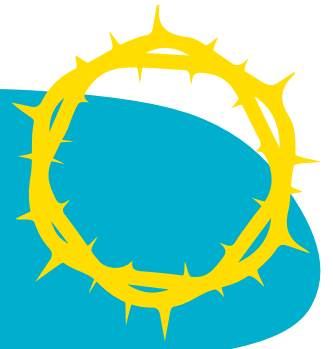


# SUFFERING



The existence of suffering in the world raises important questions for Christians. Why does it happen? Does it have a purpose? How can God allow it to happen? What is the relationship between suffering and evil?

To get started on this topic, let's think about how suffering might affect people's lives.

*Working in pairs or small groups, discuss what types of suffering and what causes of suffering there are in the world. Try to make a list of at least six different examples. You can use the pictures below for ideas – how are the people in them experiencing suffering?*

*Which of these forms of suffering are caused by humans? Which of them are not caused by humans?*

*Is there one form of suffering which is worse than others?*



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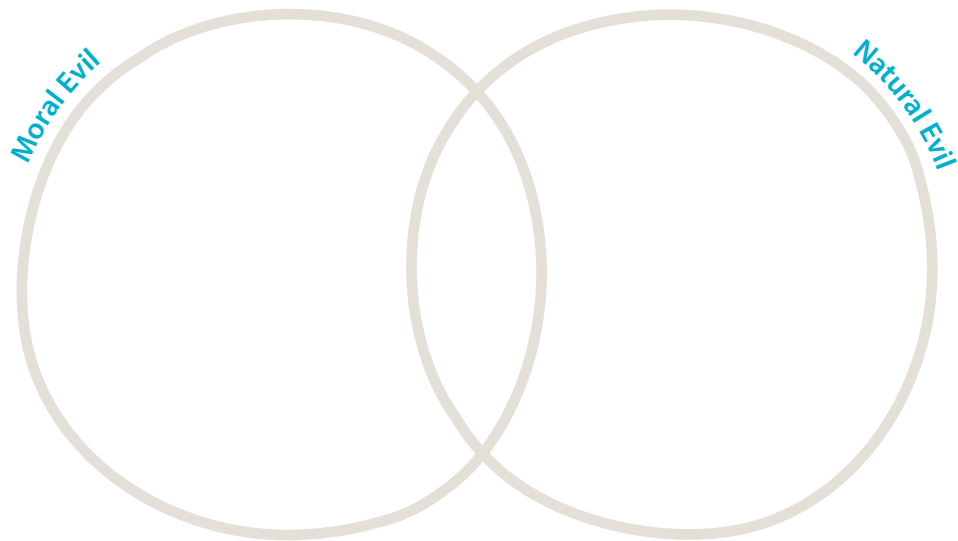
## Moral and Natural Evil

Suffering can be said to be caused by evil. Philosophers often talk about there being two types of evil – moral evil and natural evil.

Moral evil covers acts committed by human beings, such as racism or violence.

Natural evil includes natural disasters, such as earthquakes or hurricanes.

Write your answers to the questions on the previous page into the correct section on the diagram below. Where they overlap, are there examples which can be said to be both natural and moral evils?



*Do you think that there is more moral evil in the world today, or is there more natural evil?*

*Is one of the two types of evil worse than the other? Explain why.*

## Why is there suffering in the world?

There are many different religious and non-religious responses to this deep and important question.

*Take a set of cards (there are eight cards in total). Each card describes a possible reason for the existence of suffering in the world.*

*Working in pairs or small groups, lay the cards out on the table and arrange them in order, from the one which you think is the most likely explanation for why suffering happens down to the least likely.*

*Are any of the explanations for suffering offered on the cards similar to each other?*

The existence of suffering and evil in the world can raise questions about God's actions and care for the world for both religious and non-religious people alike. Christians believe that the Bible can help them to understand the suffering which they and others might face in their lives, and guide them in how to respond to it.

## What does the Old Testament say about suffering?

The problem of suffering is right at the heart of much of the Old Testament. In the book of Job, the question is explored in depth. Christians differ about what type of book Job is – is it the literal history of a man called Job and how he responded to suffering, or it is a poetic novel which uses a fictional story to describe various ideas about suffering? Most Bible scholars believe that it is a fictional story, but either way, the story of Job is extraordinary.

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

Job chapter 1 verse 1 (NRSV)

The story describes how God and Satan have a discussion. Satan says to God that it is easy for Job to believe and trust in God, because Job has an easy life. Job is extremely wealthy, lives comfortably, has a loving family and is very happy. If that life is removed, Satan says, then he will respond to God in a very different way. God then allows Satan to test Job.

Job loses everything, but he refuses to curse God for the loss of his family, his property, his riches and his good health. Some of Job's friends come to visit him, and they try to explain why they think he is suffering so much. Perhaps he has committed some secret sin which has led God to punish him? He is suffering so much that God must be teaching Job a hard lesson, his friends argue. However, it is clear from the story that Job had not done anything wrong to deserve the judgement of God, so the story of Job doesn't seem to be saying that suffering is a punishment for things we do which are wrong.

Then, towards the end of the book, we hear God's response.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:

'Who is this that **darkens counsel by words without knowledge?**

**Gird up your loins** like a man, I will question you, and you shall **declare to me.**

'**Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?**

Tell me, if you have understanding. **Who determined its measurements** – surely you know! Or who **stretched the line** upon it?'

Job chapter 38 verses 1-5 (NRSV)

God asks what right Job has to question his wisdom when he knows and understands so little.

He tells Job to get himself ready to answer God's questions.

He tests Job with some questions which are unanswerable, such as asking him 'Who decided how big the world would be.' 'Stretched the line' refers to a measuring line, a kind of ancient tape measure.

By asking Job these unanswerable questions, God shows him that he, God, is in charge and that the human mind can never truly know or understand everything about the world, including why suffering happens.

*Look again at the cards you used in the last task. Which explanations would the author of the story of Job have said were the most likely? Which cards would Job himself have disagreed with?*

*What can Christians learn about suffering from the story of Job?*

*Is it helpful to say that suffering can never be completely understood?*

## What does the New Testament say about suffering?

We are going to use three passages to find out what the New Testament says about suffering. Take one passage each and complete the tasks that go with it, then swap until you have done all three. You can do them in any order.

They are:

- Paul writes to the Christians in Rome.
- Jesus heals a deaf and mute man.
- The crucifixion.

While studying this topic, the Bible passages which you have used have included three different type of writing.

- The book of Job is Wisdom literature, which stories and poetry to explore the deep meanings of difficult issues.
- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are Gospels, written accounts which tell the story of Jesus and try to show that he was the Son of God.
- The book of Romans is a letter, written to a specific group of people (the Christians in the city of Rome) for a specific purpose.

*Which of these types of writing do you think is easiest for someone today to use to find out what the Bible says about suffering, and which is the hardest? Explain why.*

Now find out more about some examples of how Christians have responded to suffering by watching the video at:

[biblesociety.org.uk/e/suffering](https://biblesociety.org.uk/e/suffering)

*Using the same cards as you used earlier on in this topic, work in pairs or small groups and organise them again, but this time organise them into two groups : explanations for suffering which Christians might believe, and explanations which Christians would not believe.*

*For each explanation, either match it to something you have learned about how Christians respond to suffering, or explain what it is about the explanation which would mean that a Christian would not believe it.*

