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# SPOILER ALERT

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A Pastoral Response to the Problem of Evil



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## **Introduction: The Problem**

When bad things happen, we often ask, “How can a God who is all-powerful and all-good allow so much pain and suffering in the world?” Many believe the existence of evil challenges the very existence of God. If He were all-powerful, but not all-good, the presence of evil becomes easily explainable. If He were all-good, but limited in the reach of His power, the reality of evil is once again reconcilable to His personhood. But how do we explain the actuality of all three realities at the same time? This theological conundrum has classically been referred to as “the problem of evil.”

## **Presuppositions**

Despite its initial presentation, the problem of evil is not an unreasonable challenge for the Christian worldview. However, attempts to adequately address the issue with a short essay are certainly predestined for failure. Nevertheless, attempts must be made and the discussion falls mute if certain scriptural presuppositions are not affirmed from the onset. The effects of evil are felt by everyone, but only those who know the God of the Bible can wrestle with their knowledge of Him in the face of evil with any hope of achieving true understanding. Therefore, this essay is written from a Christian perspective for the benefit of Christians.

First of all, God is all-good. Life by the Spirit and the Scriptures themselves attest to the fact that His goodness extends beyond human comprehension. He cares for the well-being of His creatures and every good gift has come from Him (Jas 1:17). The Psalms are saturated with praises for His goodness. He is so good, there are many biblical passages that cite His goodness without reference to any particular deed He has done.<sup>1</sup> Exodus 34:6 declares Him to be “a God

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<sup>1</sup> John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 366.

merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” God defines pure goodness by presenting a standard of righteousness that exceeds the highest altruistic reach of man.

God can also be trusted. It is impossible for Him to be evil or corrupted by evil. Genesis 18:25 tells us that He is a judge who will always do what is right. Concerning the LORD, it states, “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” God knows justice better than any man and will always make the right call. There is no room in the universe for divine corruption. His righteous decrees from eternity past have not included chambers for personal flaws or wicked inconsistencies.

### **Definitions**

An accepted term for the study of the problem of evil is *theodicy*, taken from the Greek “θεός” (God) and “δίκη” (justice).<sup>2</sup> The term is shorthand for presenting the problem as well as attempting to solve it. First coined by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in 1710, theodicy has been the common word of choice for philosophical movements subsequent to the middle ages.<sup>3</sup> The expression itself is not particularly special or important, but a general awareness of it may unlock a wealth of resource material to help or hinder the honest inquisitor.

Is there a distinct difference between the terms: *evil*, *suffering*, and *sin*? Evil has the broadest scope of the three. The Hebrew Scriptures contain seven distinct words that can be

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<sup>2</sup> David Birnbaum, *God and Evil* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1989), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Castelo, *Theological Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 4.

translated by the English word *evil*.<sup>4</sup> Philosophers tend to differentiate between two types of evil; 1) that which involves pain and suffering inflicted on things by other things and 2) morally wrong behavior.<sup>5</sup> Christians address the latter as *sin* when the wrong behavior is evaluated against the righteous standards of the the Bible. The former *suffering* refers to the consequences of evil which often result from sinful behavior, but not exclusively. Despite these distinctions, each reality is intimately interlaced with its corresponding counterparts. For the sake of this essay, these terms will be presented and treated synonomously with their definitive qualities still in tact.

### **Origins of Evil**

In order to accurately evaluate the nature of suffering in the world, we should first remind ourselves of its origins. Where did it come from? If evil did not begin with God, who committed the first sin? The answer is Satan. He is an invisible spirit creature (Col 1:16; Eph 2:2) who pridefully desired to deify himself and usurp God (Isa 14:13-14; 1 Tim 3:6). He is a liar (John 8:44), slanderer (1 Tim 3:6-7; Rev 2:10), theif (Luke 8:12), deceiver (Rev 12:9), destroyer (Rev 9:11), schemer (Eph 6:11), tempter (Matt 4:3; 1 Thess 3:5), and murderer (John 8:44). Satan lives as God's adversary, but is far less superior in every way.

Satan is not alone in his attacks against God and humanity. According to Ephesians 6:12, “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly

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<sup>4</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Now, That's a Good Question* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), 267.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 173.

places.” Demons are also invisible spirit creatures (Col 1:16) but capable of visible manifestation (Rev 9:7-10). They are morally corrupt (Matt 12:45; Luke 7:21; Eph 6:12), unclean (Matt 10:1; Mark 1:26-27, 5:8; Luke 11:24), and deceptive (1 Tim 4:1; 1 Kgs 22:19-23). Collectively, these cosmic powers are the spiritual bad guys.

Despite Satanic involvement, it is important to remember that sin did not enter our world through angelic disobedience. Romans 5:12 states, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.” So death came into the world because of man’s disobedience, and is the result of sin... not the result of God’s creative intent. Adam originally had the ability to choose between good and evil. He chose poorly.

### **Man's Relationship with Evil**

A vociferous objection to the Reformed theological tradition conventionally stems from the first of five cardinal doctrines: the total depravity of man. This doctrine is simply an observation of man’s inability to help himself. One reformed theologian writes, “Man’s total depravity does not allow him to receive the free gift of redemption offered by God: his darkened mind provokes a spiritual blindness that refuses God’s grace; both experience and Scripture show that man’s heart is corrupted (Rom 6:20; 8:7; Ezek 36:26; Eph 2:2); he is a willing slave to sin, refuses to see the light of God’s testimony, is dead in his sins, incapable of receiving God’s salvation wrought by Christ; this refusal itself is a sin that exacerbates man’s guilt before God.”<sup>6</sup> What is man’s relationship with evil? Not good.

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<sup>6</sup> Amar Djaballah, “Controversy on Universal Grace,” *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2013), 183.

## **Natural Evil**

Natural disasters happen all the time. Earthquakes, fires, floods, epidemics, tsunamis, droughts, birth defects, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, genetic malfunctions, blizzards, hail storms, and a host of natural evils plague the world. These evils arise beyond the wicked heart of man, but often produce human anguish. *Natural evil* is that which cannot be attributed to the free actions of human beings.<sup>7</sup> That is not to say, however, that the race of man is acquitted from all responsibility for these afflictions. The great Fall of man in Genesis 3 introduced negative consequences for the natural order as well as for mankind. Romans 8:18-22 speaks of the futility creation has been subjected to. This will continue until the time when creation is set free from its slavery to corruption. Until that day, our world groans and we groan with it.

## **Moral Evil**

Moral evil presents more philosophical and theological challenges than natural evil. It is defined as “the evil that arises from human or angelic actions (though the problem is normally posed in regard to human action alone).”<sup>8</sup> These activities contend in opposition to God’s prescriptive ideal and often produce severe consequences. On the surface, they give the impression of freedom because they appear to be perpetrated apart from God (as He is the embodiment of all good). However, freedom from God is slavery to sin. True freedom is not found in the ability to choose between opposing alternatives, but in the capability to only choose that which is good.

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<sup>7</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O Felix Culpa’,” *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil* ed. Peter Van Inwagen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 15.

<sup>8</sup> John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 22.

## **Horrible Evil**

Murder, child abuse, rape, and additional acts of horror continually add to the problem.

While residing under the moral evil category, these actions carry a recognizable weight of social and personal reprehensibility. One theologian writes, “Any God who could permit the Holocaust, who could remain silent during it, who could ‘hide His face’ while it dragged on, was not worth believing in.”<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, another compares God’s apparent absence in light of such atrocities to the darkness of shade and states, “The shade would not fall, if the cross of Christ would not stand in the light of his resurrection.”<sup>10</sup> There are no good words for such atrocities; only the promised hope of righteous vindication, eternal justice, and perfect peace for those who stand in the shadow of the cross (Rom 8:18).

## **God's Relationship with Evil**

One author writes, “This dialectic relationship between God and his antipode – evil – does not come from God, however it would not be without God, and renders the riddle of evil insoluble.”<sup>11</sup> We may never grasp the perfect reasoning that guides the actions of an all-knowing, all-loving, all-righteous God. Nevertheless, Scripture has revealed a number of truths for our benefit in understanding Him better. For instance, God is entirely distinct from evil, so He can never be the cause of sin. James 1:13 proclaims, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being

<sup>9</sup> Eugene Borowitz, *The Mask Jews Wear* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 99.

<sup>10</sup> While strongly disagreeing with Karl Barth’s hermeneutic and interpretive grid of Scripture, it is this author’s hope to one day see him on the new earth. Time will tell whether his neo-orthodox approach to God’s Word prevented him from union with the Savior he seemed to love so much. Until then, favorable quotes should not be received as theological stamps of endorsement for the man’s legacy, but taken at face value for the strength of their intended meaning. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik II/1* (Zollikon–Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1940), 456.

<sup>11</sup> Christian Link, “The Riddle of Evil,” *The Problem of Evil and its Symbols in Jewish and Christian Tradition* ed. Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 165.

tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one.” James then describes how temptations are the result of our own wicked desires that lead to sin and ultimately death. The problem lies with man, not his Creator.

### **The Utility of Evil**

Despite His distinct relationship with sin, God still controls all things. Even evil submits to the sovereign authority of the Creator. Accepting this truth, we must be cautious not to accuse God of causing evil as an end in itself or choose to bring about evil for its own sake.<sup>12</sup> When contextually evaluated, Scripture attests to the perfect utility of God’s oversight (Exod 4:21; Josh 11:20; 1 Sam 2:25; 2 Sam 16:10; Hab 1; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; Rom 1:24, 26, 28; 2 Thess 2:11). He allows evil to exist in order to showcase His grace and justice (Rom 3:26; 5:8, 20-21; 9:17), bring redemption in Christ (1 Pet 3:18), shock unbelievers into a change of heart (Zech 13:7-9; Luke 13:1-5; John 9), discipline believers as a parent (Heb 12), and vindicate Himself (Rom 3:26). We may not understand every divine decision, but it is better to trust a good God who controls all things than a limited deity who does the best He can. In God’s economy, all things are useful; even evil.

### **The Purpose of Evil**

God uses everything for the good of those who belong to Him, including suffering and evil. Romans 8:28 declares, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.” In reference to this passage, one

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<sup>12</sup> Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 173.

commentator adds, “This does not make evil less evil and should not lead us to entertain positive ideas about it, but it is a testimony to the power of God who is able to bring good out of evil, just as he was able to create the world out of nothing.”<sup>13</sup> James 1:2-4 reiterates that truth by stating, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” So sin (the cause for various sufferings) did not begin with God, but He uses it to accomplish His greater purposes.

### Postulations

Men have sought to reconcile the problem of evil for millennia. Some argue for a non-natural reality composed of a personally intelligent being called “God.”<sup>14</sup> Others see God’s sovereign relationship with evil to be “a sick game” and find it more comforting to project Him into the throes of a risky battle between good and evil.<sup>15</sup> Illusionism, dualism, finitism, sadism, determinism, atheism, and many other “isms” have played their hand at the philosophical gaming table as well. Three views will be succinctly treated in this essay: the classic approach, a modern heresy, and this writer’s conclusion.

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<sup>13</sup> Nigel Goring Wright, *A Theology of the Dark Side: Putting the Power of Evil in its Place* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 91.

<sup>14</sup> R. Douglas Geivett, *Evil and the Evidence for God: The Challenge of John Hick’s Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 99-116.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *Is God to Blame? Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 14, 61-77.

### **Augustine's Absence**

Augustine of Hippo was an influential church father who lived from 354-430 AD. He believed evil to be the absence of good, such as a vacuum. One writer states, “In sum, Augustine teaches that the nature of evil is the privation of a good natural to an entity.”<sup>16</sup> While this approach makes the nature of evil more easily reconcilable with the nature of a perfect Creator, it fails to address key implications that arise from their interaction. In order to fill in the gaps, Augustine concluded that God included suffering into His plan for the world because He knew it would be better in the long run. In his book, *The City of God*, he wrote that God deemed it, “more befitting His power and goodness to bring good out of evil than to prevent the evil from coming into existence.”<sup>17</sup>

### **God of War**

The open theistic approach to the problem has continued to grow in popularity over the last two decades. Open theism seeks to relieve theological pressure by lowering the perfections of God to a created level. Here, God is constantly learning, growing, and adapting to the needs and mutinies of His creatures. Concerning the problem of pain, Greg Boyd has labeled this viewpoint the “warfare worldview” where God has found Himself locked in the ultimate struggle with Satan and other free-will agents of evil. He writes, “There is a dominant motif running throughout Scripture—I have elsewhere argued that it is the *central* motif of Scripture—that

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<sup>16</sup> Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 120.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *The City of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Press, 1994), 479-480.

depicts God as warring against human and angelic opponents who are able in some measure to thwart his will.”<sup>18</sup>

While adopting the warfare worldview may alleviate the tension we imagine to exist between God and evil, the far reaching implications such a perspective present greater issues. If God struggles and often loses, it is impossible to say with certainty whether the ends have been truly been determined or not. If God fails to exercise a transcendent sovereign rule over His creation’s affairs (both good and evil), what value is found in prayer? He is doing His best, afterall. The authoritative certainty of the Bible’s message quickly becomes a divine wish list of hopeful expectations. As a result, cardinal truths historically appended to divine power (past revelation, present prayer, and future hope) are rendered deficiently flawed for the Christian life. Man-centered theology will often sound appealing to the men it centers around, but will always fail to deliver the comfort it promises.

### **In God We Trust**

A good God has good reasons for everything He does... even the permission of evil. One theologian states, “The theistic answer to apparently purposeless evil is fourfold. First, God has a good purpose for everything. Second, we do know a good purpose for much evil. Third, some evil is a byproduct of good. Fourth, God is able to bring good out of evil.”<sup>19</sup> The fact that we are unable to see a good purpose in so much evil does not prove its absence. This does not assume

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<sup>18</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 14-16.

<sup>19</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 222.

that we could (or should) discover the good purposes God has for everything; merely that we can trust God completely because He is completely good.

Scripture never assumes the need for God to justify His behavior to sinful man. We know He is both just and good because He says so. Historically, He vindicates Himself by continually putting an end to suffering. From Genesis to Revelation, the true motif of God's Word revolves around His glory. To reduce the Bible's primary theme to man's happiness is a vulgar task. We have the assurance that every event in a Christian's life is somehow orchestrated by God for good (Rom 3:28). It is the believer's responsibility to believe and trust God to remain true to His Word.

### **Pastoral Responses - Remembering God's Response**

Ministers of God's gospel do not have the luxury of remaining passive when evil strikes the people under their care. As one author notes, "Although the problem of evil is, in a legitimate sense, abstract and theoretical, it is a problem about real evils which occur to real people."<sup>20</sup> Not one person is exempt. John Feinberg observes, "The existence of evil poses not only a personal challenge. It raises intellectual questions that at some point need to be answered if there is any hope for a relationship with God to continue."<sup>21</sup> As under-shepherds, it is our responsibility to continually redirect our suffering sheep back to the Word of God.

Rather than blame God for the temporary face of evil, there is much comfort to be found in trusting the Scriptures' testimony of His transcendent character. Galatians 6:7 reassuringly

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 21.

<sup>21</sup> John S. Feinberg, *Can You Believe It's True? Christian Apologetics in a Modern & Postmodern Era* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2013), 325.

cautions, "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap." God is not struggling to keep up with His creation. In the end, all will be rectified according to His eternal decree. He is not dead, silent, or hiding His face from the evils that plague His world. He sees our pain, has already done something about it, and will ultimately finish the story His way.

Some see God as a "guilty bystander" who witnesses evil and fails to act against it.<sup>22</sup> Others refer to "God's secret plan" when discussing the higher purposes of God.<sup>23</sup> Such language should be avoided if possible. God's plans are not secret, but revealed in His Word. He is our Savior; above all men, yet He appeared in human flesh to carry the fullness of sin for the sake of a dying race. He is our Redeemer; making all things new where anyone else would simply throw their work into a cosmic trash bin and begin again. He is our Judge; rectifying every wrong for an eternal state of peace, joy, and love. A proper perspective of God's shining perfections and promises perforates the shadows of night.

Spoiler alert: the bad guys lose in the end. 1 John 3:8 states, "Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." Evil is not eternal and the devil's works will be destroyed once and for all. This is the final outcome Jesus has provided for those whose suffering is not in vain. When faced with natural, moral, or horrific evil, our hatred of sin should grow proportionately with our love for the Savior.

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<sup>22</sup> James A. Keller, *Problems of Evil and the Power of God* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 9-16.

<sup>23</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 13.

### **Conclusion: Final Thoughts**

When bad things happen, many scratch their heads and wonder, “How can a good God allow these things to happen to me?” No one asks, “How can a just God be so good to me?” God is not required to subject Himself to our scrutiny. He is not the one on trial, we are. Job 38:4 issues God’s challenge to Job with this question: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” In response, the man replied, “Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further” (Job 40:4-5). God is all-good, all-powerful, and always in control. The more we see of Him, the less entitled we become.

The problems men have with evil are easily reconciled in the mind of God. His perfections allow for perfect interaction while maintaining perfect unity with every aspect of His impeccable character. With God all things are possible (Luke 1:37). He knows exactly how it feels to be human. Our imaginative postulations will never come close to the reality of who He is. Until the day of redemption arrives, we have only to trust and obey our marvelous Savior who rules the chaos with love and righteousness.

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All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.