

# Why God Allows Three-Year-Olds to Be Burned to Death in House Fires

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## 1. The Most Agonizing Question

My three-year-old granddaughter was burned to death in a house fire.

Thirty-four years ago, when my brother, nineteen years old, was killed as the pedestrian in an auto-pedestrian accident, from what I could tell, his death, while tragically sad, wasn't particularly horrible. It was fast, and Kevin did not see the car coming up from behind the direction he was looking—which is why he stepped in front of it. He probably literally didn't know what hit him. There was probably a quick moment when he at some level realized something was wrong, *maybe* (I really don't know) even to the extent of realizing he had been (probably?) hit by a car, but from what I know of such quick moments, whether and to what extent they involve knowing what's happening, they do not involve great suffering or distress. From what I can tell, Kevin's quick moment ended as his head hit the road, and at that point his conscious experience ended. He was gone.

Not so for little Sadie. She had been sleeping in a room where the family in the house couldn't get to her. But she wasn't somehow quickly killed in her sleep, without knowing anything about it. She was heard screaming. When I got to the hospital burn unit, where Sadie (or at least her body, as I think of things) was being kept on life support, much of her was bandaged, but I was able to see badly burned parts of it that weren't bound up. I of course could not tell how bad the pain got before she lost consciousness, but from what I could tell, her death did involve horrible suffering. My angry statement on social media:

Ours is a God (if God there be) who allows 3 year olds to be burned to death,  
screaming in terror, and all alone

"Why does God allow horrendous evils?" is how I would phrase the question that in my life I have long agonized over the most. Now a horrendous evil had befallen a dear loved one of mine.

Two very kind friends, both fellow philosophers, wrote to suggest that God might provide special comfort in such scenarios, so that Sadie's death may not have been as

horrible as I was imagining. Tom Morris (who commented publicly, and so presumably wouldn't mind being named, and maybe even quoted<sup>1</sup>) put it this way:

I hold out a hope that even in fire and bombs and after the screams, there is a presence that we never or very rarely feel in ordinary life that calms and loves, embraces, welcomes, and transforms - and not just for us but our animal friends as well. Otherwise nothing makes any sense at all.

My friends had a good point. With respect to allowing Sadie to die alone and in terror, it's like I assume that God does not provide special comfort, and then blame Them for acting as I assume.

Still, I feel I have to confront Sadie's death in the "terrified and all alone," uncomforted, version of it: that God allowed her to die so horribly is what I feel I "must face." I think that part of what's behind my difference with my friend Tom here is that I don't find it helps all that much with making sense of how God is behaving to suppose that They did provide the comfort Tom suggests, but allowed Sadie's life to end in that room, anyway. Perhaps "Why did God allow *that*?" is a *bit* more puzzling where "that" includes that the death was terrifying and horrible, but it turns out that for me, it doesn't feel that different, at least with respect to it being hard to understand how God could allow it: I feel I'm confronting pretty much the same mystery I did thirty-four years ago.

I should perhaps say that, despite my perhaps coming off as having a tough, face-the-facts stance, I think I am at bottom really a softie in pretty much the way that Tom is. My hope, by which I soften the horrible blow, is that Sadie died in that room and then immediately experienced the love and comfort of God. It's mostly a difference in timing, though I must admit that Tom's hope is much more comforting when I worry about how the time around her death was experienced by Sadie. (I find it matters a good deal to how horrible I think Sadie's death was, just not so much to how hard it is to think that God allowed it.) "In this world you shall have trouble" seems to resonate deeply with me, and so I imagine her greatest troubles ending only when Sadie left this world. Maybe Tom's hope in the end makes more sense. It does seem to line up with Stephen's experience of his would-be horrific death by stoning as told in *Acts*, and I suppose if I

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, such suggestions can be harmful, and though their communications were written in such a way that these friends could reasonably expect them not to be harmful, but to be expressions of helpful and comforting solidarity, which is how I found them, people experiencing tragic loss can be very fragile in ways, and these friends I suppose did have to risk my experiencing their suggestion as harmful. The most common thing said to me (on social media, and in person) was along the lines of "

were God, Yea, I would hold people's hands as they pass through the valley of the shadow of death, and not just after they have done so, if I were allowing them to pass through such dark shadows. And I guess I have heard reports here and there of such hand holding. But, you know, God seems to not do things as I would.

## **2. Having the Answer to the Agonizing Question?**

I was asked to speak at Sadie's funeral. Despite all the importance I put on total honesty in such settings, I think that in the about 90 seconds I took to speak, I may have managed to tell a very consequential lie: I said I didn't know why God allows three-year-olds to die in house fires.

In claiming such ignorance, I was following in the precarious footsteps of my former teacher (and then later, my former colleague), Nick Wolterstorff, who wrote this (from which I'm taking, with a little alteration, the phrase "the most agonizing question I have ever asked") in *Lament for a Son*, a book he wrote after the death of his twenty-five year old son in a mountain climbing accident—a book that has provided a lot of very honest comfort to many where I come from, including my parents, when they have lost younger dear loved ones:

I cannot fit it all together by saying, "He did it," but neither can I do so by saying, "There was nothing he could do about it." I cannot fit it together at all. I can only, with Job, endure. I do not know why God did not prevent Eric's death. To live without the answer is precarious. It's hard to keep one's footing. . . .

I have no explanation. I can do nothing else than endure in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries. I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and resurrecter of Jesus Christ. I also believe that my son's life was cut off in its prime. I cannot fit these pieces together. I am at a loss. I have read the theodicies produced to justify the ways of God to man. I find them unconvincing. To the most agonized question I have ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Lament for a Son*, pp. 67-68

Now, I wasn't simply and straightforwardly lying when I said that I didn't know why God allowed Sadie's death. It is complicated. For one thing, I take myself to have been technically telling the truth there, because I take myself not to really *know* (emphasis) *anything* (separate emphasis) substantial about these matters, including even that God exists (much less what Their reasons might be for anything). But I think that when we are speaking in "knowledge deserts," as I call them, and as I most definitely was, and we say that we "don't know" something, we tend to convey something far more substantial than just that we (of course) don't know the particular matter in question (just as we fail to know the answers to all the other questions we have in the region). We tend to somehow mean something like that on the matter in question, we don't have an answer that we even accept. And, as opposed to Nick's expressed stance, I do in a way—and I think in the way most relevant to our current purposes—have an answer that I accept to our most agonizing question of why God permits such tragedies.

And what's more, my having this answer seems key to my faith surviving senseless young deaths (and surviving the matter of horrendous suffering, sometimes unto death). And I even think that having this answer may be how many others hold on to (some of) their faith in the face of these greatest challenges to it, even when they don't explicitly realize that they have this answer and are hanging on in that way.

My brother's senseless and tragic death had not caused any crisis of faith for me, but, as I put the matter when talking with others familiar with the songs of Bob Dylan, that was for "Positively 4<sup>th</sup> Street" reasons. I there allude to these lines from that song:

You say you lost your faith, but that's not where it's at  
You had no faith to lose, and you know it

But in alluding to those lines, I didn't mean to be claiming that I had no faith at all left to lose by the time Kevin died: I still had some. What I meant was just that any faith that could be knocked off by the fact that God, if They exist, allows tragic senseless deaths had already been knocked off long before. It turns out that I am not one for whom tragedy has to strike close to home for it to have its effect on my thinking about whether there might still be a perfectly good God who allows it. I took the Problem of Horrific Evil to provide the strongest reason against God's existence, and to be clear: It had knocked off some of my faith in God. I'm just saying that what measure of my faith that had survived did so because, in the most relevant way, I had a good answer to why

God allows even horrific suffering (and so also why God allows non-horrific, but tragic and senseless young deaths).

But at the time of Kevin's death, I didn't realize I had this answer. (I "had" this answer only in the way you can when you don't explicitly realize you have an answer.) If someone asked me if I knew why God allowed such tragic, senseless, early deaths, I would have answered no—and without feeling, as I did much later at Sadie's funeral, that I was being dishonest, as I heard the words come out of my own mouth.

That we don't know such things—and usually even that we are extremely far from knowing them, sometimes expressed by the likes of "I don't even have a guess"—is almost an item of faith where I come from. I inherited that not only from Nick and other teachers, but even from the teacher from whom I learned the crucial part of the answer. This was Marilyn Adams, who taught me why God allows horrendous evils, when in seminar on the Problem of Evil that I took and that she co-taught with Bob Adams, we discussed her paper, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God." But Marilyn would not at all have described what she taught me in those terms, at least at the time she taught it to me. She in fact saw the project of proposing reasons God might have for allowing horrendous evils to be a huge mistake. She argued that while the standard theodicies might be able to explain why God might allow some evil or other, they completely fell apart when they were applied to truly horrendous evils. There the attempt to identify God's reasons for allowing these evils was "hopeless" (p. 304), as these reasons were inaccessible to us in a very strong way indeed: "[W]here horrendous evils are concerned, not only do we not know God's actual reason for permitting them; we cannot even conceive of any plausible candidate sort of reason" (p. 304). The key to her approach to the problem of horrendous evils, as she presented it (see especially the section of her paper entitled *Whys versus Hows*<sup>3</sup>) was turning away from the bankrupt project of trying to discern even possible reasons for *why* God allows horrendous evils and toward a different question, the answering of which was more promising: *how* does God, in a specialized sense that we will designate by using all-caps, DEFEAT horrendous evils in the lives of those who suffer them? We will soon look at what this DEFEAT amounts to, but you can guess already that I think that in telling us how God might DEFEAT horrendous evils, Marilyn really was addressing the perhaps not-so-hopeless-after-all question of why God might allow them.

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<sup>3</sup> Section 4.1, pp. 305-306, of Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God."

It was just a few months later that I began to realize that I had an answer. This occurred in an interview for a philosophy job, when I actually was under critical pressure to explain how I can still believe in an all-benevolent God in the face of the horrendous evils in the world. (Really, it was like a scene from a bad Christian movie, where our Christian hero is being grilled by very intellectual skeptics.)<sup>4</sup> As I started to explain matters, it was like I was listening as a spectator to the words coming out of my own mouth, and I realized that the philosophy I had been studying, the theodicies I had read, especially when they include Marilyn's (though others also had helped), actually were not as inadequate as Nick and others (including Marilyn) had taught me to think in explaining the ways of God. In fact, I began to realize, I actually had an answer to why God would allow horrific evils, and then also tragic young deaths.

### **3. How There Is No Reason Why Sadie Died in that Fire, How God Is Not the Agent of Death**

What I was mainly honestly trying to convey at the funeral when I said that I didn't know why God permits deaths like Sadie's was that there was a certain kind of account of God's reasons that I most definitely did not have, and did not want to be understood as offering:

As it happens, I'm actually a philosopher who has spent a lot of time worrying about the problem of evil, but I'm sorry, I can't tell you why God allows little girls to be burned to death. All I can say is that this nightmare has contained some beautiful moments – like hugs from strangers in the hotel lobby who had themselves lost children in the past, and encounters with strangers around town, and also in this sanctuary on Sunday, who had heard of our tragedy. But the most beautiful was also the most horrifying: after rushing down to the burn unit in Augusta, Georgia, walking into Sadie's room with my son, her Dad, and saying goodbye: kissing her on the forehead and saying, "Grampa loves you, Sadie." Nobody should ever tell you that God allows horrors to happen in order to make possible these beautiful (though sometimes horrifying) moments. But I think we should notice to the extent that we are able that they are beautiful (through the horror), and thank God for them, so far as we can, as

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part of our thanks to God for the short but beautiful lives our little ones had, and the privilege we had of playing our role in them.<sup>5</sup>

What I was most anxious to avoid, even as I acknowledged some of the beauty that I had experienced, was any picture on which God chose Sadie to suffer such a horrible death because They saw a great opportunity to make some such beautiful moments come out of it.

On the matter of why God chose Sadie, I actually don't only think that we can't know God's reasons, but in an important way, there really are no reasons: God *didn't* choose Sadie to suffer her tragedy, for any purpose, known or unknown to us. Or at least, that's what I think. But here I seem to be aligned with Nick.

Seeing God as the agent of death is one way of fitting together into a rational pattern God, ourselves, and death (p. 67),

Nick writes, but it's not a way that he can accept. Here he explains the anger he felt when at his son's funeral, he was given a book by another father who had lost a son to a mountaineering accident, in which the father had taken comfort from the thought that "God had shaken the mountain," as Nick put it, probably non-literally, to express the thought that God had chosen the man's son to die at that time in that way, and had made it happen:

I find this pious attitude deaf to the message of the Christian gospel. Death is here understood as a normal instrument of God's dealing with us. "You there have lived out the years I've planned for you, so I'll just shake the mountain a bit. All of you there, I'll send some starlings into the engine of your plane. And as for you there, a stroke while running will do nicely."

The Bible speaks instead of God's overcoming death. Paul calls it the last great enemy to be overcome. God is appalled by death. (p. 66)

Although beautiful things can come out of what look like tragic and senseless deaths, and also from horrific suffering, bringing about such beautiful results can be, at most, part of the reason that our world is such in general as to contain such deaths and such suffering, and not for why the evils are caused or even allowed by God on particular occasions. For one thing, such evils seem on many occasions to occur in ways and in circumstances where, as should have been predictable enough to God, they weren't

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very likely to produce much by way of beautiful moments. For another, even when such beautiful moments, and other nice consequences, do result, perhaps even result predictably enough, that beauty seems not nearly enough to justify allowing the evil, and those beautiful moments very often don't involve the principal victim of the tragedy. So these can't provide the real reason God allows these evils.

Or so I think, along with Nick. God created a world where tragic and horrible things can and often do happen. The world contains us, and often the world chooses someone to suffer tragedy because one or more of us choose evil, for bad reasons. But often the world "chooses" victims of tragedies in ways that don't involve anyone literally choosing the tragedies to happen for any particular purpose. They are matters of chance. The world "chose" Sadie to suffer a senseless death, but not literally, nor for any particular purpose. Her death really was senseless in terms of why it happened, even though some good can be made to come from it. God did choose to allow it to happen, but this could be, not for any reason particular to Sadie, but in order to keep to a general policy for the world on which even horrible things are allowed to happen.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In his paper "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God" (originally in Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Cornell UP, 1988); page references to the reprint in van Inwagen, *God, Knowledge, and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Cornell UP, 1995)), Peter van Inwagen develops such a picture, on which much of what happens in the world are "matters of chance" or are "due to chance," where by such things he means this:

The event or state of affairs is without purpose or significance; it is not a part of anyone's plan; it serves no one's end; and it might very well not have been. A chance event, in other words, is one such that, if someone asks of it, "Why did that happen?" the only right answer is: "There is no reason or explanation; it just happened."

Van Inwagen continues:

But you must hear this statement charitably. I do not mean to imply that a "chance" event in this sense has no explanation of any sort. If Alice suddenly remembers that she had promised to buy a box of crayons for her son, and turns into an unfamiliar street in search of an appropriate shop, and is struck and killed by a car whose brakes have failed, her death may well be a "chance" occurrence in the sense I mean—someone who did not believe in divine providence would almost certainly say that it was—even though in one sense her death has an obvious explanation: She was struck by a car. But if her grieving husband were to cry in despair, "Why did she die?", it would be a cruel joke to tell him that she died because she was struck by a large, heavy vehicle moving at fifty miles an hour. That is not the sort of explanation he would be asking for. By calling an event a "chance" event, I mean that it has no explanation of the sort Alice's husband might ask for: It has no purpose or significance; it is not a part of anyone's plan. (pp. 50-51)

As van Inwagen phrases the kinds of reasons God does and does not have in such a case, God has no "special reason" or "reason particular to that event" for allowing Alice's accident, but to get to what kind of "general" reason God positively does have, van Inwagen says They have "no reason beyond His general policy of allowing deaths by misadventure" (p. 63).



You may join me (and I think Nick) in seeing matters this way, on which, in important ways I've tried to spell out a bit, God didn't choose the victims of very bad evils to suffer them, on which God has no "particular reason," as we might put it, for causing/allowing the particular tragedies that occur, and on which God is not "the agent of death." And you may find some relief in such a picture.<sup>7</sup>

But the relief is quite limited, and we really haven't answered our question in a way that would allow it to cease being such a pointed challenge to our acceptance of the existence of a loving God—as Nick very painfully realized. God may not be the "agent of death" in the way I've tried to articulate: Perhaps we can say They are not the agent of particular deaths. But God did decide to put us in a world where we are generally subject to being "chosen" for death, including sometimes early and tragic death, and for other tragedies. And being God, in each case, God sees the potential tragedy coming (at least as a possibility, so even if you think that the future is open in such a way that even an omniscient God may not know what will actually happen), but then positively allows it to happen, presumably for a good reason. We may say that God's reason is not a "particular" one, but is to adhere to some general policy, and to some of us, that may help matters a bit. But it doesn't help much. (And to some it seems not to help at all, but rather rubs salt in the wound: These are people who find comfort in the thought that God is choosing everything that happens, even their loved one's tragedy.) Why did God choose to stick to such a damn general policy, where They so easily could have instead intervened and prevented the tragedy? Or if we construe these divine general policies as being such that it's really not an option not to adhere to them once they are in place, then why did God formulate that damn non-interventionist policy so that it would have Them not intervene in these horrible particular cases that we worry about? Well, that's

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<sup>7</sup> In "The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy" (*Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 161-187), van Inwagen quotes (with the writer's permission) a letter he received from a pastor, explaining how van Inwagen's position, on which the tragedies which befall us and loved ones can be "matters of chance" in the way we saw in the previous note, plays a crucial role in the pastor's counseling. The pastor, Dr. Stephen S. Bilynskyj, who, we are told, is both a trained philosopher and a Lead Pastor of a church, wrote this:

As a pastor, I believe that some sort of view of providence which allows for genuine chance is essential in counseling those facing what I often call the "practical problem of evil." A grieving person needs to be able to trust in God's direction of her life and the world, without having to make God directly responsible for every event that occurs. The message of the Gospel is not, I believe, that everything that occurs has some purpose. Rather, it is that God's power is able to use and transform any event through the grace of Jesus Christ. Thus a person may cease a fruitless search for reasons for what happens, and seek the strength that God offers to live with what happens. Such an approach is very different from simply assuming, fideistically, that there must be reasons for every event, but we are incapable of knowing them. (p. 187)

really just the shape that our most agonizing question takes, once we countenance a view on which God doesn't specifically choose everything that happens. And even if it's been shaped up a bit, that agonizing question hasn't been answered yet here.

#### 4. DEFEAT, Individualized

As I've already intimated, Marilyn Adams counseled us to renounce the hopeless project of proposing possible reasons *why* God might allow horrendous evils, and instead give an account of *how* God DEFEATS those evils in the lives of those who suffer them. She is there using "defeat" in a specialized way, articulated by Roderick Chisholm in his paper "The Defeat of Good and Evil,"<sup>8</sup> that we are designating by putting the word in allcaps. Chisholmian DEFEAT is one side of a distinction between two ways that evil can in a broad sense be overcome by good (or good by evil): As Chisholm tended to formulate the distinction:

To be DEFEATED, an evil is not just balanced off by an equal or greater good, but, through some form of "organic unity," is made part of a larger whole whose value is greater than it would be if the evil were replaced by its neutral negation.

In the following passage, Marilyn uses phrasing from one of Chisholm's inspirations, G.E. Moore, to help characterize the distinction, and then illustrates the notion of DEFEAT by means of an aesthetic analogy, of the type of which DEFEAT theorists can be fond:

The balancing-off relation is arithmetical and additive: value-parts are balanced off within a larger whole if other parts of opposite value equal or outweigh them. Alternatively, value-parts may be integrated into a whole to which they bear (in Moore's words) "no regular proportion" via relations of "organic unity." In these latter cases, not only may the whole have a different value from the part, but also

a significantly smaller, negatively (or positively) valued part can contribute to a greater overall positive (or negative) value in the whole;

in which case (to borrow Chisholm's label) the negative (or positive) value of the part may be said to be "defeated" within the whole. Aesthetic examples illustrate this

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<sup>8</sup> Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Defeat of Good and Evil," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 42 (1968-1969): pp. 21-38.

principle—for example, in Monet’s study of Rouen cathedral in early morning, the ugliness of the bilious green color patches is defeated by their integration into the vast beauty of the artistic design.<sup>9</sup>

Chisholm saw the importance of the notion of DEFEAT he was explicating to the project of theodicy: Three of the four historical giants he lists in his second paragraph as having seen the important distinction between the DEFEAT and the overbalancing of evil by good did so in the course of giving or discussing theodicy.<sup>10</sup>

Marilyn’s key complaint about the old theodicies, by which she diagnosed why they failed so miserably when it came to horrendous evils, is that they focused on global goods. Relative to her aesthetic analogy, her complaint was that old theodicies treated the lives ruined by horrendous evils to be ugly little color patches, those evils DEFEATED by how they fit in with the rest of the world God created. By contrast, Marilyn sought account that would vindicate the goodness of God, not just as the producer of global goods, but as being good to created individuals, even when God allows the individuals

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<sup>9</sup> This is from Adams’s book (bearing the same title as the paper we’ve been discussing, but published 10 years later than the paper), *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell UP, ), p. 21.

Leibniz, another of Chisholm’s inspirations, was especially fond of such aesthetic analogies. Here’s a particularly nice passage, from Leibniz’s 1697 essay, “Ultimate Origination,” as translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (in G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays* (Hackett Publishing, 1989), p. 153):

But, you ask, don’t we experience quite the opposite in the world? For the worst often happens to the best, and not only innocent beasts, but also humans are injured and killed, even tortured. In the end, the world appears to be a certain confused chaos rather than a thing ordered by some supreme wisdom, especially if one takes note of the conduct of the human race. I confess that it appears this way at first glance, but a deeper look at things forces us to quite the contrary view. From those very considerations which I brought forward it is obvious a priori that everything, even minds, is of the highest perfection...

And indeed, it is unjust to make a judgment unless one has examined the entire law, as lawyers say. We know but a small part of the eternity which extends without measure, for how short is the memory of several thousand years which history gives us. But yet, from such meager experience we rashly make judgments about the immense and the eternal....Look at a very beautiful picture, and cover it up except for some small part. What will it look like but some confused combination of colors, without delight, without art...But as soon as the covering is removed, and you see the whole surface from an appropriate place, you will understand that what looked like accidental splotches on the canvas were made with consummate skill by the creator of the work. What the eyes discover in the painting, the ears discover in music. Indeed, the most distinguished masters of composition quite often mix dissonances with consonances in order to arouse the listener, and pierce him, as it were, so that, anxious about what is to happen, the listener might feel all the more pleasure when order is soon restored....He who hasn’t tasted bitter things hasn’t earned sweet things, nor indeed, will he appreciate them. Pleasure does not derive from uniformity, for uniformity brings forth disgust and makes us dull, not happy: this very principle is a law of delight.

<sup>10</sup> Chisholm, p. 21: ““I shall discuss a distinction that seems to me to be of the first importance to the theory of value. The distinction was seen by such theodicians as St. Thomas and Hume’s Demea. It was seen more clearly by Leibniz in his Theodicy and by G. E. Moore in the first and last chapters of *Principia Ethica*.”

to suffer horrendous evils, by an account of how God DEFEATS those horrendous evils *in the lives of those who suffer them.*<sup>11</sup>

## 5. But How Could God Possibly Do It?

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**Rest of this still to be written**

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How could God do it? So far as I can see, only by integrating participation in horrendous evils into a person's relationship with God. (p. 307)

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<sup>11</sup> PoPP