

# HOW CAN A GOOD & LOVING GOD ALLOW EVIL?

No matter where we live, no matter what our circumstances, no matter how much money or worldly success we may have, we all experience evil. And there are many people throughout history who have considered the existence of evil, the amount of evil, and the nature of evil as evidence that there is no God—especially not one who has the will and the power to do anything about it. But although it seems we all recognize evil when we see it in things like the Holocaust, murder, a tsunami, or cancer, what exactly is evil?

Augustine defined evil as “a privation of a good.” In other words, evil is where good should be but is not. This definition also specifies that evil is not a thing; it has no substance. This does not imply evil does not exist. Rather, it means that evil exists in the same way as dark or cold does. Dark and cold are very real things that are ways of speaking of the absence of light or heat. Both dark and cold are parasites, in a way, of light and heat since light and heat can exist without dark and cold, but dark and cold cannot exist without the existence of light and heat. The importance of this way of thinking about evil is that although evil is real it was not created by God, but it was made possible by God.

Although God is not directly responsible for creating evil, he is sovereign over it and uses it to accomplish his good purposes. This idea of God and evil co-existing is extremely difficult to reconcile at times even for the staunchest believer. And this is precisely the rub that is so often exploited to show that God does not exist.

There are two kinds of arguments against God that use the existence of evil. One argument holds that evil could not exist at the same time as a morally perfect, all-powerful, all-knowing God. This is called the logical argument from evil. The other kind of argument says the amount and quality of evil makes it extremely unlikely that a morally perfect, all-powerful, all-knowing God exists. This is known as the evidential or probabilistic argument.

There are two kinds of answers to this question. One is called a “theodicy” and tries to show God’s reasons for allowing evil. This is a difficult task given the lack of information on the subject in the Bible. Although the Bible has a lot of material dealing with the nature of evil and its remedy, it doesn’t explicitly reveal why God allows it. A more modest approach is to justify God by giving plausible reasons for evil. This way of arguing is known as a defense. The advantage of a defense is that it can show the bankruptcy of a challenge without the burden of giving specific reasons why God permits evil.

## **THE LOGICAL ARGUMENT**

Throughout history the most common objection to belief in God has been the inability to reconcile the existence of evil with a perfectly good, all-powerful, all-knowing, loving God. The argument looks like this:

- If God is all-powerful he could prevent evil.
- If God is all-knowing he would know when evil was about to take place and could stop it.

- If God is loving and morally perfect he would want to prevent evil.
- Evil exists.
- Therefore, God does not exist.

In the logical argument from evil, one of two things must be mistaken; either there is no God or there is no evil. Some people have tried to solve the problem by denying the existence of evil, but this response is clearly inadequate. It is extremely difficult to imagine a person who knows about and could prevent the holocaust, or rape, or murder but instead does nothing because they don't believe in the reality of evil. For people who care about truth, evil is undeniable and cannot be solved by just defining it out of existence. Those who deny the existence of evil still get cancer, are raped, murdered, and suffer in natural disasters. They may call it something else or try to ignore it, but they still experience evil.

When we consider the arguments for God's existence, such as the cosmological, design, and moral arguments, and the arguments for the Resurrection and the trustworthiness of the Bible, we see we have excellent reasons for believing that God exists. The problem that the logical argument from evil tries to exploit is how the existence of evil and the existence of God are compatible. Is it inconsistent to believe both exist?

This question was famously answered by philosopher Alvin Plantinga with what he called "The Free Will Defense." The idea is that if there is merely a possible reason for why God would allow evil, then the existence of God and evil simultaneously is not incompatible or inconsistent and the logical argument from evil fails.

Simply stated, the Free Will Defense suggests the possibility that:

- An all-knowing, all-powerful, all-benevolent God created human beings as free moral agents with the ability to choose evil as well as good.
- Because God is all-knowing He knew evil would result, because He is all-powerful he could create the world in some other way, and because He is all-benevolent and morally perfect he could only have good reasons for making the world in this way.
- As a result, God may have created the potential for evil, but human beings, because they have chosen evil things, made it actual. But this actualizing of evil was not news to God. Thus, ultimately, there is evil in the world because God has a good reason for its existence.

According to the Bible, neither humankind nor the world was made in a state corrupted by evil. God created all things and called them "very good." God also provided in abundance for everything that Adam and Eve could ever need. As creatures made in God's image, they were endowed with moral ability, the freedom to choose between good (adhering to God's will) and evil (violating God's will). How long this good state lasted is unknown, but at some point Adam and Eve freely disobeyed God by violating God's one commandment. As a result, evil was introduced into the world by the free choice of morally accountable creatures. God made evil possible, but people made evil actual.

Of course, if God is omniscient, then He knew all along that people would sometimes choose evil. But if God is morally perfect and benevolent, then He must have a good reason for permitting evil, and this is all we need to know. The specific reasons God allows evil are not given, nor are they required in order for Christianity to be logically consistent.

The whole point of the Free Will Defense is to show that God and evil are not incompatible. It does not claim that this is the actual scenario. Whether it is true or not is irrelevant. The important thing is that there is a way of affirming both the existence of God and evil without being inconsistent.

### **THE EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENT**

Another way of using evil to argue against the existence of God is to take the enormous amount of evil and the egregiousness of evil and weigh it against the claim that God exists. Simply put, which do we see more of—evil or evidence of God? Unlike the logical argument from evil, which is a compatibility argument, this argument is based on probability. The evidential, or probabilistic, argument from evil does not come right out and say that God does not exist. But it does say that it is very likely or even probable that God does not exist. And that is justification enough not to not believe in God.

This form of the argument has been articulated many different ways. One well-known example uses a hypothetical situation of a fawn who dies a slow, painful death in a forest fire started by lightning. More often, real-world examples are used, such as the beating, rape, and murder of a five year old girl. The point of these examples is that there is no point. What possible good could come of these things that could justify such evil?

Some people who use the evidential argument don't deny that some amount of evil might be necessary for God to achieve His purpose. However, they believe that there is more evil than necessary for God's plan to succeed. But how could anyone know such a thing? Just because a resulting good isn't perceived by someone does not mean there is no resulting good. To know all the effects and consequences of a situation would require omniscience. The only person who could know whether the good resulting from evil is justified is God himself. There is just no way for us to know how much evil is required to bring about a perceived good.

One problem with the evidential argument is that it is based on arrogance. It puts finite, flawed human beings in the place of an infinite, perfect God and then declares that nothing makes sense. But just because we cannot see the good that results from a given situation doesn't mean that there is no good. Human beings do not have an exhaustive knowledge of all the workings of the universe and therefore cannot determine how much evil is required to bring about a particular good. The Evidential Argument is ultimately grounded in the selfishness and short-sightedness of human beings.

Another problem that the evidential argument faces is that it loads the question to be answered a certain way. If someone makes the claim that all the evil we see in the world (genocide, rape, torture, slavery, disease, injustice, terrorism, and so on) makes it likely that God does not exist, then they have their thumb on the scale. Taken as a statement in isolation this argument might have some force. But to bring forth the evidence for evil and leave the evidence for God unstated is disingenuous at best. Probability is calculated by the relevant background information. We all know quite a lot about evil and can easily rattle off a long list of examples. Our personal experience and observation of the world make up the background information we use to be able to speak about evil. But the same consideration must be given to the arguments for the existence of God. We cannot just place the idea of God unexamined on the other side of the scale. The background information that is relevant to this question contains much more than just evidence for evil. And in this background information we find the cosmological, design, and moral arguments for

the existence of God; that the God described by those arguments is the God of the Bible; that the Bible is a trustworthy document both in terms of its manuscript authority, authorship, and content; that God reveals himself to humans through prophecy which are verified by miracles; that the resurrection of Jesus was an actual historical event that authenticated Jesus' claim of divinity, his message of salvation, and His ability to reveal the will of God. It is against these considerations that genocide, rape, torture, slavery, disease, injustice, terrorism, and other evils must be weighed. And given all this background information, the weight of evil is shown to be no match for the overwhelming evidence for the existence of the God of the Bible.

### **THE PROBLEM OF EVIL REDEFINED**

The most powerful way to respond to the problem of evil is not, however, to place various kinds of evidence on both sides of a scale. Rather, there is a more fundamental issue that has to be addressed when using the terms "good" and "evil." When someone speaks of evil what are they actually saying? For anything to be called "good" or "evil" we must first recognize that we are not talking about preferences. When things are declared to be evil we mean that something ought to be a certain way but is not. We mean that there is a violation of an intended order and that its purpose is not being achieved. But where do things like intention, order, purpose, and ought-ness come from? They come from a person, of course. And since we are talking about intentions and purposes that are universal and transcend individual human beings, cultures, and times, these intentions and purposes must come from a transcendent source. This source must be a person that has the power to impose His will on the world and has the ability to enforce it. This person is who we call God. Good and evil therefore find their reference point in the person of God. If an act or event is evil, it is because it diverges from God's moral will.

But this claim is often challenged. Critics point out that either God is conforming to a standard of goodness outside of Himself or that something is good just because God says it is. Either way we see a God that does not deserve our obedience and worship. After all, if a thing is good just because God says it is, then we are saying that might makes right. And if there is a standard of goodness to which God is obliged, then it is to that standard that we are also obliged. This apparent flaw in the logic of Christianity has given justification to many people wishing to avoid the God of the Bible.

But there is a third option: Goodness finds its source in God's character, and the standard of goodness is God's character itself. Things are not good just because God says they are, they are good because they correspond to His perfectly good and unchanging character. God's intentions, purposes are strictly informed by His character. The degree to which something does not correspond to God's benevolent character is the degree to which that thing is evil.

The point is that to say something is evil is to say that there is an objective, transcendent, personal being whose will is being violated or whose order is being disturbed. In other words, to say something is evil is to claim there is a God. In fact, the existence of evil is one of the most powerful evidences for God. Without the existence of God, the idea of evil becomes unintelligible. As a result, the problem of evil is not a problem for the Christian. Rather, the problem of evil is a problem for unbelievers.

### **WHY DOESN'T GOD DESTROY EVIL?**

We have seen how God could allow evil and that the existence of evil is compatible with God's character. But if God is all-powerful, omniscient, and perfectly benevolent, why doesn't he just destroy evil? The answer may have to do with our moral character. Because we are made in the

image of God, human beings have the ability to make choices that have a moral dimension to them. This ability, of course, allows that we can choose the wrong thing and as a result introduce evil. For God to destroy evil, He must take away the ability of His creatures to introduce evil into the world. But to do that God would also be destroying the ability to do the greatest moral good as well, and that is to be able to love. Thus, for God to destroy evil would ultimately be evil itself since it would take away the greatest good—the ability to love God. Instead of being destroyed, evil needs to be defeated.

### **THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

Perhaps the greatest difficulty of the answer to evil given above is that it doesn't provide a great deal of comfort for those in the midst of evil and suffering who have never thought through the issue before. Although the answer may be intellectually satisfying, it often fails to provide real comfort to those who are suffering and asking why such things happen to them. In fact, to give this answer to those in crisis can come off quite cold and uncaring; it can be completely inappropriate to respond with this answer at certain times. The proper time to explore the problem of evil is not in the middle of suffering. This question is best answered before such situations arise—and they will arise. If the answer is understood beforehand, then it provides a framework to understand, at least to some degree, why things are the way they are. It also gives assurance to the believer and buoys them for their journey. It strengthens faith and can be used to reveal God to unbelievers brought in contact with suffering believers.

The main answer, however, to the problem of evil is the person of Jesus. Jesus took the moral evil committed by those who believe in him and paid the penalty for that evil on the cross. And Jesus will sit in judgment of the moral evil committed by those who do not believe in him. Either way, moral evil finds its remedy in the perfect obedience of the life of Jesus and His death on behalf of those who believe in Him for the payment of sin. He will either judge or justify every person who has ever lived.

Jesus is also the solution for natural evil. In His resurrection we see Him not just restored to His physical body, but to a glorified state. His resurrected body cannot die, get sick, or be corrupted in any way. Jesus' resurrection is a glimpse of the world to come. It is clear and even tangible evidence of the fulfillment of God's good purpose that He is bringing about. This demonstration gives an answer to those who are suffering from physical or natural evil. The blind shall have their sight restored, the deaf shall hear, the crippled shall walk, the mentally handicapped shall think clearly. More than that, there will be no more tsunamis to kill thousands of people, no more hurricanes, tornados, floods, sickness, or disease. All things will be not just restored to their state before the fall, but will attain the good purpose for which they were created. Jesus overcame both moral and physical/natural evil. He alone is the solution. Evil is only a problem for those who refuse Him.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

#### ***Apologetics Study Bible* Articles:**

How Can God Have All Power and Be Loving and Yet There Be Evil? by Gregory E. Ganssle, 736.

How Can the Bible Affirm Both Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility? by Burce Ware, 1054.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Which version of the problem from evil is more powerful to you, the logical or evidential? Why?
2. If someone asked, “Where was God during the terrorist attacks of September 11?” how you would answer them?
3. How have you tried to make sense of suffering in your own life? Did any of your friends try to give an explanation for why it was happening?
4. What passages of scripture talk about how God allows evil and is sovereign over it? (cf. 50:20; Ex 4:21, 7:3; Acts 2:23; 4:27; Rom 9:18)
5. What would be the problem if God actively prevented us from committing evil and allowed us to only do good?