

The Problem of Evil and Suffering

By
Patrick Zukeran

I have sat with friends in hospital rooms grieving over the loss of a loved one as the result of a tragic accident or criminal act. There is little one can say in these situations. Often I feel helpless as I watch and share in the pain of the individuals involved. Inevitably at times like these they struggle with questions such as “How can God let something like this happen?” “Does He care?” “Why is there suffering and evil in the world?” or “Is there any hope for our suffering?” Studying and wrestling with this issue has led me to conclude that Christianity is the only system that can offer a reasonable explanation for evil and a message of hope in the midst of suffering.

The Different Worldviews and Evil

The religions that embrace a pantheist worldview teach that all reality is reduced to what Hindus call Brahma or the divine. “This reality – Brahma – alone exists; it is the sole reality, and there are no distinctions. Everything else is illusory. This Ultimate Reality has no personality; it is impersonal and beyond description.”¹

Because of the belief in monism where all is one and the premise that besides Brahma all is an illusion, evil also is an illusion. There is ultimately no distinction between good or evil. Cruelty and compassion are not ultimately different. Monism not only destroys any moral law code but also eliminates an individual’s responsibility to do right and stand against wrong.²

Our reasoning, intuition, and experience indicate that the world is not an illusion and there is a real distinction between good and evil. Why should we believe the monist notion that the world is an illusion when it goes against our experience and intuition? Monist narrowly base their conclusions on their own individual experiences. Therefore pantheism and the religions built on this worldview cannot offer any reasonable explanation for evil, nor can they offer any kind of hope for those experiencing the suffering that comes from evil.

The naturalist or atheist runs into a more difficult problem. In order to identify something as objectively evil, there must be an external perfect standard of good. How can we say it is wrong for anyone to torture and murder babies for amusement if there is no moral law that stands above every individual? A universal moral law points to a moral lawgiver. We identify this lawgiver as God. If there is no universal objective moral standard, all we have are subjective opinions. It would be impossible to define an act as evil.

However, our intuition helps us to sense what is evil and expects individuals to be responsible for their actions. When the two airline jets hit the World Trade Towers, we

¹ Paul Copan, *That’s Just Your Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2001), 50.

² *Ibid.*, 55.

were angered and demanded the men behind the acts of terror be brought to justice. Our reactions show that we are able to perceive what is good and evil and that we hold all men accountable to a universal moral law code.

Even though the other worldviews do not offer a reasonable explanation for the problem of evil, the Christian must still provide an explanation. The problem of evil and suffering is one of the toughest question a Christian must answer. If God exists, what accounts for all the evil in the world? If we have a God who is good, loving, and sovereign, how do we account for evil, a force contrary to His nature? In dealing with this challenge, we must address two aspects of the issue, the philosophical problem of evil and the personal problem of evil. The philosophical aspect addresses the question, "Does the existence of evil argue against the existence of God?" The personal aspect deals with the struggles that come when an individual experiences evil and suffering.

The Philosophical Problem of Evil

Let us begin by affirming the character of God as revealed in the Bible. God is morally good; He is just, loving, and sovereign over all creation. Evil is contrary to the nature of God, in fact He abhors it. The paradigm used to argue against the existence of God follows this logic:

- An all-powerful God could destroy evil
- An all-loving God would destroy evil
- Evil is not destroyed
- An all-loving and all-powerful God therefore does not exist

Nevertheless, the question of evil presupposes God exists. How do we know what evil is unless there is an objective moral standard of good by which to measure it by? If there is a universal moral law by which we can identify objective acts of evil, it implies there is an ultimate standard of good. We interpret this ultimate good to be God.

C.S. Lewis in his struggle realized this when he said, "As an atheist, my argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?"

The question of evil implies a universal and external standard of good. A universal moral law implies a moral lawgiver.

The Origin of Evil

If God was as caring and omnipotent as the Bible says, then why is there still pain in the world? In order to get a satisfactory answer, we must understand the origin of evil. God in His great love created man in His image. This means He created man to reflect some of the moral attributes of God. Part of being made in the image of God means man has the capacity to love and possesses a free will. Free will allows man to be the only creature that can have a love relationship with God.

It is impossible for love to exist without free will. Love is not love if it is forced upon someone. In a relationship of love, the other being must exercise their free will and

choose to enter into the relationship. Out of love, God created man with the capacity to exercise his free will and choose to obey or disobey Him. Yet with freedom there also exists the capacity for evil.

For example, let's say I give one of my students the keys to my car and ask, "Could you go and pick us up a pizza?" Giving him this freedom is not evil. However, he can use his freedom for evil. He can obey my wishes or he can choose to go drag racing on the interstate freeway. Freedom creates the potential for evil. Adam, in his freedom chose to disobey God. Thus sin entered into the world. That event was the origin of evil. So God created a world in which there was the potential for evil. However, it was man who actualized evil.

God initially created humans as morally perfect beings. This means man must be able to perform the greatest act of good, which is to love. However, it is impossible to enter into a love relationship without the freedom to choose. Man had the freedom to choose good but that freedom also allowed for the possibility to choose the option of disobedience. This is a risk God knew and willingly took when He created man.

Why Does God Allow Evil to Exist?

The next question is, why does God allow evil? Does that negate His sovereignty? Though God may allow evil to exist, this does not mean He is not in control. God permits evil to persist and in His sovereignty uses evil to accomplish His purpose. Often in the Bible, where evil once appeared triumphant, God turned it around to be a victory for His almighty plan.

In Genesis 37 Joseph is betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt. Despite this evil act, God used it to bring about His purpose in shaping the character of Joseph to be a future ruler who would preserve the nation of Israel during a famine. In the end, Joseph saw how God used this apparent tragedy to bring about His purpose. He states in Genesis 50:19–21 to his brothers, "Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." God overcame evil and accomplished His purpose.

The cross is the greatest illustration of good coming from evil. Evil seemed to have prevailed when a disciple of the Lord Jesus betrays Him, the religious rulers falsely accuse Him, and the soldiers beat Him for hours. After suffering the cruel torture of crucifixion, Jesus tastes the painful death of separation from His Father. Yet this tragic event falls right into the plan of God to bring salvation to men who trust Jesus as Lord and Savior. Consequently, God maintains His sovereignty in allowing evil to exist in order to fulfill His purpose.

Since we are not infinite and omniscient like God, we cannot always know the purpose of every event that occurs. Although we may not be able to perceive any good resulting from a tragedy, we can trust that God's perspective involves the big picture and that He is providentially working all things for good.

Will God always allow evil to exist? No. God will allow evil to exist until He has fulfilled His purpose and then He will destroy evil. Why? Simply because of His grace. 2 Peter 3:9 states, "The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." In other words, God withholds the destruction of evil so that more who are

opposed to God can turn and receive His grace. I am glad God did not destroy evil in 1980. If He did, I would be in hell, eternally separated from Him today.

God's grace and mercy will not extend indefinitely. One day He will execute His justice and bring evil to an end.

A New Paradigm

The argument that rejects God because of the existence of evil makes a false presumption. Despite the fact that evil is not yet defeated, this condition will not always remain. Though God has not removed evil today, it does not mean that He never will. If we take into account that the final chapter of God's dealing with mankind is still incomplete, the new paradigm is the following:

- God is all-powerful and can defeat evil
- God is loving and will defeat evil
- Evil is not yet defeated
- God can and will defeat evil at a future time

The existence of evil does not argue against the existence of God. God is presently using evil to accomplish His purpose as He waits patiently for more to receive His gift of grace. We must also wait and trust that He will bring all things to a final conclusion according to His perfect timing and plan.

The Personal Problem of Evil

The philosophical problem of evil answers the intellectual challenge. For those who have experienced the cruelty of evil, we try to offer answers that can bring healing, peace, and strength. However, only God's Word can truly provide hope. There are no easy solutions or quick fixes that will instantly remove the pain one feels in such times. Even the great Christians suffered and wrestled with this issue. Yet of all the worldviews, I believe the Christian worldview offers the most meaningful and true explanations.

How does the Christian face the pain of suffering that comes from experiencing evil? First, it is important to understand that we live in a fallen world that is suffering the consequences of sin. Man in his freedom, has chosen to turn away, seeking to live life with no regard for God or His laws. In His grace, God does not impose His will on humans and has allowed individuals to temporarily go their own way. The Apostle John writes in 1 John 2:15-16,

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in Him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world.”

John is not stating here that we are not to love the people in the world. He is saying the system of the world is in rebellion to God. Because we live in this fallen world, we are not immune to its effects.

Secondly, the verse from John goes on to state, “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:17). Although we may now live in a fallen world and must endure the effects of evil, this will not always be the case. One day, God will bring an end to all evil and suffering. The pain we bear now reminds us of our need to depend on God and not ourselves for ultimate hope and to desire the day when He will restore all things. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:17, “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond comparison.” Promises like these bring us hope even in the face of disheartening situations.

Thirdly, we draw comfort from knowing God understands our suffering and cares for our situation. God understands because He endured the greatest pain on the cross. He cares deeply about us especially in our moments of suffering. 1 Peter 5:7 affirms, “Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.” God never abandons His people and wants us to draw near to Him in our time of need.

Fourthly, God remains in control of all things and He is at work in every situation. He has a purpose for our life that is always for His glory and our good. Romans 8:28 states, “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.” No matter how bad the situation may seem, God is working in ways we often cannot see or understand.

Fifthly, a Christian receives strength from God’s presence. He has promised never to abandon His people, even in the worst of times. Romans 8:38 states,

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Lastly, there are valuable lessons to be learned from suffering. God will sometimes use evil to warn us and deter us from greater evils. In my teenage years, I got into a minor fender bender shortly after receiving my driver’s license. That experience created a healthy fear in me and has kept me from the greater evil of reckless driving.

There are some lessons we can only learn through our times of pain. As a high school and collegiate athlete, I endured the pain of training and repeated practice sessions. I knew that it was necessary to make me a better athlete. I would not be able to strengthen my body or increase my skill without the pain.

Trials do the same for us in regard to developing our character. The metal of a person’s character is tested, refined, and sharpened only when put through the fire of difficult trials. 1 Peter 1:6-9 states,

“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

People of great moral integrity who have touched our world in significant ways endured some of the most difficult and painful experiences of life. The world has been

inspired because Joni Erickson Tada, a quadriplegic, has motivated us to overcome our handicaps and live sacrificially for God and others. Corrie Ten Boom, Victor Frankel, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's works have impacted the lives of millions because they persevered and overcame the horror of Nazi tyranny. Abraham Lincoln endured many hardships, the death of his mother at a young age, the death of three of his four children among other tragedies. Nevertheless these very circumstances made him a man of renowned moral character and courage. As a result of these people sharing their pain, we have much a greater depth of understanding of love, courage, faith, and character. This helps us become men and women of stronger character. For this reason James writes,

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”
(James 1:2-3)

In the context of a relationship with God, our suffering is hence not in vain as there is always a purpose for everything. We cannot dispel the pain we experience, but we can overcome it through the power of Christ. We can draw comfort from knowing God cares for us as we receive strength from His presence. We have hope knowing there is a reason for our suffering and that one day, God will defeat evil and bring an everlasting dominion of peace and justice. We will either go to be with the Lord at our death or He will return and establish His kingdom forever. Either way, the Christian is victorious.