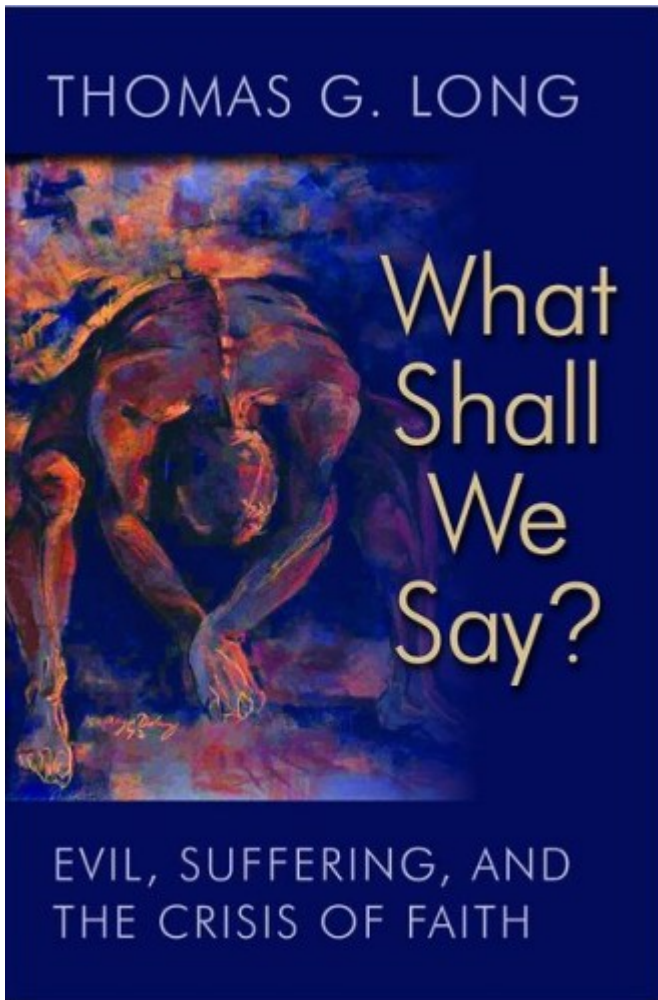


What Shall We Say? by Thomas G. Long

reviewed by [Robert Cornwall](#) in the [March 21, 2012](#) issue

In Review



What Shall We Say?

By Thomas G. Long
Eerdmans

Pat Robertson had a ready explanation for the Haiti earthquake—he said that it was an expression of divine wrath at a centuries-old pact with the devil. Robertson's explanation may offend many of us, but attempts at offering a theodicy have a long

pedigree. Monotheists have long had a difficult time explaining the presence of evil and suffering in the world since they assume that God has no rival. If God exists and is by definition omnipotent, good and loving, then why do the innocent suffer? This dilemma may appear to be an impossible chess match, but some kind of answer is demanded of those called to preach, and even an incomplete and tentative answer must be deeply rooted theologically.

It is not that God needs defending, but that the people of God need help in holding together their faith professions in the midst of suffering. Those called to ministry in the church must walk with those who suffer, and a ministry merely of presence is insufficient. Thomas Long eloquently and forcefully demonstrates that the question preachers face is: "What shall we say?" This difficult question requires expert guidance, something that Long, a leading preacher and teacher of preachers, is well equipped to provide.

Long begins his book with the story of the earthquake that hit Lisbon on All Saints Day in 1755, devastating the Portuguese capital and killing thousands—and shaking the faith of many thousands more across Europe. Traditional theology was already under attack by partisans of the Enlightenment, and this disaster undermined the traditional theodicies offered by the likes of Gottfried Leibniz, who suggested that what God had created was the best of all possible worlds. Preachers sought to offer an explanation in terms of divine punishment, but how could God strike what was considered Europe's most religious city as it worshiped on All Saints Day? What did this event say about God?

If the preacher can't remain silent, and if traditional appeals to divine punishment no longer suffice, then what should be said? Long writes: "If we think we have some insight or wisdom about the theodicy problem, . . . but it is not a word that we would want to speak to a sufferer in the depths of loss and grief, then this is a trustworthy sign that this so-called 'wisdom' is not really the gospel, and it should not be spoken at all."

Long takes the reader on a journey through the various attempts to address the problem of evil, from free will to Bart Ehrman's abandonment of God to process theology's rejection of omnipotence. Many turn to Job, which Long explores before concluding that as powerful as that story is, in the end we're led to the position of having to "step over the line and fall on our knees in prayer and faith. Only in the light of our trust in God is there anything to see."

An answer is demanded, but it will take considerable theological imagination to offer an answer that makes sense of our realities. The preaching task is never finished; loose ends will remain when the preacher steps into the pulpit each Sunday morning. There are no easy solutions, and those that emerge will likely come as we pray and sing hymns and walk with each other and with God.

Long doesn't offer an illustrative sermon. He points us to an appropriate text, which he helpfully unpacks with theodicy in mind. We discover good news as we attend to the message of the parables of the weeds and the mustard seed. The question is posed: has God sown weeds along with the wheat? The answer is no. That is, evil and suffering are real and present, but this is neither God's doing nor God's will. Can we fix the problem by pulling out the weeds? Again, the answer is no, for these two realities have become too intertwined to separate. Thus we must look at this problem eschatologically, knowing that God will bring evil and suffering to an end and will establish justice. But this doesn't mean that God is not at work in present circumstances.

The parable of the mustard seed then offers a word of illumination. A mustard bush may look like a weed, but it isn't one. As Long puts it, "God's power in the world is ambiguous. It doesn't look like power—in fact, it looks suspiciously like a worthless weed that we'd like to root out of the field—but it is nevertheless working, in stealth fashion, to produce something of great size and pervasive impact."

It's not likely that readers will agree with Long at every point, especially since he finds some current theological positions, including process theology and Ehrman's understandings, to be wanting. Nonetheless, this is a moving and inspiring book. Too often preachers avoid these kinds of questions, offering pat answers or no answer at all. Long offers not only expert guidance but a push toward finding an answer that is theologically grounded and makes sense of the reality of suffering and evil in this world. His answer is not in a diminished or power-wielding God, but in a God who comes to us in the cross of Jesus, who overcomes evil by sowing mustard seeds in the midst of the weeds.