

"IF GOD IS GOOD AND ALL-POWERFUL, WHY DOES EVIL EXIST?"

Hebrews 2:14-15, et. al.

THEME: Apparent contradiction in the nature of God.

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According to the Bible, God is a good God. But there is a problem in this claim. John Wenham explains: "With God's full permission, the Devil and a host of other powerful and malevolent spirits stalk the earth, tempting and tormenting men, even to the extent of depriving an innocent man of health, wealth, and family. There are cursing psalms. There are terrible pictures of hell. . . There is war on earth and war in heaven and war in the human heart." (*The Goodness of God*. IVP, 1974, p.7)

There is no peace on earth. We've grown accustomed to evil in our environment. The Apostle John wrote, 'We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.' (1 John 5:19)

- I suppose most of you have wondered how can he be good while allowing evil to continue? Or, if God is good, does he then lack the ability to prevent evil? Either God is not all-good, or God is not all-powerful.

About 25 years ago Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book entitled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

Kushner proposed that God arranged the universe in such a way that even he cannot solve all of its dilemmas. But because of God's caring nature he suffers along with his creatures. Kushner proposes a world that is outside of God's control; so God cannot be all-powerful. This contradicts what the Bible says about God.

- The presence of evil and suffering in the world is one of the main reasons people refuse to believe in the Lord God.

Many mental health practitioners who follow secular psychological and psychiatric theories deny the existence of sin, or that moral evil has affected human nature.

Where eastern, Hindu philosophy has influenced Western thought people deny the existence of evil or sin and argue that the chief problem among humans is a lack of enlightenment. Ignorance is our problem, not sin.

But it is utterly absurd to deny the existence of evil. How then do we explain the atrocities perpetrated on the Jews by Hitler, the genocide of Kurds by Saddam Hussein, and there is no end to the examples of horrendous evil in human affairs.

Evil is real; it is hideous and hellish. It is not the stuff of fiction.

- Christians emphatically declare that God is both good and all-powerful. He has demonstrated his love in the historical acts that comprise the Christian gospel.

But Christians also have to answer a tough question. If God is all-powerful and loves us, why do we suffer?

The Bible gives us some helpful **answers** to this perplexing question about evil.

I. THE SOURCE OF EVIL IS THE CORRUPTION OF GOOD.

The early church father Augustine argued that evil does exist, but it is essentially a lack of something that is good. So evil is just the absence of good.

Maybe someone recently sent you an e-mail account of a college professor mocking Christian faith: if God made everything, then he made evil. A student in the class challenged the professor by pointing out that there is no such thing as cold—and yet we experience cold. Scientifically, cold does not exist. It is the absence of heat. The same is true of dark. We experience darkness, but darkness does not have its own independent existence. Darkness is the absence of light. In the same way, evil is the absence of good.

That is essentially a variation on an observation made by Augustine about 1600 years ago.

If this is consistent with what the Bible teaches, then we cannot accuse God of creating evil as he did other things he created. We cannot blame God for darkness, nor can we blame God for the cold.

Some of you know that I always say the cold is a result of sin. C.S. Lewis got it right in his Narnia Chronicles.

These past few weeks I have been keenly aware of the fact that this world is in the grip of sin. It's not good, but God is not to blame!

If Augustine is correct in saying that there can be no evil where there is no good, then we can explain why evil exists in a universe created by a good God.

- Another view about the existence of evil is called Dualism.

C.S. Lewis explains, 'Dualism means the belief that there are two equal and independent powers at the back of everything, one of them good and the other bad, and that this universe is the battlefield in which they fight out

an endless war. . . They both existed from eternity. Neither of them made the other, neither of them has any more right than the other to call itself God. (Mere Christianity. p.44)

Christians, of course, cannot be Dualists, because we believe in one God who is the omnipotent Lord of heaven and earth. There is no power that can stand before the Lord God.

- How, then, did evil become real? God created mankind with the freedom to make choices. But freedom is nothing if it doesn't include the freedom not to choose God's will.

Evil entered the world through a choice not to do God's will.

The Prophet Isaiah speaks indirectly of Satan, or Lucifer: *How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit.'* (Isaiah 14:12-15)

This created angelic being chose to oppose God. Evil came into this world through the decision of Lucifer, or Satan.

- The first man and the first woman, created in the image of God, had the freedom to choose. When Satan tempted them they chose to place their will above God's revealed will. They chose to disobey. As a result of their choice, evil infected the whole human race and all creation came under a curse. The Apostle Paul wrote, '*. . . sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned*' (Romans 5:12)

While we wait for the end of the age, when Jesus Christ returns as Lord over all, Satan continues to hold unbelievers in his control: *'The god of this age (the devil) has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.'* (2 Corinthians 4:4).

- Jesus, speaking of the work he would do through his death, said *'Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.'* (John 12:31) By his death and resurrection Jesus won the victory over Satan, the prince of this world. The devil is a defeated foe. Those who place their trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior are rescued from Satan's dark dominion and brought into the Kingdom of God's Son.

That is why we are a "gospel" or "evangelical" church. We tell the good news that Christ has defeated the devil, and by faith in Jesus Christ people are saved from the devil's power and enter into a new life in Christ.

- Did God create the evil? Certainly not! God revealed his righteous will to Adam and Eve. But the influence of the evil one, Satan, was enough for them to choose to go their own way instead of God's way.

We can say that evil has come upon us because of mankind's violation of the good that God purposed and created for us.

The source of evil is the corruption of good.

[2nd answer to this perplexing problem of evil in the world]

II. GOD USES EVIL TO CARRY OUT HIS PURPOSES

This sounds horrible, so let's look at the most significant example of this. Grudem writes, *'The most evil deed in history, the crucifixion of Christ, was ordained by God—not just the fact that it would occur, but also all the individual actions connected with it.'* (Systematic Theology, p.326)

Here's an excerpt from a prayer in the Jerusalem church: *'Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.'* (Acts 4:27-28)

In his address on the Day of Pentecost, Peter said about Jesus of Nazareth, *'This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.'* (Acts 2:23)

In the Old Testament we read about Joseph's jealous brothers selling him into slavery. By God's providence Joseph attained to the highest office in Egypt and was able to save his entire family from starvation. He later said to his brothers, *'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.'* (Genesis 50:20)

- God's way of working includes the use of suffering and evil.

C.S. Lewis wrote, *'God whispers in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.'* (The Problem of Pain. p.93) Our good God uses pain and suffering to get our attention.

The Apostle Paul's words have become a source of encouragement to believers: *'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.'* (Romans 8:28)

- It may be hard for us to acknowledge this, but our Holy God uses suffering and evil to carry out his purposes.

[3rd answer to this perplexing problem of evil in the world]

III. GOD IS NEVER TO BLAME FOR EVIL

Even though God uses evil for his purposes, he is never to blame for evil.

In the Old Testament account of the life of Job we read that God gave Satan permission to use evil against that righteous man. The man lost everything—family, possessions, friends, and his own health. But we read, *'In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.'* (Job 1:21)

The great Reformer John Calvin wrote, *'God so uses the works of the ungodly and so bends their minds to carry out his judgments, that He remains pure from every stain.'* (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 1:228)

God is never to blame for evil.

[4th answer to this perplexing problem of evil in the world]

IV. PEOPLE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE EVIL THEY DO

We cannot evade responsibility for our evil actions on the grounds that it's not our fault that we were born tainted into a fallen world.

Mankind's fallen nature is in perpetual rebellion against God's will. *'God looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. Everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.'* (Psalm 53:2-3)

The Lord said through the Prophet Isaiah, *"They have chosen their own ways, and their souls delight in their abominations; . . . For when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, no one listened. They did evil in my sight and chose what displeases me."* (Isaiah 66:3-4)

In spite of their knowledge of God's will people rebelled against it, so Paul said people are without excuse (Romans 1:20).

Jude wrote: *"See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him."* (Jude 1:14-15)

People are accountable to God for the evil they do.

[5th answer to this perplexing problem of evil in the world]

V. IT IS ALWAYS WRONG FOR PEOPLE TO DO EVIL

You're thinking, "Well, duh! Isn't that a novel insight?"

This seems like a truism. But someone may object, "If God uses evil to carry out good purposes, why can't we do the same?"

The Apostle Paul puts it this way, *'Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" Why not say-- as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say-- "Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is deserved.'* (Romans 3:7-8)

When God uses the evil of men to accomplish his purposes, God is in control, and he can guarantee the outcome of his plans.

Wayne Grudem gives the analogy of a father who uses a very sharp knife but does not allow his child to use it. So God uses evil to bring about good purposes, but he never allows his children to do so. (Grudem, *Systematic Theology* p.330)

Augustine said, *'There is a great difference between what is fitting for man to will and what is fitting for God. . . For through the bad wills of evil men God fulfills what he righteously wills.'* (Quoted by John Calvin in *Institutes*, 1:234)

We never have a right to do what is evil. Jesus taught his disciples to pray to our Father in heaven, *'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.'* (Matthew 6:13).

The Bible is explicit on this matter. It is never right for people to do evil or to attempt to use evil for a good purpose.

[6th answer to this perplexing problem of evil in the world]

VI. WE DO NOT COMPREHEND HOW GOD RELATES TO EVIL

God has revealed himself to us in various ways so that we may know him and not be deceived, but even so, God's ways are beyond our full comprehension.

Moses said, *'The secret things belong to the Lord our God.'* (Deuteronomy 29:29)

There's a line from a character in a George MacDonald novel that I just love: *'God, you know, Joan, is more than anybody knows what to say about.'* (*The Laird's Inheritance*, p.136.)

But can anything be better than the Apostle Paul's magnificent doxology? *'Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.'* (Romans 11:33-36)

Grudem writes, *'We confess that we do not understand how it is that God can ordain that we carry out evil deeds and yet hold us accountable for them and not be blamed himself. . . Scripture does not tell us exactly how God brings this situation about or how it can be that God holds us accountable for what he ordains to come to pass.'* (*Systematic Theology*, p.330)

How God relates to evil is ultimately a mystery to us. Only God knows how he works this out. We cannot comprehend the ways of God.

[7th answer to this perplexing problem of evil in the world]

VII. GOD WILL FINALLY JUDGE EVIL

The devil's power has already been broken. The Apostle John wrote, *'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.'* (1 John 3:8)

As soon as Jesus began his public ministry he *'(Jesus) went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news."*' (Mark 1:14-15)

- This word *near* is really a verb meaning *has come near*. (15)

Jesus meant that in him God's reign had come into the world.

Cranfield explained that the kingdom is intimately connected with the person of Jesus: *'It is in his words and works and person that the kingdom has come. In fact, we may actually go so far as to say that the kingdom of God is Jesus and that he is the kingdom.'* (C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary*, p.66)

Jesus went about preaching the gospel, healing the sick, and driving out demonic spirits. In doing so he demonstrated that in him the power of God's reign had entered the world under the control of evil.

The people of Capernaum in Galilee didn't want Jesus to leave them, *'But he said, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to other towns also, because that is why I was sent."*' (Luke 4:43)

The kingdom of God meant God's power, authority, and dominion over all other powers.

- Jesus mission culminated in his death on the cross. The writer to the Hebrews explained: *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil--and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.* (Hebrews 2:14-15)

Jesus destroyed the devil. The word "destroy" in v.14 means to render powerless.

Because of Christ's victory, the devil's authority over believers has been broken.

He is like a vicious dog that has been chained. You're not going to wander over and pat him on the head. He's not a nice doggy, but he is bound and you are free.

- By faith in Jesus Christ we are set free from our fear of death.

Without a Savior death is something to fear. It's a horrible destiny.

It is the most potent and paralyzing of fears. It's the king of terrors.

- If you have placed your trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior you will still go through that valley of death (unless Christ comes before you die). It may come after some physical suffering. But the devil has no power over you. Christ has gone through that valley ahead of you to make it the path to eternal life.

But with Christ as your Savior, you don't have to fear it any more.

Instead of death and all its horrors, you have life that is infinitely more than you ever imagined.

- How will it all end?

The Apostle Peter expressed the hope of all Christians, *'But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.'* (2 Peter 3:13)

The Apostle John describes it in his God-given vision of what will be: *'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"'* (Revelation 21:1-5)

There will be no more evil. In the Book of Revelation hell is graphically described as a lake of burning sulfur, or a lake of fire. That's where Satan, the devil or deceiver, will be thrown to endure eternal punishment. (Revelation 21:10)

God will finally judge and expel all evil and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain because the old evil order will have passed away.

That is God's promise, and we can count on it.

People who have repented of their sin and put their faith in Jesus Christ have been rescued from the devil's dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of God's Son (Colossians 1:14). We are citizens of heaven, but we still live in a world in which the devil goes about like a roaring lion looking for people to devour.

People who have not repented of their sins and trusted Jesus as their Savior are still under the control of the devil. Their minds have been blinded by him and they cannot see the truth.

That's why the Apostle Paul declared, *'I am not ashamed of the gospel (the good news of Christ), because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes'* (Romans 1:16)

- Evil is real. Evil destroys the lives of people, both now and for eternity.

Jesus Christ has destroyed the power of evil. He is our only hope. He is the only Savior for the world.

- Maybe you're disappointed with God for the way he is handling evil.

But God's ways are not our ways. He does all things well. The only way to come to Christ is in humility and desperation. He is our only hope.