

The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is one of the most serious and troubling subjects on the minds of people who struggle with the existence of God. A typical formulation of the problem can be stated as follows:

Premise 1: If God were all powerful, he would be able to prevent evil.

Premise 2: If God were all-good, he would desire to prevent evil.

Conclusion: So, if God were both all-powerful and all-good, there would be no evil.

Premise 3: But there is evil.

Conclusion: Therefore, there is no all-powerful, all-good God.

More than a few Christians have struggled with this as well. This is not simply a problem that results in unbelievers washing their hands of the whole matter of God. It is a problem that threatens Christians to either undermine our confidence in God, or to convolute what the Bible tells us about His omnipotence, immutability, and sovereignty.

Is there an answer to the problem? That depends on what we mean by an answer. If you are seeking an explanation that will vindicate God's providence in every instance of evil, I cannot nor would I desire to do that. God needs no vindication. Our job is not to vindicate God (or get Him "off the hook"). Our task is to understand what the Bible teaches about the nature and character of God and develop our thinking accordingly. Nor can we supply a totally satisfying theoretical reconciliation between divine sovereignty, goodness, and evil.

What We Must Not Do

1. Simply dismiss the problem out of hand. Our temptation is to come up with a theodicy (theodicy means literally "**justification of God**" and is used to describe a proposed solution to the problem of evil), be satisfied with it, and move on without dealing with all the issues that may militate against our particular theodicy.

2. Redefine God. Some theologians claim to have the answer to the problem, but those answers consist in revising the theology of the Bible. They think they can resolve the problem best by changing the biblical doctrine of God.

What the Bible Does Not Say

Many of the devices used by philosophers to solve the problem of evil aren't present in Scripture. Very often there is a good reason why they are not. Here we will note and discuss briefly most of the defenses and theodicies used in the historic discussion.

I. The Unreality of Evil Defense

Some mystics maintain that evil is an illusion. Even Augustine classified evil in the category of "non-being" and taught that God creates all being but is not responsible for non-being. Many reasons exist for rejecting this theodicy but the best might be that **the unreality of evil defense** only backs up the problem a step to ask, "How could a good God give us all such terrible illusions of pain and suffering?" Scripture does not play games with people's suffering. It is treated as something we must deal with.

II. The Divine Weakness Defense

This view teaches that God does not overcome or otherwise prevent evil because he cannot do so, although he does do his best. Christians must reject this view as unsatisfactory because while gaining a solution (so called) to the problem of evil, this view now loses any sure hope for the overcoming of evil. It gains intellectual satisfaction but at what price? If this view is correct, then we have a God unable to assure that justice and right will ultimately prevail, which is a promise taught throughout scripture (Ps. 73; Rev. 19). Certainly there is something ironic in calling this a “solution” to the problem of evil.

III. The Best Possible World Defense

This view teaches that for all its evils, this is the best world God could have produced. This is argued not because of the weakness of God (as in the previous view) but by the very logic of creation. The thinking goes like this; certain evils are logically necessary to achieve certain good ends. Here is an example: *There must be suffering in order for there to be compassion for sufferers. Thus, God made a world including whatever evils may be required for the best overall result.* The view should be rejected on this ground:

We don't know whether this world is the best possible world that can be (as this view states). So far as we know from Scripture, God is free to make things that are either imperfect or perfect. So we cannot solve the problem of evil by saying that we know that this is the best possible world and all evils are logically necessary for its perfection.

IV. The Free will defense

This is the most common defense. It states:

- Evil came about by the free choice of rational creatures.
- Since that free choice was in no sense controlled or foreordained or caused by God, he cannot be held accountable for it.
- Therefore the existence of evil does not compromise God's goodness.

While certain aspects of the view are good and sound; the view should be rejected by believers. The primary reason is Scripture **does not** teach free will in the sense that man's free choices are not in any way foreordained or caused by God. Scripture frequently speaks of God determining our free choices (see Gen.50:20; Acts 2:23; 4:27; 2 Sam. 24:1 referring specifically to evil choices; also Prov. 16:9; Luke 24:45; John 6:44,65; Acts 2:47; 11:18; 13:48; 16:14; Rom. 8:28; 9; Eph.2:8-9; Phil.1:29)

V. The Character Building Defense

John Hicks calls this the “soul-making” theodicy. Basically this teaches that man was created in a state of moral immaturity. Thus, pain and suffering are necessary for man to reach moral maturity. While it is true that sometimes suffering builds character; this view does not properly view the created world order versus the underlying cause of its order now.

VI. The Stable Environment Defense

C.S. Lewis in The Problem of Pain states that a stable environment is necessary for human life. Existence in the universe requires the existence of regular laws. This, says Lewis, opens up the possibility of evil. For example, the law of gravity will not be temporarily repealed to save me from falling down a flight of stairs. True enough, but does a stable environment necessarily produce evil? No! Furthermore, how does a stable environment cause the evils of the human heart, and the spirit of rebellion toward God? So while some evils may be traced to natural laws in a stable environment, these are not a sufficient explanation for evil. The Bible never refers evils to such a source. To do so would be to blame creation rather than our own hearts.

VII. The Indirect Cause Defense

This argument goes that God is the indirect rather than the direct cause of evil therefore bears no responsibility for it. This is to say that God created the elements and potential for evil but man has put them to use to create evil. It is true that God's relation to evil is indirect. It was not God who tempted Eve, but the Serpent (c.f. James 1:13-15). But indirectness does not in itself mitigate responsibility. If I hire a hit man, I am as responsible for the murder as the man who actually pulls the trigger. Scripture warns us that enticing someone else to sin is itself a sin (Deut. 13:6; Rom. 14). Is God so different from creatures in this respect that the indirectness of his role in evil insulates him against moral censure? Is God some kind of giant Mafia boss who keeps his hand legally clean by forcing his underlings to carry out his nasty designs?

VIII. The Ex Lex Defense

This says God is "ex lex" (outside of the law). He is on such a different level morally that he has the right to do things that seem evil to us, even things that are contrary to Scripture should we do them. There is some truth to this. For instance, God reserves the right to take human life, be jealous, hate sinners, and seek vengeance. However, one fundamental truth refutes this view: **the law reflects God's own character**. Thus, God cannot act outside of Law because He is the Law and always, for the sake of His Name and Glory acts in accord with His character.

IX. The ad Hominem Defense

This argument, when faced with the problem of harmonizing God's sovereignty and goodness with the presence of evil, simply turns the issue back on the questioner and says, "Who are you to question God". The point is correct as far as it goes. No man can accuse God or demand an explanation from God for his actions as Job found out. But this argument is "ad hominem" (addressed to the person not the issue). We can say to the inquirer, You have a problem...you, a finite creature are trying to judge an infinite God." This is true, but it does not address the problem of a good, sovereign God and the problem of evil.

All of these views are either inadequate or unbiblical. So how do we deal with the problem of evil? Again, while the answer might not be totally satisfying to us, we believe there is an answer to the question that does not violate biblical teaching or in some way change the character of God as it is revealed in the Scriptures.

What the Bible does Teach

The Bible needs to be our only authority in all things but especially in this area concerning the problem of evil. Does the Bible give an answer to this problem? The answer is yes, it does. However, it may not be an answer that is intellectually satisfying to us in that the answer, like all

our experience with God, must be grounded in faith. In all the classic passages dealing with the problem of evil, five truths are reiterated over and over. Let's state these five truths and then look at some passages that reinforce these them.

1. *We have no right to complain against God, and when we do, we expose ourselves as disobedient.*
2. *God is under no obligation to give us an intellectually satisfying answer to the problem of evil. He expects us to trust him in spite of that.*
3. *God's sovereignty is not to be questioned in connection with the problem of evil; it is rather to be underscored.*
4. *God's word, his truth, is altogether reliable.*
5. *As a matter of fact, God is not unjust. He is holy, just, and good.*

Let's examine three parts to the biblical position on the problem of evil:

I. God is the standard for His Actions.

Scripture never assumes that God owes us an explanation for what he does. In a number of passages, the problem of evil arises for the reader, but the text itself never comments on it (e.g., Genesis 3, 22).

II. Scripture Gives us a New Historical Perspective

Why is it that biblical writers are **so sure** of God's justice and goodness? Many were aware of this problem of evil. Around them were all sorts of voices challenging the goodness and justice of God. The first answer of course is, God says so, and that ought to be enough. But that is not the only, or full, biblical answer. God also reveals his goodness by giving us a new **historical perspective, by helping us see history through his eyes.**

A. The past: The wait and the dialectic. God draws out history through time. He carries his purposes out through the time space continuum. Why? Even the drama of redemption could have been accomplished in a few moments (i.e. a moment of disobedience, a moment of divine-human suffering, a moment of resurrection triumph, and a moment of initiating eternal glory). Certainly, a great part of the problem of suffering lies in our suffering drawn out in time. Scripture tells us a great deal about the waiting process. It shows us how God's people are tested by the passage of time over and over again. But it also shows us how God brings the waiting periods to an end, vindicating himself and ending the sufferings of his people (e.g., Israel in bondage for 400 years; the Wilderness Wanderings; the OT waiting period).

B. The present: The Greater-Good Defense. This is the ability to see our (the believer's) present with a new perspective. This is the "Best Possible World" defense of the previous section. It is the one defense that has good biblical support; however, it must be **modified** from the view first presented. The former view deals with the problem of evil from an "**anthropocentric**" point of view (i.e. a man centered way). That view said that evil was a necessary part of the world because man's ultimate happiness and good depended on its presence. The Scriptures, however, deal with the problem of evil in a "**theocentric**" (i.e. God

centered) way. In the biblical model, man's chief goal is not to be happy, fulfilled, or otherwise accommodated, it is to glorify God.

Note, however, that God's greater good does not automatically ignore the happiness of human beings. Obedience to God is a way of life and happiness (Deut. 5:33; 8:3; 11:13-15; 28:1-14; Ps. 1; 119:7 et al). Furthermore, suffering is for a little while, glory is for eternity. Therefore, when God seeks a "greater good" for himself, he seeks at the same time a greater good for his whole creation.

While we cannot always understand why God has chosen evil events to accomplish these good purposes, we do know that God never foreordains an evil event without a good purpose (Rom 8:28).

C. The Future: Some Scripture Songs. Here is the third dimension of our new perspective on history. We are still waiting. We have not yet seen how all of God's purposes result in good. But God promises that in the future he will be totally vindicated and we will be fully delivered from all evil (e.g., Psalm 73; Revelation 15).

III. Scripture gives us a new heart.

As indicated earlier, the Word of God is powerful to save (Rom. 1:16-17). With the ministry of the Holy Spirit, our skepticism is turned to faith. We become like the saints in the Heb. 11 hall of faith who never fully understood why they were torn asunder by wild beasts, why they were sawn asunder, why they had to live in caves, etc. But they endured by faith. They never claimed the city, but they saw it by faith. We too are creatures of faith. If there are problems we can't yet resolve, we accept by faith the word of God.

Conclusion

In conclusion we would say understanding the problem of evil is greatly enhanced if we approach it by maintaining some basic truths:

I. God is his own standard for his actions. His beings cannot call him to account. When they try, God does not stoop to attempt to explain his actions. He instead charges the complainers with sin, restates his sovereignty, underscores his word as true and reliable, and reinforces his goodness and holiness.

II. Scripture does give us a new historical perspective on the problem. The **past** shows us that waiting for the dialectic (tension) to be resolved in God's time is most prudent and ultimately most satisfying. The **present** shows us that God is working out things to the "greatest good" for his glory and ultimately his entire creation. The **future** shows us that there is a satisfying conclusion (if not a complete explanation) coming.

III. Scripture gives us a new heart to be able to walk by faith and trust the faithful God when unresolved problems plague us.

Whatever we do, there are **three pitfalls** to avoid. We must avoid the temptation to make God less than sovereign. We must never deny the human responsibility of man to make choices

in a space time continuum. We must never charge God with folly or with being culpable for evil. While it may seem “logical” to do so, it is not “theological” to do so. However, unsatisfying this may be to us, it is the position of faith. After all, where is it promised that we will have all our questions about God and his workings satisfied? Actually, the opposite is affirmed. Whatever one’s view of this problem may be, these certainly are issues with which we must deal.