaining theodicy. I will work within the scope of my expertise. Most of our arguments against God are emotional. We are disappointed that He didn’t come through for us, protect us, or bless us in the way we had hoped. Let me address those disappointments. First, He can take it—He understands that this great-controversy stuff is difficult. But of more importance is the fact that He joins us. Remember, even Jesus asked why. Jesus also experienced disappointment with God. Our God understands our issues with God. To balance that out, we have a choice. We can

cherish faith, or we can nurse our doubts. I am hoping and praying that this book will encourage the former.

Stanford professor T. M. Luhrmann has observed church life as an anthropologist. She has concluded that when people see God as good, it makes them healthier: “I saw that people were able to learn to experience God in this way, and that those who were able to experience a loving God vividly were healthier—at least, as judged by a standardized psychiatric scale.” She also said, “When God was experienced as remote or not loving, the more someone prayed, the more psychiatric distress she seemed to have; when God was experienced as close and intimate, the more someone prayed, the less ill he was.”⁴ Apparently, it’s not religion itself that brings us benefits but our picture of God and our choices as they relate to that view that heal us.

Although God won’t make us perfectly happy here on earth now, He does promise the gift of joy in the midst of our sorrows. May we all find that joy is my prayer.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What events in your life have led you to question God?
2. If you had just a few sentences to explain why God allows sin and suffering, what would you say?
3. How do you imagine God feels as He allows temporary suffering for the greater purpose of eradicating sin?
4. How do you imagine the loyal angels felt when the conflict arose between Lucifer and God?
5. How does God’s method of eradicating evil differ from the typical human methods?
6. Why is it important to maintain a balance between an emphasis of God’s sovereignty and human free will?
7. What are some instances of innocent suffering that have led you to feel the utter unfairness of sin?
8. God can end all innocent suffering in terms of power. But how does His character prevent Him from ending it?
9. How can an unloving, distant view of God actually make religion into a vehicle for more distress?

10. Have you had any ah ha moments about the character of God? Describe them.

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1. John C. Peckham, *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 91.
 2. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 16.
 3. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1905), 199.
 4. T. M. Luhrmann, “The Benefits of Church,” *New York Times*, Opinion, April 20, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/opinion/sunday/luhrmann-why-going-to-church-is-good-for-you.html>.