

The Problem of Evil

Why would a loving God just stand by and watch this happen?

Such heart-wrenching questions have confronted pastors, priests, and rabbis throughout history. The question may be asked at the graveside of a child, in the aftermath of war, while sifting through the wreckage of floods, fires, or earthquakes, or in doctors' offices. Whatever the circumstance, few questions test faith more severely.

Classically and formally, the "problem of evil" was first expressed as a syllogism by Epicurus:

1. If an all-good and all-loving God exists, He would want to remove evil from the world.
2. If an all-powerful God exists, He would be able to remove evil from the world.
3. Evil exists.
4. Therefore, it seems that an all-good, all-powerful God does not exist.

Philosophers like J.L. Mackie ("Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind, New Series*, Vol. 64, No. 254. (Apr., 1955), pp. 200-212.) have carried the Epicurian argument into the modern age. He argues that it is logically incoherent to hold simultaneously that God is omnipotent, God is omnibenevolent, and that evil exists. While modern theologians and Christian philosophers have provided a suite of rebuttals--which we will survey here--the heart of the problem is not principally an intellectual one. One might play the armchair philosopher and intellectually conceive of an omnibenevolent omnipotent God having a reason to allow suffering. The problem is most strongly expressed not in syllogisms, but in sobs. The intellect is insufficient when the heart is broken. We'll first address the mind, then the heart

Questioning Assumptions

The classic Epicurean syllogism makes assumptions about God in statements 1 and 2 that it then uses to hang classical theism. It asserts that, if God is all-good and all-loving, He would want to remove evil from the world. We are meant to read this quickly and uncritically, but there are at least several qualifications to this statement that can and should be made.

Does God desire to remove evil from the world? If so, how does He desire to remove it? When does He desire to remove it? Why does He desire to remove it? Is it at all possible that evil, at least in the present, serves some purpose to this all-good and all-loving God? These questions ought to at least be considered.

Christianity definitely believes that God desires to remove evil from the world. In fact, a favorite summary of all of the Bible is as a story of "Creation, Fall, and Redemption." Genesis 1 and 2 provide the first act of cosmic history--a perfect, sinless, painless universe in which God and man are in perfect communion. Genesis 3 represents act 2--it is all ruined by the freewill act of God's greatest creation, humankind. From that moment on, God has been about the redemption of His good creation. Act 3, then, begins at Genesis 3:15 and represents 99.75% of the written revelation of God to us. God is about setting right the evil that we brought upon Him and His handiwork. Does God want to remove this evil? He most certainly does!

It is important, however, to understand the nuance of this divine intention. Given that God wants to annihilate evil, He has an infinite number of methods He might undertake to do so. He is omnipotent, after all (but more on that later). In the seconds after the fall of humanity, He might have simply judiciously undone the choice of Adam. He could have willed Adam and Eve

to cease existing and replaced them with Ralph and Margaret, humanity block 2, and wired them slightly differently. He might have been more like the god of Islam and simply chosen to forgive out of his mercy and moved on with time and eternity without needing justice. He might have done any number of things, and we must believe that multiple options lay before his omniscient mind. In the end, He chose the history of the world that our race has experienced. We ought to at least wonder why.

He chose not to immediately remove evil, although this was certainly an option before Him. What purpose could there be to give evil a season of existence in the initially (and ultimately) good creation of God before He redeems it, eons later? Many philosophers and theologians have posited answers that have convinced different segments of inquirers throughout history, but ultimately, it is the position of this article that the best answer lies in God's desire to reveal Himself fully to His creation. To help illustrate this, please allow a brief analogy.

Imagine an all-white rabbit. It has beautiful, soft white fur. Its skin is white. Its nails are white, and even (impossibly) its eyes are white. There is no non-white pigment whatsoever anywhere on it. If this white rabbit were to step out onto freshly fallen snow in bright sunlight, it would be utterly invisible to the observer. That would be fantastic if it wanted to be unobserved by predators, but what if it wanted to be known? The unspotted appearance of this creature and the pristine setting in which it finds itself would utterly frustrate its desire to be found, handled, and in relationship.

Now imagine that this same perfectly white rabbit were to hop out of pristine snow and into a patch of dirt, where the soil shows through. It would immediately be able to be discovered and seen for what it is.

In the same way, Adam and Eve knew some of the attributes of God in the garden, but much more of His nature has been perceptible as a contrast against the sinful background of the world that Adam's evil introduced. Given the reality of sin, God has chosen to reveal His nature most fully through contrast, though neither His attributes nor His self-revelation depend upon evil.

God's holiness is best shown as a contrast to our depravity. God's mercy can only be shown when we, undeserving sinners, are its object. God's grace can only be expressed when it gives us time to repent. God's long-suffering patience is only revealed in a relationship with stubborn rebellion. God's love is most clearly proclaimed when it loves the unregenerate toward repentance. Even God's justice and wrath are only able to be shown when they are unleashed rightly against the wickedness of fallen mankind. How would we have known these attributes in their fullness if not for the stain that Adam's sin cast upon the perfection of God's original design?

It is at least possible, then, that an all-good and all-loving God desires to remove evil but permits its existence for a season out of His goodness and love--or at least so that His goodness and love might be more fully known. This will be developed more fully below.

Second, is it true that an all-powerful God would be able to remove evil? Certainly, it seems like the answer has to be "yes," otherwise, He would not be all-powerful. However, there are some limitations, even on an all-powerful being. Some potential actions are impossible not because God is unable but because they are self-excluded by God's nature or by logic. For example, it is "impossible for God to lie" (Heb 6:18), not because God is unable to form untrue words but

because His nature will not allow it. He doesn't lack the ability. He simply won't do it because it would violate who He is. Is removing evil by a fiat action something like God lying? Perhaps.

In the lying example, an attribute of who God is limits His free will choices, not a lack of ability. Similarly, God's goodness would seem to compel Him to remove evil, but this action might be restrained not by his ability but by some other one of His attributes. Which of those attributes might that be? Certainly, holiness and justice would urge Him to annihilate evil. What might modify His plan?

Perfection. Glory. Love. Mercy.

When Adam and Eve were created, they were made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6). Just as pagan religions put an idol, an image of a false god in a temple to reflect and represent their idea of god, the true and living God set mankind as His image and reflection in the created world, all of which was meant as a temple to Himself. We are designed to point one another and all of creation to worship God, reflected in ourselves. In that original sense, we were meant to reflect the goodness and glory of God to one another.

When Adam rebelled against his Maker and brought ruin upon us all, he marred that image. We are all now distorted images of our God, but the image has not ceased to be carried within us. It is only dimmed. Adam did not cease to be the image of God completely. He simply became a dirty and broken one.

If God had done away with Adam and Eve and replaced them with Ralph and Margaret, which He could have theoretically done, He would have failed in His declared purpose of making an image-bearer. He declared, in Genesis 1:26-27, that He would make mankind in His image to have dominion. If he had folded up that project and gone with block 2, He would have failed to accomplish his declaration. God cannot fail. Having freely decreed to create and endow humanity with His image, God bound Himself by His own faithful nature to redeem rather than replace Adam.

He had set His glory upon mankind. He could not destroy it. He had to preserve it.

He had set his love upon mankind. He could not violate it. He had to maintain it.

While mankind willfully became an object of divine wrath, God chose not to destroy the archetype (Adam and Eve). Rather, He chose to endure for generations of sinful men the evil of their actions so that He might show His compassion, grace, and mercy to some who turned to Him in faith while allowing others to suffer the consequences of their sinfulness in judgment (Rom 9:22-24).

God's holiness, justice, and moral perfection demand that He punish sin. His love, compassion, mercy, and glory compel Him to do it a particular way. That particular way involved millennia of patience, revelation, guidance, and ultimately self-sacrificial love.

So, can an all-powerful God remove evil? Yes, but in keeping with His other attributes, and that requires time, process, and Calvary. He could not leave sin unpunished. He could not obliterate His image bearers, so He did what only God could do--He stood in the way of His own wrath as Philippians 2:5-9 so beautifully describes:

“5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. “

This solution is what only an all-powerful and all-loving God could do.

The Glory of God Theodicy

Having therefore shown that the Epicurian syllogism that lies at the heart of the argument for the non-existence of God from the presence of evil assumes too much and therefore fails to prove its conclusion, we will now build a more robust theological and philosophical defense for the God of the Bible vis-a-vis the presence and persistence of evil.

Any attempt to answer the problem of evil, as this paper does, is called a “theodicy” in the philosophy of religion. This term is derived (originally by the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz in 1710) from the Greek words for God (theos) and justice (dike). A theodicy then answers the question, “How is God just, given the evil around us?”

Thinkers from Augustine and Plantinga to Hick, Lewis, and Leibniz have each emphasized different facets—free will, soul-making, the goodness of creation, and final restoration. All of these arguments have merit and assist in providing various layers and nuance in addressing the co-existence of a loving God and evil.

The best answer, in this author’s opinion, however, is not to look at the suffering of the individual as the starting point or crux of the argument. Rather, we ought to look first at God and work backwards from there. The foundation for this perspective has already been laid in the foregoing analysis of the Epicurian syllogism. God’s attributes, His glory, and His desire to be known are a more sure foundation for analyzing the presence of evil than the subjective experience of those who suffer because of it.

Premise 1: God is the author and cause of all goodness.

The Bible is very clear that only good and right things are created by God. This is explicitly the point of the creation account in Genesis 1-2. Every stage of creation is declared to be “good” (Gen 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Jesus affirms the absolute goodness of God (Mark 10:18), and his brother, James, sources God as the absolute source of “every good and perfect gift” (Jas 1:17).

There is a persistent belief in popular thought and intuition that good and evil are balanced opposites--yin and yang, positive and negative. Without being pressed to think about it too carefully, most people would probably see good and evil are both fundamental realities of the cosmos. Greek mythology, many pagan theologies, and eastern mysticism would affirm this. In this system, if there is a God who lies at the root of all reality (as the Bible teaches), then we must lay the origin and existence of both good and evil at his feet. It is God’s “fault” that bad things happen.

It is the principal benefit of the “privation theodicy” as advanced by C.S. Lewis to argue that this is not the case. Good things are dependent upon the action of God. Evil is derived from the actions of fallen angels and men. Darkness is not itself a substance but is rather the lack of light.

Cold is not itself a substance but the absence of heat. So too, evil is not dependent on the action of God but a rebellion against it.

Premise 2: God hates evil but permits it for a season.

Since we know that God's attributes constrained His freedom of will and omnipotence from eradicating evil as soon as it touched His creation of mankind, we need to clarify that the persistence of evil for a season is not enjoyed by God. Scripture is clear that He hates wickedness and sin.

Psalm 5:4-6: "4 For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. 5 The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. 6 You destroy those who speak lies; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man."

Proverbs 6:16-19: "There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers."

Proverbs 15:9: "The way of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but he loves him who pursues righteousness."

It is this hatred of sin and evil that drove God to create ultimate everlasting punishment in the lake of fire. Everlasting torment is not a light thing. It is not those who mildly irritate the God of the universe for whom the lake of fire was created, according to scripture.

Matthew 25:40: "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'"

Revelation 20:10: "...and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

Let us not allow ourselves to slip into a view of God that would make Him tolerant of evil and sin. He most certainly is not. Evil must be and will be ultimately and finally destroyed.

Premise 3: God, while not the Author of Evil, is glorified despite it.

We have already seen, in the above discussion, that God's attributes are best seen in contrast to the evil that mankind brought upon the world. The Bible gives us several concrete examples of this in action.

In the Exodus story, God's people are enslaved for 400 years, which entails numerous evils collectively being leveled against individuals that He loves and has chosen for Himself. Individual Hebrews all experienced hardship and prejudice, deprivation, and abuse for their entire lifetimes. However, in Exodus 9:13-16, we are given a theodicy of sorts, defending why this was allowed to occur.

"13 Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, 'Let my people go, that they may serve me. 14 For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none

like me in all the earth. 15 For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. 16 But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.”

God allowed the evil of Pharaoh to be leveled against his people so that God’s glory might be clearly displayed. Pre-emptive, rapid removal of His people from the situation or the elimination of the slaveholders without process would not have shown as clearly the attributes of God to the watching world. God chose to do away with the evil of the slavery of His people, but He chose to do it in a particular way that put His justice, His mercy, His power, and His love on maximum display to the largest possible audience. It was not just about removing the evil; it was about glorious self-revelation.

Jesus illustrates a similar leveraging of suffering in the life of an individual in John 9:1-3.

“As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3 Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

Sin is the root cause of all suffering, sickness, and death. The reason this man was born blind was due to the universal covering of sin over all mankind. His disciples wanted to know where to set the blame. Whose sin in particular is the cause of this man’s condition? Jesus answers their question from a different perspective, though. Universally, blindness anywhere is due to sinfulness everywhere. The resolution need not be particular.

However, Jesus shows His disciples that they are looking at the situation from the wrong angle. They (and we do the same thing) are looking at individual suffering and asking how God can be just given this situation, as do all theodicies. Jesus reframes the question. He instead demonstrates how God can be glorified and made known, even given this man’s suffering. The focus should not be on the suffering of the individual. The focus is on the way that God can be glorified despite this suffering.

There are numerous other examples of God turning unquestioned evil into demonstrations of His nature. The lives of Joseph, Job, Esther, and Paul jump off the pages of scripture with similar attestations. In all of these cases, God is not the cause of the evil, but He derives glory despite the presence of evil that He permits for a time. Clearly, God’s glory is revealed not merely in permitting evil, but in His redemptive engagement with it.

This is what is meant by Paul in the often-quoted declaration in Romans 8:28. “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

Premise 4: The most gratuitous evils do not upend God’s sovereignty.

We live in a world of degrees. I am happy when I get a smile from a stranger. I am thrilled when I get an embrace from my wife. I am annoyed when I’m cut off on the highway. I am crushed if a family member betrays me. Good and evil can be realized in diverse kinds and varying degrees of impact. It is important to understand that God is powerful enough to bend all evil to serve as a demonstration of His glory, not just the milder varieties.

Modern atheists have modified some of the arguments for God's non-existence from evil to focus not on human volitional actions (largely because of the success of theistic counter-arguments in this domain) but on natural evils that plague innocent children (i.e., Christopher Hitchens) or even animals (Arthur Schopenhauer, William Rowe, Alex O'Connor). It seems to many that it is much harder to understand how God can derive glorious self-disclosure from things like childhood cancer or a rockslide that obliterates an innocent family of deer that had been sheltering under an overhang. Certainly, these are more challenging cases.

Scripture doesn't flinch at these situations, however. Rather, the Bible is perfectly comfortable seeing natural evil and moral volitional evil as two sides of the same coin. They are both derivatives of the sin of Adam, corrupting an originally perfect creation.

Genesis 3:17-19: "17 And to Adam he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Isa 24:4-6: "4 The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish. 5 The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. 6 Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left."

Jer 12:4: "How long will the land mourn and the grass of every field wither? For the evil of those who dwell in it the beasts and the birds are swept away, because they said, 'He will not see our latter end.'"

It is the view of scripture, then, that both moral evil and natural evil have their root in the fall. Just as it lies outside of the original plan of God in creation for a man to kill another man, it lies outside of the original plan of God in creation for children to contract cancer or for a rock overhang to crush a family of deer sheltering beneath it. The working out of the evil is different, but its roots are the same.

A potential chronological problem surfaces here. If the reader assumes an origin story of the earth that sees biological evolution producing animal suffering long before humans are on the scene to choose to sin, it might seem inconsistent to blame Adam for pain. Obviously, this is not the Bible's chronology. According to scripture, Adam's choice to sin predates the death of any animal. If the reader sees this differently, the argument can still stand. Evangelical philosophers of religion, such as William Demski or John Feinberg, who embrace an evolutionary origin, hold that God's *atemporal* curse of creation for the sin of man, which He foreknew, had an effect before history caught up to the causative event. However we picture the details, Scripture's simpler chronology remains sufficient: creation's curse followed man's sin.

God's plan of redemption does not stop at fixing the moral flaws in mankind. It extends to repairing natural evil as well. In fact, in Isa 11, right after a well-known Christmas passage about Christ rising from the "stump of Jesse," physical peace and the removal of natural evil are prophesied.

Isa 11:6-9: “6 The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. 9 They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”

This is also the New Testament teaching, as recorded by the Apostle Paul.

Romans 8:19-22: “19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.”

Certainly, the greater the evil in any given example, the more we long for God to be able to show His glory in it, and the harder we imagine it must be for that goal to be accomplished. When we consider the suffering of innocent children or animals, we are viscerally enraged at the evil lying behind that suffering. Certainly, so is our good God. He, more than anyone else, understands the depths of the evil that must be overcome in His plan to redeem His creation, and He is able to accomplish this redemption.

The more sinless and morally perfect the object of suffering, the worse the sense of the evil surrounding that object’s suffering, and the “harder” it is for us to imagine God getting glory from that situation or redeeming that situation.

Who is the most morally perfect being in the physical universe? The answer is Jesus Christ. In his entire human lifetime, he never committed one sinful act. Consider the deepest level of human cruelty imaginable. That would have to be a torturous death protracted over hours, on display before a mocking crowd, brought on by one you considered a friend, abandoned by all but a single member of your family. This is what Christ endured. Moreover, we know explicitly that this was the will of God, not a divine oversight.

Was God able to reveal Himself even in this? Most clearly.

Was God able to glorify Himself in this? All the nations of the earth worship Him for it!

Was God able to redeem this horrible evil? Yes! And that redemption envelopes all who trust in Him by faith.

If God has redeemed the most gratuitous evil perpetrated upon the most innocent of victims, then He can be trusted to redeem all lesser evils perpetrated upon the less innocent. We do not pretend to see how every sorrow fits the pattern, but we trust the One who bore it all. The same God who once redeemed the cross will finally redeem all things.

A Pastoral Word

In closing, it is obvious that you, the reader, have not struggled through this because you have intellectual curiosities. You have done so because you have existential pain. You have suffered. You have lost. People close to you have died. You've watched loved ones shipwrecked on the reefs of a world that cares not a whit for your heart. You have been sick. Your children have been sick. Your parents have died. You've not had the resources required to meet the needs of your life. The list goes on.

You are hurting.

In light of your reality, all of the reasoning of the last several pages comes back hollow. The question that began this article still haunts you:

Why would a loving God just stand by and watch this happen?

Perhaps it's true that God's attributes restrain the freedom of His will to right all wrongs instantaneously. If that is true, perhaps that infuriates you rather than soothes you. Perhaps that makes you less apt to worship Him rather than more. Why worship a God that binds His omnipotence by His perfection? What good is that God to you in your pain?

Grant, for a moment, that what has been said is true. There is a morally perfect God. He can accomplish all that He purposes, and He has purposed to eliminate evil because He is good. However, He has purposed to do it in a unique and particular way to best reveal Himself and display His glory in the process. In the meantime, you suffer.

This God could seem heartless, seeking His maximal glory while you writhe on the hook of evil, only a small fraction of which is your own fault.

If he left you to writhe alone while He was glorified, you would be right, but that isn't what He has done. He, enthroned in ageless glory and splendor, unable to suffer because of His divine nature, looked upon mankind that He created and loved and saw their pain. He looked through time and saw *your* pain.

He didn't *have* to do anything about it, but He did.

He didn't have to step into it, but He did.

As God, He could not feel cold, pain, hunger, loss, deprivation, want, shame, guilt, curse, or remorse. Divine perfection cannot encounter these things. So, he added to His divinity humanity. He took on flesh. He became human, like you.

Like you, he knew cold, pain, hunger, loss, deprivation, and want. Because of you, he knew guilt, shame, curse, and remorse.

If God had only gained glory while we suffered, you might be justified in being angry and withholding your worship. But that isn't the God that exists. The God of the heavens saw your pain and loved you enough to share in it. He is not intellectually able to comprehend your suffering. He has felt it firsthand. He weeps as you do, alongside you--within you, if you will permit Him to be there. The glory of God revealed in suffering is not spectacle but solidarity — the glory of a God who bleeds.

A friend sits with you in pain. A father works to end it. God does both—and more. The ultimate solution to the evil in your life has been accomplished through the work of Jesus, God in the flesh. God on the cross. That solution is sure and is coming.

In the meantime, He delights to be with you as you suffer. He desires to be in your pain with you, in your life and heart, while you wait for the redemption of this world.

Will you let Him? Even if you cannot yet say yes, He will sit beside you until you can.