

The Problem of Evil

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What is evil? Evil is the absence of good just as darkness is the absence of light and chaos is the absence of order. (Exodus 33:18-19; Deuteronomy 31:17; Isaiah 51:1-2)

“Augustine argued that evil is not something that exists; rather, ‘evil is nothing but a privation [negation, or absence] of good.’ He worked from the notion that God, who is the supreme good and source of good, created everything good in its original state. But creatures can fall away from their original goodness, and it is in this loss of goodness that evil consists: ‘Here we see the proper use of the word *evil*; for it is correctly applied not to essence, but to negation or loss.’” (Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, p. 282)

The dilemma caused by the existence of evil: The Encyclopedia Britannica says that evil is “a theological problem that arises for any philosophical or religious view that affirms the following three propositions: (1) God is almighty, (2) God is perfectly good, and (3) evil exists. If evil exists, it seems either that God wants to obliterate evil and is not able to—and thus his almightiness is denied—or that God is able to obliterate evil but does not want to—and thus his goodness is denied.” [*evil, problem of*. (2006). Encyclopedia Britannica. Encyclopedia Britannica. Encyclopedia Britannica 2007 Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica.]

Consider the following assessments made regarding God and evil:

1. If God cannot restrain evil, then He is impotent and foolish in creation
2. If God will not restrain evil then He is careless and monstrous
3. If God allows and restrains evil to give purpose to evil according to His decree, then God is benevolent and wise.

Consider the following three statements and the questions they generate:

1. Evil exists. Where did evil originate?
2. God is good. Why does He allow suffering and pain?
3. God is omnipotent: What guides the use of His power?

Evil Exists: Where did evil originate? The answer is that God ordained that evil exist. God ordained that evil exist in that iniquity was found in the angel Lucifer. (Ezekiel 28:15) God also ordained that evil exist by creating “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” (Genesis 2:17; 3:1-7) In addition God ordained that evil exist by providing a remedy for the consequences of evil in the Person of His Son, the Lamb of God. (Revelation 13:8; John 1:29, 36) In light of these realities we must conclude either:

1. The pre-existence of evil or,
2. God’s foreknowledge of evil.

Since God is holy and created all things as good, Scripture supports the later.

It is important to note that although God *ordained* that evil exist, He did not *cause* evil. Who or what is the *cause* of evil?

In the heavenly realm, iniquity was first conceived in the heart of Lucifer, i.e. Satan. (Isaiah 14:12-14; Ezekiel 28:11-19) Lucifer (Serpent, Satan, Devil) is called “the evil one” (Matthew 5:37; 6:13; Luke 11:14; John 17:15; 2 Thessalonians 3:3) and “the wicked one.” (Matthew 13:19; Ephesians 6:16; 1 John 2:13, 14; 3:12; 5:18, 19) Lucifer remains the originator and conspirator of all evil. He is the god of this age who deceives the entire world. (John 8:44; 1 Corinthians 4:3-4; Revelation 12:9)

In the earthly realm the cause of evil, although influenced by the deception of the Serpent, is the free will of man.

Gregg R. Allison, in his *Historical Theology* (p. 280) states, “Tertullian reasoned from the fact that God decided to create human beings with the free will. Because of this, God could not intervene to stop people from abusing their freedom by choosing to do evil. Addressing the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, Tertullian framed the problem in this way: ‘You reason that if God were good, and if he were unwilling that such a catastrophe should happen, and if by his foreknowledge he was not ignorant of the future, and if he were powerful enough to hinder its occurrence, that result would never have come about...Since, however, it has occurred, the contrary affirmation must certainly be true: God must be neither good, nor knowledgeable of the future, nor powerful.’ After vindicating the goodness, foreknowledge, and power of God, Tertullian turned to human beings to look for the cause of evil: ‘I find, then, that God constituted humanity free, ruler of its own will and power...Upon careful consideration, it can be shown that this human freedom alone is to be blamed for the evil that it committed itself.’”

Augustine said, “ ‘[There is] an order of causes in which the highest effect is attributed to the will of God...But it does not follow that, though there is for God a certain order of all causes, there must therefore be nothing depending on the free exercise of our own wills, for our wills themselves are included in that order of causes which is certain to God, and is embraced by his foreknowledge, for human wills are also the cause of human actions. And he who foreknew all the causes of things would certainly not have been ignorant of our wills, because they are among those causes...We are by no means compelled to do away with the freedom of the will by retaining divine foreknowledge, or, by retaining the freedom of the will, to deny that God has foreknowledge of future things--an ungodly idea! But we embrace both!...Whatever is done in the world is done partly by divine agency and partly by our will.’ And he extended this providential control to everything that exists.” (Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, p. 282)

God is good. Why does He allow pain and suffering? In the original creation, all that God created was good (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31; 2:9) and mankind received God’s blessing. Guilt, shame, fear, blame, pain, suffering, dysfunction, war, environmental disaster, death, separation, and the curse did not exist within God’s created order. The curse and the loss of God’s blessing came about through man’s disobedience. (Genesis 2:17; 3:7, 8, 10, 14-15, 16, 17-19, 21, 23; Ro 5:12, 15-17; 1 Corinthians 15:21)

God is not unjust to allow the consequences of evil to exist. Neither is God unjust to execute righteous judgment that inflicts pain and suffering. (Genesis 18:25) God’s exercise of righteous judgment is a *good* rather than an *evil* action. (2 Thessalonians 1:6) If God were to fail to establish justice, His failure would itself be evil. The accusation of fallen men that God is unjust does not prove that He is unjust. It only proves that they do not understand God’s righteous standard and the justice penalty they deserve. (Revelation 16:9, 11, 21) Blaming others, including God, for the guilt and consequences of our own sin is proof of our sinful condition (Genesis 3:12, 13) In fact, God has demonstrated His love and goodness toward us in that while we were yet dead in our sins and trespasses, He sent Christ to die for our sins.

(John 3:16; Ephesians 2:1) Through the Cross of Christ God's justice for our sins was satisfied and His redemption made complete. Now through longsuffering, God has revealed His goodness and mercy by temporarily withholding the full measure of consequence that our sin deserves to give us an opportunity to admit our guilt and repentance. (Psalm 103:10; 130:3-4; Romans 2:2-4; Revelation 2:21)

Even as the act of torture must be distinguished from the suffering inflicted by torture, so the principle of evil must be distinguished from the suffering that evil inflicts. Pain and suffering are not themselves evil but are the evidence of evil's presence and work. Just as physical pain alerts us to the reality that something is wrong in our body, so pain and suffering in this life alerts us to the reality that something is wrong with this fallen world. The elimination of pain without addressing the source of pain can be deadly. God can comfort us in our suffering and heal us of our pain, but He is most interested in addressing the root of the evil behind it all. (1 Timothy 6:10)

God created a perfect world to demonstrate the glory of His wisdom, perfection, goodness, and beauty. God ordained evil to reveal the glory of His redeeming nature. Without the existence of evil and its consequences, the redeeming attributes within God's nature, although existing, would not be displayed (i.e., mercy, forgiveness, longsuffering, salvation, healing, deliverance, life, righteousness, justice, wrath against evil, etc.) Paul argued this in Romans 9:22-24 (NKJV) "*What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,*²³ *and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory,*²⁴ *even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?*"

Origen, one of the early church fathers, argued: "Virtue cannot be discerned unless it has vices opposed to it, nor can it be developed unless it is exercised by adversity. God designed that there should be this distinction between good and evil things, that we may know from that which is evil the value of the good, and also know the value of evil from the good. The nature of either one cannot be understood if the other one is removed. God, therefore, did not exclude evil, that the nature of virtue might be evident." [Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, 5.7, in ANF, 7:142. The text has been rendered clearer as quoted in Gregg R. Allison's *Historical Theology*, p. 281] Gregg Allison went on to say, "For Lactantius, moral virtues like patience and faithfulness develop if and only if evil exists and persists. Were there no evil, human beings would not develop virtue. As to where God could have created human being inherently virtuous, that whole idea is absurd. God could have created human beings in the absence of evil, but they would not have been *virtuous* human beings. For virtue to prosper, evil is necessary; thus, God does not intervene to remove evil from the world." [Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, p. 281]

We must not forget that God Himself entered our world through His Son to become a victim of the pain and suffering caused by evil. Christ experienced the greatest injustice ever launched against a human being--a crime against a righteous and sinless man. Sinners deserve the just consequences of their sin, but Jesus had done nothing wrong (Luke 23:41). The injustice of the Cross is man's injustice toward God Himself! God has not ignored the problem of evil. On the contrary, the Cross is God's exclamation point that something is seriously wrong with our world—that something is seriously wrong with *us*. Thus the presence of pain and suffering reveals not only the problem but also our need for Him and His salvation.

God is omnipotent. What guides the use of His power? The answer to this question is His purpose and glory. (Isaiah 43:6-7; 1 Corinthians 2:6-7; Ephesians 1:11) The glory of God is His holiness on display. (Isaiah 6:3) The glory of God's holiness is displayed in His "goodness." (Exodus 33:18-19;

34:6-7) The glory of God is the divine purpose of all things. (1 Corinthians 10:31; Isaiah 43:6-7; 66:18-19; Psalm 96:1-3; Ezekiel 39:21; Ephesians 1:6) The working out of His sovereign purpose for His glory is called “providence.” God will not use His power to violate His justice by overlooking or excusing sin or by withholding sin’s consequences. However, God uses His power to demonstrate His love for mankind and power over sin by redeeming unto Himself a people out of fallen humanity to demonstrate His glory in redemption. (John 3:16; Romans 8:28) To those whom He calls, He will make known the riches of His glory (Romans 9:23; Ephesians 3:16; Romans 8:29-30) and the riches of His grace. (Ephesians 1:7; 2:7) According to His purpose and glory He is “working (i.e. by His power) all things together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28) For His glory, God uses His power to accomplish what is good in His sight. (2 Samuel 10:12; Matthew 11:26; Luke 10:21; Acts 10:38; Romans 12:2)

Why would Adam and Eve, who were originally created good, fall away? As previously stated, in creation God ordained that man be given a free will. Free will is the ability to do what one desires. God ordained man’s free will with a choice to obey or not obey His law. (Genesis 2:16-17) Free will prevents God from over ruling it even when the choice is disobedience and the consequences disastrous. God, in His goodness, created man morally upright and able to obey. (Ecclesiastes 7:29) Before the fall man had the moral *ability* to attain righteousness by keeping God’s law. However, man is not *immutable* (unable to change) in his nature like God (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8). As a result, the Serpent, who is the devil and Satan (Revelation 12:9), through temptation deceived Eve and Adam into disbelieving and disobeying God’s law. (Genesis 3:6) The consequence of their free will disobedience was that their eyes were opened to the knowledge of evil through the consequences of disobedience rather than through the training of obedience. (Genesis 3:3, 22; Hebrews 5:14) Although Adam and Eve retained their free will after the fall to choose what they desired, they were disqualified from attaining righteousness in their own ability and their moral compass was corrupted. They were free to choose but they were no longer able to choose anything, apart from God’s grace, except what is evil. (Romans 7:14; 8:7)

What has God done to overcome evil? God has overcome evil with the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ upon the Cross. The coming of Christ into this world represented 1) the entrance of the kingdom of God into the realm of evil and sin (Matthew 3:14-15), 2) a confrontation with the powers of the evil one working in this world (Matthew 11:12; 12:28; Acts 10:38; 1 John 3:8), and 3) the introduction of God’s righteous rule and government in this earth. (Isaiah 9:6-7) The throne of God’s kingdom is founded upon righteousness and justice. (Psalm 89:14; 97:2) God’s works flow from the goodness of His righteousness and justice. Evil will be finally eliminated at the White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11-15) and the pain and suffering caused by evil will pass away when all things are made new. (Revelation 21:1-4) For the believer, deliverance from evil is experienced in the past, present, and future. At the Cross we were delivered from the *personality* of evil, we are currently being delivered from the *power* of evil, and one day we will be delivered from the *presence* of evil.

How are we to overcome evil? As the Light of Christ overcomes the darkness, so God’s goodness overcomes evil. We are to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21) through the provision of Christ’s redemption. (Revelation 12:11)

What will be different in the new creation? What will prevent redeemed believers from falling again in the new creation? In the new creation, man’s free will is freed from the bondage of sin. Unlike Adam, the redeemed man will be cleansed from his filthiness and idols, will receive a new heart and a new spirit, will have the stony heart replaced with a heart of flesh, will have the law of God written on his heart, and will receive the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to cause him to walk in obedience to God’s law. (Ezekiel 36:25-27)