

TOUGH QUESTIONS *...from the Old Testament*

HOW CAN A GOOD GOD ALLOW BAD THINGS?

One thing the Old Testament (and for that matter, the entire Bible) *cannot* be accused of is sugar-coating human experience. As you continue your reading through the Old Testament, I'm sure you've concluded by now that life doesn't always go as expected. Even the heroes of the Old Testament are profoundly tainted by sinful actions and attitudes. Abraham was a polygamist, Jacob a liar, David an adulterer, Samson a womanizer, and Jephthah apparently murdered his own daughter.

And then, of course, there is the fascinating account of Job. From the opening chapters of that book we find a good God allowing the very epitome of evil, Satan himself, to bring unimaginable tragedy and suffering into the life of this man. And from a casual reading of the book, we're left with the question, "What's the deal? How can a good God allow such bad things?"

Someone has expressed the question this way:

Sooner or later I must face the question in plain language. What reason have we, except our own desperate wishes, to believe that God is, by any standard we can conceive, "good?" Doesn't all the ... evidence suggest exactly the opposite?ⁱ

Those are not the words of an atheist or skeptic. They're not written by the promoters of a smear campaign against Christianity. They are the words of C. S. Lewis, one of the greatest defenders of biblical faith during the 20th Century. He wrote those words as he grieved the loss of his wife to cancer.

As a believer, Lewis was dealing with the problem of pain – the problem of evil. And many of you are too. As I prayed through the requests many of you mentioned last week, there must have been at least five cases of cancer mentioned. Many are struggling with the reality of the very same pain that C.S. Lewis was struggling with. And maybe you're asking the same question. If God is good, how can he allow such evil? Can we reconcile what the Bible says about God – that he is good, loving, just and kind – with the harsh realities of pain and evil in the world all around us?

Of course, that question remains rather theoretical as long as evil and its tragic consequences don't touch too close to us personally. It's fairly easy to engage in tidy, philosophical discussions about a tsunami, a Katrina, a genocide in Darfur, or the 1001 tragedies that we read about every day in the news. But it is not until the sharp pain of evil touches you and me *personally* that all of our tidy reasoning begins to unravel.

What is Evil?

On a personal level I've been wrestling in the last few years with this question of evil and pain more than any other time in my life. But just what is "evil" anyway? Listen to these responses from the street.

[VIDEO]

The Bible gives us the best definition of evil. It's found in Romans 3:23 – “For all have sinned, *and fall short of the glory of God.*” Sin, which is the moral expression of evil, means literally “to miss the mark.” It is to come up short. But what “mark” do we miss? We “come up short” in relationship to what? This verse gives us the answer: “the glory of God.”

A couple of weeks ago, Matthew Brooks in his message on Isaiah 6 told us just what the glory of God is. It is the sum total of God's perfections (God's attributes). Another word used to express the same idea in the Bible is the word “goodness.” When we say that God is good we mean that in every way God's character and will represents the ideal. Psalm 18:30 says “As for God, His way is perfect.” In other words, the character and will of God are the perfect standard by which all human notions of goodness are to be measured. Man is good and things are good in so far as they measure up to the glory and goodness of God.

And when they don't? Well, to that degree, evil is present. Evil then is not so much a “thing” but a “lack” of something.ⁱⁱ To the degree that anyone or anything falls short of the goodness and glory (i.e. the perfection) of God, to that degree evil exists.

And so we talk about *moral* evil, which includes:

- Evil acts (murder, adultery)
- Evil people (Osama Ben Ladin)
- Evil events (genocides in Africa)
- Evil spirits (fallen angels)

On the other hand we also talk about *natural* evil, including things like hurricane Katrina, or a tsunami, or a devastating earthquake. Here there is little or no choice, just the awful consequences.

But why do we call these acts, people, circumstances, events and spirits *evil*? Because, whether it is moral evil or natural evil, something is *lacking*. When the good that should be there is absent, that is evil. Simply put, evil is falling short of God's goodness, God's glory. So A.W. Tozer has said: “Everything in the universe is good to the degree that it conforms to the glory of God and evil as it fails to do so.”ⁱⁱⁱ But it is *more* than this. That's what we discover as we ask another question...

Where Did Evil Come From?

When we read the opening chapter of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, we're left with the impression that all of creation is in the most ideal state of affairs. Genesis 1:31 says this: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” [That ought to make us feel like the kids in Willy Wonka running through a candy heaven saying, “Oh, look at this and look at that and taste this! God is good!”] But from there on out, everything is downhill. Man sins, the earth suffers, and everybody and everything is in need of salvation.

It's here, before we get past the first chapter of the Bible, that we have one of our biggest problems. If every creature God made is perfect (i.e. good), and perfect creatures don't do what is imperfect, then how do we explain evil? Where does evil come from? In other words: If God is

all good, He *could* not allow evil in a perfect world. And if God is all powerful, He *would* not allow evil in a perfect world. Or maybe God isn't all good and all-powerful after all?

Or maybe the answer lies in the idea of perfection itself. As our verse says, all that God made was good, i.e. perfect. And one of the perfect things that God made was *free* creatures (whether people or angels), able to choose between good and the opposite of good, i.e. evil. God could have created robots, preprogrammed to always make the right choice in conformity with God's perfect will. And yet what would be lacking is love. Where there is *not* the possibility of choice, there *cannot* be authentic love. Forced love is not love at all! In fact, "forced love is rape. And God is not a divine rapist."^{iv}

In creating perfect creatures with the possibility of choice, God "ran the risk" so to speak of making evil *possible*. But what made evil *actual*? In other words, what turned evil, which is the more abstract idea of the *opposite* of good, into sin, which is the more concrete idea of *opposition* to God?

The Bible tells us that, before creating man, God created a host of angels. Angels are God's servants, carrying out his will in the universe (Hebrews 1:7). We know from the New Testament that some of these angels, beginning with Satan, made the free choice to arrogantly rebel against God. Here's what Peter says:

God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment... 2 Peter 2:4.^v

Apart from several references like this, we know next to nothing about the initial choice of some angels to sin. What we *do* know is that Satan – *by his free choice* – was the first *cause* of evil in the universe, and you can't back up any further than that.

And Satan is just as active in the world today as when he made that first choice to arrogantly defy God. After I returned from Rwanda last year I read the book *Shake Hands with the Devil* by Roméo Dallaire, the Lt. General in charge of the UN peacekeeping forces in that country during the awful genocide of 1994 that resulted in the heinous massacre of nearly 1,000,000 people. In his book Dallaire says this:

I know there is a God because in Rwanda I shook hands with the devil. I have seen him, I have smelled him and I have touched him. I know the devil exists, and therefore I know there is a God. –Lt. Gen. Roméo Dallaire

Interesting way of reasoning! As we observe the creation around us, we see multiple signs of God's goodness. At the same time, as we observe the evil around us, we see evidences of Satan's existence.

Evil then is not only coming up short in relation to God's perfection, God's goodness. Evil is the *abuse of moral freedom*.^{vi} We were created as perfect creatures. But perfect creatures have the ability to choose. And both Satan and mankind *chose* mutiny, attempting to supplant God rather than submit to God.

What is the Purpose of Evil?

Maybe you say: Well, this helps me better understand why God allowed the *possibility* of evil, creating angels and mankind with the freedom to choose. But just what is the *purpose* of evil? And why doesn't God step in now and do something about it? After all, such suffering, pain, loss and grief seem so senseless. Put another way: If God is all-powerful and *could* do something and if God is all-good and seemingly *would* do something, why doesn't he put a halt to all this mess? In fact, evil seems to be intensifying? Just look at 9/11!

Some reason this way:

There is no good reason for much suffering.
An all-good God must have a good purpose for everything.
Therefore there can't be an all-good God.^{vii}

First, we must remember that God is not obligated to explain himself to you and me. Check out these verses from the Old Testament:

- It is the glory of God to conceal a matter. Proverbs 25:2
- Truly you are a God who hides himself. Isaiah 45:15
- The secret things belong to the Lord our God. Deuteronomy 29:29
- For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. Isaiah 55:8-9

This is an aspect of the Christian life that is not well advertised. We prefer to think in terms of the idea that the well-know gospel tract states: "God has a wonderful plan for your life." And that plan *is* wonderful, *when measured from the perspective of eternity*. But what we don't prefer to talk about is the intense and sometimes unexplained suffering that evil works in our lives in the here and now.

The Bible promises that someday things will become more clear to us. Paul says to the Corinthian believers: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

As I look back on why four young people in our church died in tragic accidents a couple of years ago in the short space of 15 months, I don't have the answer. But God does. As I stood a year ago this month at the memorial to the victims of the horrific Rwandan genocide that violently took the lives of 1,000,000 victims, I don't have the answer. But God does. I must not assume that because this side of eternity I don't *see* a wise purpose for evil and it's consequences that there isn't one.

On the other hand, in both the Bible and in our own lives, we do see *some* of the purposes of God allowing evil. Here's one example, from a verse that has been a great comfort to our family as we've grappled with the loss of our oldest child:

The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart;
devout men are taken away, and no one understands
that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. — Isaiah 57:1

In the Hebrew Bible, the word “righteous” stands at the very beginning of the verse. This emphasizes the irony of the fact that sometimes the righteous – those who have a right standing with God – die prematurely. Why? Isaiah gives us the rather novel but inspired response: “to be spared from evil.” Sometimes people experience evil (in this case, premature death) *in order to be spared from evil!* Sometimes God allows evil in order to accomplish a higher good. Sometimes God allows what he hates in order to accomplish what he loves.

There are many examples in the Bible where the experience of evil has brought about a higher good. How would Israel have survived famine and the cruel rule of an Egyptian Pharaoh if Joseph had not been sold by his brothers into slavery? Joseph’s words at the end of the story give the perspective that you and I should have: “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20). Or how could Job say, “When he has tested me, I will come forth as gold (Job 23:10),” if he did not pass through the crucible of suffering – even suffering caused by Satan himself?

What we do know is that, while we may not always understand the purpose of evil, its reality and its consequences are not outside the providential control of a good God. The prophet Amos asks: “When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?” (Amos 3:6). Of course, this is only a way of speaking. Amos knew full well that God may not have *directly* caused the disaster. But since an all-powerful and sovereign God is ultimately in control of everything, it follows that even evil and its destructive consequences are not outside the permissive plan of God.

However, the best answer to the question, “What is the purpose of evil?” is found at the cross where the very Son of God suffered and died. You ask, “Why doesn’t God do something? Where is God in all of this?” God is where he has always been since that infamous Good Friday when Jesus Christ experienced the brute force of satanic evil. At that moment, when God seemed most absent, he was more present than ever before.

We sang earlier these amazing words:

How deep the Father’s love for us,
How vast beyond all measure.
That He would give His only Son,
To make a wretch His treasure.

How great the pain of searing loss,
The Father turns His face away.
As wounds which mar the chosen One,
Bring many sons to glory.

Dorothy Sayers has said: “Whatever the answer to why there is evil and suffering in the world, this much is true: *God took his own medicine.*”^{viii} Jesus’ identification with you and me in sin and suffering is finally the *best* and *only* answer to the perplexities of evil in this world. When trouble is near and God is far (or at least, when he *seems* far away), look to the cross. Look to God the Son who invaded time and space, who identifies with you in the painful consequences of living in a fallen world, and remember that the final chapter has not yet been written. Or better, *it has been written*, we just haven’t experienced it yet. A better world is coming.

While the opening chapters of the Bible begin with Satan in the garden, the Bible ends with Satan tormented in the lake of fire. The Bible is very clear. Such eternal punishment was prepared for Satan and his demons (Matthew 25:41) – who *through the abuse of moral freedom* – initially brought evil into the universe. As for you, God desires all people to be saved (2 Peter 3:9). But He leaves each of us with a choice.

ⁱ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*.

ⁱⁱ Actually the terms “evil” and “sin” are to be distinguished. Evil is the rather abstract *opposite* of good as defined by God. Sin is the more concrete *opposition* to good as defined by God.

ⁱⁱⁱ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 36-37.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 73

^v Cf. Jude 6-7 “And the angels *who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home*-these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.”

^{vi} And the same was true for Adam and Eve and for you and me. *We* are the cause of our sin and bring upon ourselves the consequences of our sin (Deuteronomy 32:4, 5).

^{vii} *Op cite.*, 65.

^{viii} Dorothy Sayers, emphasis mine.