



Questioning Christianity

How Can God Allow Evil?

The Problem of Evil

- One of the most common obstacles to faith is when one's understanding of the attributes of God seem opposite to lived experience or contrary to what one expects God to do in a situation.
 - For example, in Psalm 73, Asaph writes with confusion and despair as he seeks to reconcile a God of justice with rampant injustice in the world.
- Perhaps one of the most poignant examples of such perceived discordance is framed philosophically as "the problem of evil."
- The problem of evil typically comes in the form of a question:
 - "'If God were good, he would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God either lacks goodness, or power, or both.' This is the problem of pain in its simplest form." (C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*)
 - "God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet, evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false."¹ (Atheist philosopher, J. L. Mackie)
- God's characteristics of **goodness**, **omnipotence**, and **love** are called into question due to a perceived irreconcilability with the presence of evil in the world.
 - If God is all-powerful, then why doesn't he just prevent bad things from happening?
 - If God is good, why did he allow the Holocaust?
 - Why doesn't God just heal my friend?
 - Why didn't God save people from that earthquake?
 - ...etc.

¹ Peterson, Michael L. *The Problem of Evil : Selected Readings*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992, 89.

- **A Theoretical and Practical Problem**

- Sometimes the problem of evil is posited theoretically to disprove the existence of God, using this argument in search of a valid reason to disbelieve.
- Often, the problem comes through personal struggles, trying to make sense of an incredibly difficult circumstance.

- **Our Approach**

- Because there's no way to address all experiences, we will focus on the theoretical. We must remember that when caring for people, our aim is not to beat them with arguments but to lovingly shepherd them into understanding.
- First, we will consider the problem of evil as a philosophical *argument*.
- Then, we'll consider how the question should be reframed Scripturally.

The Argument from Evil²

- Evil Defined (for the argument's sake)
 - **Moral Evil:** Evil that relates directly to human actions. For example, a person kills another person.
 - **Natural Evil:** Evil that relates to natural disasters, disease, and other undeserved sufferings that do not trace directly to human choices (though they can be traced to sin's effect on the world).
- **The Basic Argument**
 1. If God exists, then there is no evil.
 2. There is evil.
 3. So, God does not exist (from 1 & 2).
- **The Argument Expanded**
 - Premise 2 is irrefutably true.
 - That leaves us to consider Premise 1 – is it true?
 - Premise 1 involves several presuppositions to be considered:
 - 1a. A perfectly good being always prevents evil as far as he can.
 - 1b. An omnipotent and omniscient being can do anything possible.
 - 1c. So, if a perfect good, omnipotent, and omniscient being exists, he prevents evil completely (from 1a and 1b).
 - 1d. If God exists, then he is perfect good, omnipotent, and omniscient.
 - 1e. So, if God exists, he prevents evil completely. (from 1c & 1d).

² Murray, Michael J. 1999. *Reason for the Hope Within*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 83-84.

- **Is this a good argument?**

- Most theists accept 1d. As Christians, we cannot adopt a response that forfeits God's divine attributes.
- However, 1a fails if it can be demonstrated that a perfectly good being would not always prevent evil as far as he can. In other words, what if God had a *justifying reason* that was consistent with and compatible with his omnipotence, goodness, and love?
- In that case, the argument would have to be reframed as follows:
 - 1. If God exists, then there is no evil, *unless there is a reason that would justify him in permitting it.*
 - 2. There is evil.
 - 3. *There is no reason that would justify God in permitting evil.*
 - 4. So, God does not exist.
- Is it true that there is no reason that would justify God in permitting evil?³
 - Some assert that, unlike us, God is always able to bring about a greater good without permitting evil.
 - Sometimes we're faced with choices due to our limitations. For example, imagine you're a lifeguard, and you can either save three swimmers drowning close to you or one swimmer drowning far away; due to our limitations, we can only choose the best of two bad options.
 - However, the argument goes, God is not limited in power - he can save them all. So to assert that God is unable to bring about a greater good without the presence of evil is to assert that he is limited, like us.
 - Even if God is omnipotent and omniscient, it does not logically follow that he can always bring about the greater good without permitting evil.
 - God's power is limited by what's possible; thus, if there were a greater good that could absolutely not occur unless evil was permitted, it might be a part of God's justification for permitting evil.
 - We're not saying that God is limited by what we're able to do, or by what we think is possible. Rather, God's power does not permit him to do what is *absolutely impossible*.
 - For example: It's not possible for God to exist and not exist. It's not possible for God to lie. It's not possible for God to make a stone so large he cannot lift it, etc. Such assertions are not limitations on God, but rather limitations on what's possible based on the very character and nature of God himself.

³ Murray, 84-86.

- **Finding a Solution**

- The argument, qualified and adjusted:
 1. If God exists, then there is no evil, *unless there is a reason that would justify him in permitting it.*
 2. There is evil.
 3. *There is no reason that would justify God in permitting evil.*
 4. So, God does not exist.
- Thus, to defeat the argument (outcome 4), one needs to suggest justifying reasons for permitting evil (premises 1 and 3).
- Such arguments are called **theodicies**.

the·od·i·cy [thee-od-uh-see] - noun. A vindication of the divine attributes, particularly holiness and justice, in establishing or allowing the existence of physical and moral evil.

Common Theodicies⁴

- Not all theodicies are equal and valid. However, below is a survey of common philosophical theodicies.
- **Punishment Theodicy**
 - **Argument:** God is justified in punishing evildoers, and suffering is a result of his punishing them.
 - **Problems:** While it's true that God is justified in punishing the wicked, what about undeserved evil? There are some who experience great suffering despite not being morally responsible for it (consider Job, for example.)
- **Counterpart Theodicy**
 - **Argument:** Good and evil are like pairs or opposites; if one exists, the other *must* exist. Without evil, there'd be no moral goodness. Thus, God is justified in permitting evil because that's the only way there can be good.
 - **Problems:** God is unsurpassably morally good, and is able to exist without there being any evil (i.e. pre-creation). It's not correct to say God can't exist without evil.
- **Free Will Theodicy**
 - **Argument:** God could have created us such that there was no chance of us doing evil. While he could have done this, this would have removed the "good" of self-determination; were we to lack such freedom, we would not be responsible for who we are, nor would our choices have been positively motivated by genuine affection or love. Thus, God permitted evil to allow for such self-determination and genuinely loving relationship.

⁴ Murray, 86-99.

- **Problems:**
 - **Problem 1:** Why didn't God create a world that allowed free decisions that affected me, but doesn't negatively affect others, blocking harm to others? One reply (in favor of this theodicy) is that such a situation would create a world of illusion where our choices may appear to be genuine but in fact are not. Another reply is that relationships of genuine love require choices that both benefit and harm others. This theodicy asserts that we are responsible for others according to how our choices affect their wellbeing; two persons cannot be in a genuinely loving relationship unless it is up to them that they are so related.
 - **Problem 2:** This theodicy assumes that free choice is the only basis of genuine love, but this is not true; parents love their children, but they did not choose them (nor did the children choose their parents). While it's true that such affection is cultivated by meaningful choices over time (feeding, caring, etc.), those choices are *not* the basis of the relationship.
 - **Problem 3:** This theodicy assumes that free will is of such value that not trespassing it is worth the presence of evil. If this is the case, it follows that God would never intervene with free will. However, Scripture is filled with examples of God affecting the free will of his creatures. If he is able to do that to accomplish his purposes, why doesn't he just do that all the time? Furthermore, why is it sometimes valuable to interrupt free will, but in cases of what appears to be much worse evil, it's not?
 - **Problem 4:** The free will theodicy doesn't explain natural evil, nor does it address God's omniscience in creating free creatures who do evil.
 - **Problem 5:** In heaven, we will be free-willed, moral creatures with no evil. We will not be able to choose evil, thus such a world can exist in God's providence.
- **Natural Consequences Theodicy**
 - **Argument:** God created humans so that he might love them and they might return his love. In doing so, they chose to withhold their love, and God is now permitting us to bear with the consequences of that decision such that we'd grow dissatisfied with our decision and turn back to him.
 - **Problems:** While this sounds attractive at first glance, it doesn't align with Scripture. Firstly, God *doesn't* leave us to all the consequences of our choices. Secondly, Scripture paints a picture of God pursuing us out of our consequence, drawing us to faith, not simply allowing us to experience pain such that, by free choice, we'd turn back to him.
- **Higher-Order Goods Theodicy**
 - **Argument:** Certain goods require evil, including showing sympathy, compassion, generosity, and forgiveness. Unless there is evil, there cannot be such higher-order goods, and thus God permits evil to allow for the cultivation of these goods.

- **Problems:** Higher order goods don't require real evil; they can be cultivated with simulated problems. One pushback to this (in favor of the theodicy) is that the higher order good is actually that such qualities would be present in real relationships, and that justifies God's permission of evil. However, this theodicy fails to address gratuitous evil, the fact that evil often crushes people instead of building qualities in them, and heaven is again a foil to such an environment.

Addressing the Problem Scripturally⁵

- The theodicies discussed above, while interesting attempts, all seem to fall short of fully explaining the problem, reconciling the goodness and power of God with all the kinds of evil we see in our world.
- Instead of simply addressing the problem philosophically (the previous section), we're better helped to reframe the problem Scripturally.
- Simply put, we're not told the "solution" in a simple way.
 - Our minds are fallen, and our knowledge is limited.
 - However, just because we cannot understand something *fully* doesn't mean we cannot understand things *truly* (i.e. the Trinity).
 - Scripture provides us enough information to address the problem truly, even if we're not told *fully*; we can trust God because of what we do know and what has been revealed.
- **What God Has Revealed about Evil**
 - God is the creator and ruler of the universe.
 - **Psalm 115:3** *Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.*
 - **Genesis 1**
 - **Colossians 1:16** *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.*
 - God is in control of every aspect of his creation.
 - **Ephesians 1:11** *In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.*
 - God is able to orchestrate the sins of man to glorify himself while not being tainted by them.
 - **Exodus 4:21** – God hardens Pharaoh's heart so that he will not let his people go.
 - **Genesis 37-50** – God works through the evil choices of men in order to accomplish great good.

⁵ Adapted from Capitol Hill Baptist Church's Apologetics Core Seminar, <https://tinyurl.com/ProbEvil>

- God is never blameworthy for the evil that occurs; those who commit evil are to blame.
 - **James 1:13-14** *When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.*
- God is holy and good, and hates evil.
 - **Habakkuk 1:13** *Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?*
 - **Revelation 4** *Day and night [the creatures around the throne of God] never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."*
 - **1 John 1:5** *God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*
- God's ways are not our ways; we do not judge God.
 - **Romans 9:19-21** *You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" ²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?*
 - **Isaiah 55:8-9** *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*
- God will use evil for an ultimately good purpose, which we may not fully understand in this life.
 - **Genesis 50:20** *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*
 - **Consider the Cross of Christ!** If God is able to use the ultimate evil of the murder of the only righteous man who ever lived to bring about our salvation, then God can use lesser evils in other places and times in history – even in our lives – for our good.
- Evil is not the *presence* of something, it's the *absence* of God's glory. Jesus is the "light of the world", stepping into darkness; darkness is the absence of light. Evil exists because of sin, and sin is the fault of humanity.

- **What God Has Revealed about His Purposes**

- The chief end of God is to glorify Himself.
- God's glory is the radiant display of his attributes, character, and nature.
- God uses evil to display his mercy, forgiveness, and justice.
 - Romans 3:26, Romans 5:8, Romans 5:20-21, Romans 9:17
- God uses evil to bring about redemption.
 - 1 Peter 3:18
- God uses evil (both moral and natural) to bring persons to repentance.
 - Deuteronomy 8 (God's warning that Israel will fall way)
 - Luke 13:1-5 (Tower of Siloam)
 - John 9 (Man born blind)
- God uses evil to discipline his children.
 - **Romans 5:3-5** *Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*
 - **Hebrews 12:5-11** *And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." ...*

- **What God Has Revealed about Our Future**

- God will eventually end all suffering and evil.
 - **Revelation 21:1-4** *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."*
- God will one day vindicate himself; justice will not be delayed forever.
 - The wicked will be thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:12-15).
 - The righteous will be vindicated for their faith in God.

The Christian's Answer to the Problem

- We know God is in control, and we know that God is able to use even evil to accomplish his good purposes.
- God's chief end is to glorify himself; our good is intrinsically tied to his glory.
- Sometimes, it's clear how God is bringing himself glory through suffering.
 - i.e. the death of a martyr, the suffering of someone protecting another, etc.
- Sometimes, it's not clear how God is bringing himself glory or working good through suffering.
 - i.e. Job – he's never given an explanation.
 - i.e. We cannot always figure out how a sickness or terrible tragedy was used by God.
- We do know the character of God based on what he has revealed, and our correct response is to humble ourselves and trust him.
- When we're weak, we can have hope that nothing will separate us from the love of God, and he will never let his children go. (Romans 8:28, Romans 8:35-39)
- **The answer to suffering is not an answer at all. It's the Answerer, Jesus himself.**
 - It's not a bunch of words, it's the Word made flesh. It's not a tightly woven philosophical argument alone, but a person. A Man of Sorrows.
 - The answer to suffering is not just an abstract notion. When we cry out, God, where are you? We need to look with eyes of faith to the cross.
 - John Stott: "I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross....in the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?...There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering."

Conversations from a Scriptural Standpoint

- **"Why make a statement when a question will do?"**
 - While we should have a reason for the hope within us, consider instead asking questions in response that address presuppositions or expose faults in logic.
 - Usually, as hard as it is to admit, difficulties with the problem of evil flow from pride in our hearts (assuming we'd do it better than God, that God should do and see things our way, etc.). Questions can be helpful tools in drawing out such attitudes of the heart.
 - **Examples:**
 - "I can't believe in a God that would allow so much evil in the world."
 - "I understand, it is hard to wrap our minds around it. How do

you define evil without God?"

- "How could a good God allow dictators like Hitler to get away with what they did?"
 - "It does seem like Hitler escaped justice on earth. However, how does your worldview solve this problem?"
- "There's no good that can come from God allowing my friend to get cancer. She didn't do anything to deserve it!"
 - "I'm so sorry to hear about your friend. You're right that it's possible for bad things to happen to those who haven't done anything to deserve it. However, just because you can't imagine good from it, does that mean it's impossible for God?"
- "There's no way God could use this for good."
 - "The assumption here is that one knows all possibilities and that no possibility for good exists. If you claim to know all possibilities, doesn't that make you omniscient? And if omniscient, doesn't that make you God?"
 - "I know from your perspective, it seems like nothing good could come from this. However, what if that feeling is due to lack of information? For example, imagine a bear is caught in a trap, and a hunter wants to free him. The bear growls, and the man shoots him with a tranquilizer, further convincing the bear that the hunter is his enemy. The man then pushes the bear's foot deeper into the trap to release it, but the bear again interprets it as harm. Finally, the bear is freed; yet, he runs away still thinking the hunter was his enemy. Could you be like the bear in this story?"

- **Leverage the Moral Argument for God**

- While the problem of evil is often used as an argument against God, from the Christian perspective, the presence of evil is an argument *for* God.
- As we saw earlier, evil is the absence of God, not a quality or presence in and of itself. Evil is only definable if you have an objective, moral standard of goodness.
- This line of reasoning is the "moral argument for God."
 - (1) If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.
 - (2) Objective moral values *do* exist.
 - (3) Therefore, God exists.
- There's much more than can be noted here, but reframing evil as a proof *for* God instead of against God may be a helpful approach.

- **Consider Your Testimony**

- Often people wrestle with the problem of evil when they themselves have experienced evil; sharing our stories of redemption can be a powerful way to minister hope.
- The most powerful apologetic is a transformed life. Consider how God has worked good in your life through evil, and have a testimony ready to share.