

If God is almighty, why do we suffer?

A nine-year-old at my church wants to know.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [December 29, 2021](#) issue



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Children have a way of surfacing profound questions at bedtime, sometimes to bring closure to their day and other times just to postpone the “lights out” moment. My own kids used to review the entirety of creation at bedtime, it seemed, figuring that Mom and Dad couldn’t say a final goodnight if they kept having to field imponderable questions about God.

Last month, I received a one-line email from the mother of a nine-year-old in my congregation who had thrown a theological curveball her way one night. “Elliot wants to know,” she wrote, “if God is all-powerful, why are so many bad things happening in the world?” I haven’t answered Elliot yet because I’m looking for a helpful child-friendly response. I know what I’d say to his mother, however, the drift of which goes something like this.

The almightiness of God is indeed a central theme in Christianity. Not only do the hymns, prayers, and creeds of the church use the language *Almighty God*, the personal piety of many believers relies on the same. For the better part of two millennia, Western theology has been enamored with the idea that divine sovereignty places God in complete control of everything. Absolute dominion. Unrestricted power. Despite Paul's celebration of God's weakness, the church has long encouraged people to believe that this controlling of everything is a virtue.

Plenty of faithful people have challenged this portrait of omnipotence. They wonder why one would follow a God enthroned above the rough-and-tumble of history when Nazi death camps, Cambodian killing fields, and 9/11 rubble have marred creation. We can ponder a similar question with respect to our personal suffering.

For nearly three decades now, I've clung to a powerful theological insight from Arie Brouwer, the ecumenical leader who died in 1993 following a brief bout with cancer. During that final year, Brouwer's son confronted him about the nature of his faith. "Dad, when I talked to you by phone at the hospital, you said something about living by faith. What does that mean under these circumstances? It doesn't seem right to me. You and Mom have spent a lot of your life trying to make this a better world for people to live in. This [cancer] is a very strange way to be paid back."

Arie responded to his son: "My whole life has been a love affair with God. I am not about to give that up because I have cancer. I don't believe that God wants me to have cancer, but what I have come to believe during these days is that God can't do anything about it."

To many Christians, questioning the almightiness of God is certain heresy. But Brouwer had done his homework. He found that God's almightiness (*Pantokrator*, in Greek) is spoken of only ten times in the New Testament, nine of which are in the book of Revelation. All ten have to do with God's ultimate triumph in history. At the end of history, God will prevail in the struggle, just as love, justice, peace, and well-being will prevail. In the meantime, God settles for limited power in order to be with us through every struggle.

We tend to think of God in terms of absolutes. God can do absolutely anything. But we shouldn't forget that God *is* love—and that love involves solidarity with the hurt that others endure. Now, to find a way to communicate some of this to Elliot.

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