



Answering The Problem Of Evil

September 2006

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In order to not protect the guilty, I'll use his real name. It is Frank. Frank and I attended Bible College together.

Frank liked to discuss the sticky and difficult theological issues of the Christian faith. Often he would play "devil's advocate" and sometimes I couldn't tell if he was really arguing his perspective, or if he was simply trying to give me a run for my money in the discussion.

Frank loved to engage in "endless speculation." *Could God create a rock so big He couldn't lift it? Is it possible for God to create a square circle?"*

It was about four years after graduation that I ran into Frank again at a mutual friend's house near Calgary. Frank had spent the last couple years majoring in business at a secular university in Alberta. Only four years after graduation from Bible College, Frank had all but abandoned his Christian faith.

Summarizing his concerns as he expressed them to me: "Christianity has serious philosophical contradictions that it cannot answer. These contradictions render the Christian view of the world doubtful at best."

Reminiscent of my Bible College days, Frank and I stayed up late into the night arguing, debating, and reasoning together.

What are the serious philosophical concerns that caused a man with a Three Year Bible College Diploma to question and abandon his faith? Take heart friends, it is nothing that has not been raised before and adequately answered ages ago. Yet Frank's time spent

on the secular university campus listening to the daily barrage of attacks on the Christian worldview convinced him that Christianity was unable to give an answer for the **problem of evil**.

What's the Problem?

Simply stated, the problem is evil. Evil exists in our world. This fact (according to the atheist/skeptic) creates a problem for the Christian, since according to the Christian Scriptures, God is both infinitely and completely good and He is omnipotent (all powerful).

When the skeptic raises the challenge, it is usually stated something like this: *If God were really good He would **want** to get rid of all evil. If God were really powerful, He would be **able** to get rid of all evil. Since evil exists, God is either not good, not powerful, or both.*

In other words, since evil exists, God either doesn't **want** to get rid of all evil or He isn't **able** to get rid of all evil. If He doesn't want to get rid of evil, He is not good and therefore the Christian view on the nature of God is wrong. If He simply can't deal with evil, then God is not powerful, in which case the Christian view on the nature of God is wrong. This is the philosophical contradiction just as Frank stated it to me.

The problem touches us emotionally when the skeptic begins to recount all the bad things that happen to good people around the world. They cry, "Where is God when an earthquake takes 10,000 lives in Mexico?" or, "Why doesn't God do something about the starving children and diseased infants dying in jungles and deserts across the globe?" For some it is personal,

“How can I believe in your God when my little niece died a horribly painful death from a terminal disease when she was only nine years old?”

Are not these things evil? Can't God stop a Hitler, or does He just not want to? Can't God stop the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Darfur, or does He just not want to?

Evil and Moral Absolutes

The presence of evil in our world does not prove that God does not exist. In fact, the presence of evil **actually implies that there is an objective moral absolute.**

If God does not exist, then there are no moral standards. Every man can do what is right in his own eyes. If morals are relative to the individual or the situation, then there is no right and there is no wrong.

If there is no Absolute Moral Lawgiver, then there is no such thing as evil. Without a Moral Absolute [i.e. God], *there can be no evil*. Did you catch that? How can you say that Hitler is evil, or that torturing babies for pleasure is morally wrong and that the person who commits such an act is a monster? You can't.

If there is no objective moral lawgiver [God] then there is no objective moral law. If there is no objective moral law then there is nothing that is good. If there is nothing that is good, then there is nothing that is evil. Any objection to the existence of God that raises the problem of evil, must assume an objective standard of good by which evil may be measured. The atheist has no basis upon which to insist that something is **evil** unless he wants to concede that there is a standard that defines what is **good**.

Imagine for a moment a universe in which there was no light and in which creatures had no eyes. Then imagine the creature complaining about the darkness! You would rightly reply, “What darkness?” In such a universe, the word “dark” would have no meaning. Unless there existed a light, by which one could know there was such a thing as darkness, *darkness would be without meaning.*¹

Evil is not a thing in itself. Evil is not a force, a person, or a thing. Evil is the absence of something else. Evil is the absence of good. Like darkness is the

absence of light or like a donut hole is the absence of donut.

Simply put: we cannot know evil apart from comparing it to good any more than we can know darkness without being familiar with light. We can only know that a line is crooked if we have some concept of straight. If God does not exist, there is no good, therefore nothing can be called “evil” in any meaningful sense. The atheist has no valid objection. The only person who can intelligibly raise the issue of evil is the theist, not the atheist!

Getting Back to the Problem

For the moment, let's lay aside the atheist's inconsistency and deal with the problem of evil from the theistic perspective. We know that God does exist and that evil is real. How do we account for this? Is it because God is good but not omnipotent, or is it because God is omnipotent but not good? Even more to the point, *are we really forced to choose between those two options?*

Kushner's God

In 1981 a best-selling book swept the nation. Rabbi Harold Kushner's book titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* attempted to make sense out of the tragedy around us that seems to strike indiscriminately.

Over ten years ago, my own great-uncle lay dying in a hospital bed from aggressive brain cancer. During those difficult days some of my family members sought solace in Kushner's counsel.

Kushner turned to the book of Job and concluded that the author of the book of Job, “*forced to choose between a good God who is not totally powerful, or a powerful God who is not totally good. . . chooses to believe in God's goodness.*”²

Kushner cannot bring himself to deny God's goodness, so it must be that God **can't** get rid of evil. In fact, Kushner's view of the teaching of Job is that “*God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even He can't bring that about. It is too*

1 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1960, paperback), p. 45.

2 As quoted in *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts* by Jerry Bridges (Colorado Springs: Navpress), p. 23.

*difficult even for god to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims.*³

Kushner's solution is no solution at all. He offers a weak, impotent, helpless god who certainly cannot be trusted or relied upon. Rather than presenting God in all of His majestic, sovereign, wise, and good providence, Kushner seeks to offer comfort by giving you a weak god who wants desperately to help, but cannot. Kushner's god must sit on the sidelines and weep with you at his creation run amuck. Kushner's cure is worse than the disease.

The Typical Answer

Christians who are reluctant to compromise either God's goodness or His power have typically offered a second alternative. The answer most commonly given is that *even an all-powerful God cannot create a genuinely free being unless He provided the being with the chance to misuse that freedom. God's highest goal in creation was the making of creatures that would freely give their love to Him by deliberate choice.*⁴

In other words, God did not want to create robots that were forced to love Him because they had no other choice. He wanted to create creatures who would offer love and worship as a deliberate choice. In order for that choice to be a valid one, God *had to create* a world in which evil was a genuine possibility.

According to this answer, real moral freedom requires at least the potential for the commission of a moral evil. If the possibility to choose evil does not exist, then neither does genuine moral freedom. Without genuine moral freedom, love that is offered from such a creature is forced, incomplete, and in some way defective.

This answer may be somewhat helpful to some and maybe even satisfying, but I find it unhelpful, unsatisfying, and even contradictory.

A couple questions will suffice to show how this answer doesn't quite suffice.

First, will we be capable of sinning in heaven?

The answer is a resounding no! In heaven we will be

confirmed in holiness, blameless, and perfect (**Jude 24**). There will not enter into heaven anything that defiles it (**Rev. 21:27**). We will be removed from the presence of sin and sin will be done away with. There will be no evil and no possibility for evil to be committed. *We will not be capable of sin in heaven.*

The second question is, does this mean that we will not have genuine freedom in heaven? In other words, if I can't sin in heaven, how can my love and worship offered to God be meaningful since I won't be able to do otherwise? Are we just going to be robots?

If real moral freedom is incompatible with inability to sin, then we won't have real moral freedom in heaven. This means that Adam and Eve's real moral freedom on earth allowed them to offer worship that was more preferred than that which would come from a creature who could not sin. Their worship was better and more preferable than ours offered from glory. Adam and Eve were able to do something on earth that we will be incapable of doing from heaven, namely offering God love as a deliberate choice rather than offering love from an environment or condition where we couldn't do otherwise.

David Clotfelter states it well when he says that we will be *"brought beyond even the possibility of sin. But if that is possible in heaven, then why was it not possible in the garden? How can it be that God is able to keep countless millions of redeemed human beings and unfallen angels in an eternally holy state in heaven without violating their freedom, but He was incapable of doing the same for Adam and Even in Eden?"*

In the words of Jonathan Edwards, *"Objectors to the doctrine of election may say, God cannot always preserve men from sinning, unless he destroys their liberty. But will they deny that an omnipotent, an infinitely wise God, could possibly invent and set before men such strong motives to obedience, and keep them before them in such a manner, as should influence them to continue in their obedience, as the elect angels have done, without destroying their liberty? God will order it so that the saints and angels in heaven never will sin, and does it therefore follow that their liberty is destroyed, and that they are not free, but forced in their actions?"*⁵

³ Ibid.

⁴ David Clotfelter, *Sinners in the Hands of a Good God* (Chicago: Moody Publishers), p. 41

⁵ Ibid., pg. 48, footnote 13.

I would argue that it was possible for God to create an environment in Eden in which sin was impossible and in which Adam and Eve would have been incapable of falling and sinning, without doing violence to their will or their moral freedom. Love, adoration, and worship offered in heaven by the redeemed will be offered willingly from free moral creatures. These actions will not be forced. Yet sin will not be a possibility. This fact renders the typical response to the problem of evil incomplete **since moral freedom is not incompatible with inability to sin.**

A Biblical Answer

I believe that it was possible for God to create a universe in which free creatures could offer meaningful obedience and worship and yet be incapable of sinning. The fact is that God did not create such a universe. The fall of man did not take God by surprise and He certainly did not lack the power to prevent it. So the question really is, why did God create a universe in which evil was (by His decree) allowed to exist?

Let's ask the question a different way: what is the **end for which God created the world?** God certainly did not create out of need (**Acts 17:25**). He didn't need the worship and love of His creatures. God is the center of the universe. He is infinitely worthy of all love, honor, praise, and glory. It is right and proper for His creatures to love Him above all else. It is also proper for God to love Himself above all things. If God loved some part of the universe above Himself, we would rightly consider Him an idolater. It is right for God to not share His glory with another (**Isa. 42:8**), and it is idolatry for God to act in any way other than to express, display, and highlight His own glory. God's righteousness consists in His acting in accordance with truth. The truth is that He is of infinitely greater worth than any created thing, or all created things combined.

So then, all that God does, He does **for His own glory**. He does not act chiefly out of regard for the creature, but out of regard for **His own glory**. The more His attributes and character are displayed, the more He is glorified. *God's highest goal in creation was not making creatures that would freely give their love to Him by deliberate choice, **rather His highest goal was the display of His own glory.***

So then, is it not possible, that a universe in which sin has existed contributes more to God's glory than a universe in which sin had never existed?

The universe exists to display God's glory. The full expression of God's glory requires the revelation of all aspects of God's character. Therefore, not only must the love, mercy, and grace of God be fully revealed, but also, His wrath against sin, His justice, and His holiness. *In short, a universe in which sin had never been allowed, or one in which no sinners were justly punished for their sins, would be a poorer universe, because it would be one in which God's character was less fully exhibited.*⁶

To put it simply: the full expression of the glory of God requires the full revelation of **all** His character. The full revelation of **all** His character is only made possible in a universe in which sin has been allowed to hold temporary sway. In the end, in the long run, a universe that has fallen and been redeemed will be a richer universe and contribute more to God's glory than a universe that had never fallen at all.

Because of the fall, because of sin, God is able to display not only His love, mercy, and grace, but also his justice, holiness, and righteous indignation against sin. **In the long run, the fall of this universe, the redemption of some sinners and eternal judgment upon others will glorify God MORE than a universe in which sin was never allowed temporary reign.**

This answer to the problem of evil is not new. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) developed this in his treatise, *The End for Which God Created the World*. Edwards expanded upon St. Augustine's (354-430 AD) thoughts. In his great work, *The City of God* Augustine wrote, "*The human race is so apportioned that in some is displayed the efficacy of merciful grace, in the rest the efficacy of just retribution. For both could not be displayed in all; for if all had remained under the punishment of just condemnation, there would have been seen in no one the mercy of redeeming grace. And, on the other hand, if all had been transferred from darkness to light, the severity of retribution would have been manifested in none.*"⁷

⁶ Ibid., p 242-243.

⁷ Ibid.

Does the existence of evil show that God is either not good, not omnipotent, or both? No. Since God **is good** He will manifest His glory to the greatest degree possible. Since God **is omnipotent**, He will ultimately triumph over sin and in doing so, infinitely display His glory. God had the power to prevent sin, but if He did, it would have minimized the display of His glory, which would not have accomplished the most good. The display of His glory is the ultimate good. The existence of evil will accomplish the maximum display of His glory, therefore, it is **because** God is good that He has allowed evil to hold temporary sway.

I have to say with Paul, *“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! . . . For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”*
(Romans 11:33,36)

Without Wax -

