

The Problem of Evil

Multiple Passages

by Pastor Bill Farrow

One of the most common excuses given by those who reject the God of the Bible is the issue of evil in the world. Skeptics and theological liberals ask, “How can the God portrayed in the Bible as good, holy, and loving allow massive injustices and evil in the world?” Some ask, “How can an all-powerful God be loving *and* tolerate all of the effects of evil which inflict so much suffering around the world?” In fact, many skeptics and theological liberals believe this dilemma backs Christians into an impossible position.

Their argument boils down a simplistic syllogism: “The biblical God is a loving, benevolent, holy, all-knowing, all-wise, and omnipotent Sovereign who created everything in the universe. If such a God exists, everything should be perfect and good.

*“But it is evident that there is much evil in the world. Therefore,”
they say, “the biblical God does not exist.”*

But does the presence of evil truly disprove the God of the Bible? Is that really all it takes to upend biblical Christianity?

In reality, the syllogism shows no understanding of what Scripture teaches about evil. The only thing it actually proves is that the person making the argument hasn’t read much of the Bible—or simply doesn’t recognize the authority of God’s Word.

Nevertheless, many evangelical Christians are stymied by arguments like that. They think of the problem of evil as a “fourth and forty on the ten-yard line” (to borrow an expression from gridiron football). They believe the only good option available to them is to punt—to kick the argument as far away as possible. They might quote Deuteronomy 29:29, which says, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God.”

But is a cowering appeal to mystery really a sound biblical answer to the problem of evil?

It’s not a good answer at all. In fact, to give an answer like that is to forfeit a wonderful opportunity for explaining the gospel. The existence of evil is not an issue that should put Christians on their heels. The answer to why God allows evil in the world is in the Bible. We can know it, we can thoroughly embrace it, and we can enjoy it. It’s not an inadequate short answer, either. It fully accounts for God’s benevolence, His omnipotence, His holiness, and His wisdom. And it exalts His glory. In fact, the answer to the problem of evil begins and ends with God and His glory.

This branch of theology is called “theodicy.” The term is derived from two Greek words: *theos*, meaning “God”; and *dikaio*, an expression that can mean either justification or righteousness. Theodicy is a defense of God’s righteousness in light of the reality that evil exists in the universe He created.

Within this realm, there are five popular solutions to the problem of evil.

I. *Make a New God*

Theological liberalism tries to rescue God from what they believe is a bad caricature of Him in the Bible. They basically just deny what the Bible says about God and offer their own version of a more true and benign deity. This new god is assembled like a cardboard doll held together with brads, from scraps of their own personality and preferences, then colored to reflect whatever values and morals are important to them. In short, they make a god in their own image.

II. *Make God Imperfect*

Others, like *Process theologians*, insist that evil proves God Himself is imperfect. They argue that His knowledge and power must be limited in some way. They postulate that He is “in process”—getting better as He gets more information.

III. *Make God Ignorant*

In the same way, *Open Theism* limits God’s knowledge. Open theists surmise that the future must be unknown to God—“open” in the sense that it’s full of possibilities but unknowable because it hasn’t happened yet. The best their god can do is predict the possible outcomes, wait to see what occurs, and respond accordingly. They have essentially created a god without omniscience, whose excuse for evil is his own ignorance.

The common thread across all those aberrant brands of theology is their man-centeredness—their determination that God’s nature cannot and must not offend human sensibilities. Their God must fit within their own presuppositions and preferences. They want to determine who God is and what He is like rather than believing what He has revealed about Himself. They have in effect set themselves above God.

IV. *Make Evil Necessary*

Another common wrong answer to the problem of evil is metaphysical theodicy, which says good exists, therefore evil must exist, because the fact of anything necessarily posits its opposite. Evil is therefore inevitable just because good is a reality, and every yin must have its yang. This is basically a modern version of Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism—two ancient dualistic heresies which taught that two co-eternal independent realities, good and evil, are always present. In other words, they believe good and evil are equally ultimate. But according to Scripture, evil is not an eternal reality. It did not exist at all until God’s creatures rebelled against their Creator. Furthermore, in the end, evil will be overthrown and eliminated, so the eternity to come will be evil-free. You can’t affirm that aspect of biblical theology if you embrace metaphysical theodicy.

V. *Make Free Will Supreme*

The next category of theodicy, the most popular among evangelicals today, is autonomy. Autonomous theodicy teaches that the cause of evil is the abuse of creaturely free will. This is a very sentimental approach. It begins with the assumption that God would never willingly ordain evil, decreeing a plan for His creation that unleashes so much misery into His universe. They also imagine, evidently, that human free will trumps everything else on God's scale of values, so they often suggest that God had to allow for the possibility of evil in order to protect His creatures' highly-prized autonomy. The idea is sometimes articulated this way: "God wants you to love Him all on your own, not because He made you love Him." A God who would willingly permit evil or sovereignly choose whom to save is a God that some people just can't live with, so they reinvent Him to reflect their own priorities—in this case, that means an emphasis on the nobility and value of their own free will that frankly is found nowhere in the Bible.

Perhaps the most obvious problem with the human-autonomy argument is that it solves none of the problems theodicy supposedly addresses. Human autonomy, even if true, wouldn't really vindicate God by the standard this view uses as its starting point. Nor does human autonomy really answer the objections people raise against the doctrine of divine sovereignty. Because if God knew in advance that His creatures would sin, He set the plan in motion anyway. All the evil, divine judgment, and determination of eternal punishment were thereby ordained by *His* choice, because He set these events in motion with full knowledge of the consequences.

So all those different kinds of theodicy are fatally flawed, shortsighted answers. If God has limited power or doesn't have complete knowledge, the universe is out of control at the most crucial point. And if God is not truly omniscient, how can anyone know for certain whether He will ever accumulate the knowledge He needs to curb the effects of evil and conquer it once and for all? Why would anyone prefer a God trying to get control of evil rather than a God completely in control of it? It's heresy to say the world is full of evil apart from a predetermined plan and purpose of God.

The same goes for most of the answers to the problem of evil—they fail because they attempt to reconcile the truth about God and the existence of evil to the satisfaction of the unbelieving world. They're too focused on rounding off the sharp edges of biblical truth in order to accommodate philosophies and world-views that are openly hostile to God and His Word—to conform God's goodness and power to the boundaries and limitations of the unilluminated mind (cf., 1 Corinthians [1:18](#); [2:14](#)).

That's no way to answer the problem of evil. Instead, in the days ahead we'll look to God's Word to explain—not accommodate—the presence of evil in the world, and how it relates to God's sovereign authority over His creation.