“Why Did God Create a Flawed World Where Eve Could Eat the Forbidden Fruit?”

I found Rick Rood’s article on The Problem of Evil helpful in some way, but I was hoping to find some additional information. No where in my search have I seen anyone address the issue of why God allowed Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge. Surely God knew Eve would be tempted by Satan (the serpent). Why did he allow this? Surely he must have known this would be the downfall of his creation, Earth? And subsequently the root of all pain, hate, and evil to come in the world, both behind and ahead of us. If God had intended for us to live in a Paradise here on Earth, he never would have permitted this event to occur, indeed the event that destroyed what civilization could have been. Instead, God MADE it necessary to save us from ourselves through Jesus. WHY WAS THIS NECESSARY? WHY THE DRAMA? IS GOD SO LONELY AND SELFISH HE CONCOCTED THIS FANTASTIC REALITY SO THAT MANKIND WOULD LOVE AND REVERE HIM? TO THINK THAT WE COULD ALL BE HAPPY AND LOVING AND TOGETHER AS A PEOPLE HERE ON EARTH, RATHER THAN THE CESSPOOL WE HAVE TODAY, MAKES ME SCREAM OUT IN ANGER AT THE GOD WHO SAYS HE LOVES US.

THE EVIDENCE THAT GOD IS NOT ALL POWERFUL AND ALL LOVING IS ON TV. DOES GOD LIKE THE ATTENTION? IS ANY ADVERTISING GOOD ADVERTISING FOR HIM?

It seems to me God wanted this to happen—he made it happen. He WANTS us to suffer, in order to be driven TO Him. That must be the only way he figured we would love and come to Him? I’ve heard that God does not need us. But surely he does, or he would not have introduced pain and suffering to the world to drive us to him. Without it, why would we need him, goes the argument.

We have the perfect Villain—Satan—to blame everything bad on. But Satan did not create Adam and Eve. Satan did not make the Tree. And where was God when the Serpent came sliding in in? Did God not know Eve would eat it? TO ME, THIS IS THE MOST CRUCIAL QUESTION IN ALL OF HUMANITY. Assuming God is all knowing, he knew what would happen, the chaos for all time it would bring, and chose to do nothing. Or rather, let it happen. Had God stepped up at the crucial moment, we would all be loving and happy and together here on Earth, JUST AS IT WAS INTENDED. GOD MADE THE WORLD WHAT IT IS TODAY. GOD CREATED MAN'S HEARTS, GOD IS RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL THAT HAPPENS. UNLESS YOU BELIEVE SATAN IS ON PAR AT EQUAL STRENGTH WITH GOD, THEN GOD HAS TO BE ACCOUNTABLE. IT'S TIME RESPONSIBILTY WAS PLACED WITH THE RIGHTFUL OWNER.

Hi _____,

I will be happy to talk to you about this, but first I have a question: do you have any children?

Sue Bohlin

Thank you for your response, I really do appreciate it. No, I don't have any children. I smell an analogy using children coming….Something like "As a parent, we do things in the best interest of our children, and it is only until later in life that those same children understand the actions that were taken…". One analogy I have heard puts God in the example as the parent and us as the children. I would never have children until I was able to resolve these questions in my own mind and heart. Otherwise I am sure I would pass on the same frustration about God to my family.

After even more thought, I guess the Root of my problem/question is creation, and specifically why God created a flawed world intentionally. I use the word "flawed" in the sense that he

- ***Knowingly created an access point for evil for all the***

world (apple tree)

• Had foreknowledge Eve would eat from it

• Knew that eating from it would result in Sin throughout mankind

• That the sin would cause great suffering to all of God's People

• That it would be necessary for God to "save" the world through his Son

Is God so selfish he would intentionally and knowingly cause all this so we would "choose" him through the salvation in Jesus and 2) He must have known it would turn out like this (the hell that is our world today).

I must sound like a maniac, but I'm 29, well educated, catholic raised and partially practicing, with a good heart. I want to love God, but when I am honest with myself I realize I don't. In fact I hate the person I have concluded God to be. I love Jesus, and of course do believe he died for my sins. My problem is with the Father, and why this grand scheme to make everyone love him was necessary. He could have designed us that way. I finally stopped prayer almost entirely 3 years ago, because I would get so mad and angry at God during prayer—because I would find myself 1) praying for the same stuff with no result 2) many of the things I was praying about were caused by God (natural disasters, human suffering, etc.) When I say human suffering is caused by God, of course I understand free will and that people cause suffering. I hold God accountable for allowing evil and pain and suffering to exist.

Hope this provides you with a little more insight into my problem. If you are able to assist or offer a new perspective that would be great. Thank You.

Dear _____,

I believe the answer to your question is the fact that God has a very big plan for creation that we cannot see from our vantage point in space and time. He knew before He created anything, what would be the best way to get to His final desire, which is to provide a Bride for His Son. Just as any man wants a woman to marry him freely and out of love and commitment and support, the Lord Jesus wanted a Bride who chose Him freely. The only way to have a Bride who chose Him freely was to create people who could also choose freely to reject Him.

Could God have made people who couldn't have chosen NOT to love Him? No. Love means choice, and the other alternative would have been to create automatons who were programmed to behave in a certain way. If I read your e-mail correctly, you believe God could have made a world in which we were "happy and loving and together as a people here on earth," but He didn't and you're mad at Him for that. People without choice cannot be happy and loving. (Have you ever used a word-processing program that automatically changes what it thinks are misspellings and punctuation errors? No matter what you type, the program rearranges your letters, removing your choice. I don't know about you, but "happy and loving" doesn't describe me when I growl, "That's not what I meant! Let me type things MY way!"<smile>)

I would suggest that an ant colony is busy and productive, ant-wise, but they are not happy and loving. They ARE together, but in the scope of eternity, what does it matter? Their behavior is programmed, but there is no depth to any of it.

God created a world in which the people WERE happy and loving and together, and they chose to trash it. I guess you don't have any trouble accepting that reality; if I'm not mistaken, what you want is all the benefits of Eden without the choice

to trash it. I can certainly understand that! 🙂 But you also haven't seen the end of the story, either, when everything is made right again, and that's exactly what we will have. I respectfully suggest that that's the part you're missing. The big picture where God restores creation to its original perfect state. I also respectfully suggest that the evidence of the world today that God is not all-powerful and all-loving, is actually evidence that God is very patient. He's not finished yet. He's allowing a certain amount of pain and suffering—which He will redeem, every bit of it—because there is a larger purpose behind it. Our inability to see it doesn't mean it's not there.

I asked if you if you had children because this is one of the things we can learn about God as parent when we have children. I passionately love my children, but I allowed them to experience pain of immunizations and school tests and other things they hated because I had a larger purpose for them besides preventing discomfort and pain in their lives. For instance, now that my son is in college, he's glad I made him do his homework in 5th grade although he sure didn't at the time. I never lost sight of the big goal, of maturity, because I am his mother who loves him and wants the best for him. God never loses sight of His big goal either.

You have a lot of company in being angry with God for allowing pain and suffering to exist. In fact, many wise people have said that pain and suffering is the single biggest evidence that God is not good. Or that He doesn't exist. (But then, if there were no God, and we evolved by chance, then where did we get this idea that life is unfair and broken? Life just IS, according to that worldview. But we are haunted by the sense that things should be much better than they are. And sure enough, God has revealed that we live in a fallen and broken world that is so much less than what He originally created for us. We're the ones who blew it.)

But you're not there; you know God exists, and you apparently

resent Him for being a bad God for allowing life as we know it.

I'm afraid all I have to offer you is what God has revealed to us: that there IS a bigger plan, than He will make all the pain and suffering worth it some day. If you insist that there was a way for God to create people who could freely choose to either love Him or ignore/hate Him AND there be no chance for pain and suffering in the exercise of that choice, then I guess you will continue to be irreconcilably angry. You may as well fume over God not making a "square circle" or "light-filled darkness." God is a powerful God, but He is not able to create nonsense.

You know that Jesus came to earth and was tortured and died to pay the penalty for our sin. And bless you, you love Him for it. Jesus coming into the midst of our suffering and pain is the clearest indication of the Father's heart there is. He didn't do or say a single thing that was not the Father's will, and to see Jesus is to see the Father. So to hate the Father and love the Son is inconsistent. They are one God with one heart. It cost the Father everything to let the Son pay for our sins, and it cost the Son His life. That's how valuable we are to Them.

The bottom line here, _____, is that what you want God to have done is something He couldn't do. He couldn't make a world for Him to lavish with His love that didn't include the ability to reject that love. Otherwise creation would have been pointless, and God never does anything pointlessly.

May I suggest, humbly, that you try a prayer again, even though it's been three years, and ask God to show you what you're not getting? Ask Him to open your eyes to see the truth about Him and His ways? And ask Him to help you deal with your anger? He's not intimidated by it; He fully understands your frustration. And He'd love to relieve you of the burden of that anger and replace it with His peace.

I hope this helps, even a little.

Sue Bohlin

Posted July 2002

© 2002 Probe Ministries

Where Was God on Sept. 11? The Problem of Evil

Dr. Ray Bohlin explores the problem of evil in light of the terrorist attacks on the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001.

Why Didn't God Prevent the Terrible Attacks?

The events of September 11th are indelibly etched in our hearts and minds. The horrible memories of personal tragedy and suffering will never really go away. As well they shouldn't. As Christians we were all gratified to see so many of our national, state, and local leaders openly participate in prayer services and calling upon people of faith to pray for victims' families and injured survivors.

What was lost underneath the appearance of a religious revival was the clear cry of many that wondered if our prayers were justified. After all, if we pray to God in the aftermath and expect God to answer, where was He as countless individuals cried out to Him from the planes, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon? The skeptical voices were drowned out because of the fervent religious outcry seeking comfort and relief. But make no mistake; the question was there all the time. Where

was God on September 11th? Surely He could have diverted those planes from their appointed destinations. Why couldn't the hijackers have been intercepted at the airports or their plots discovered long before their designed execution?

Why so many innocent people? Why should so many suffer so much? It all seems so senseless. How could a loving God allow it?

It is important to realize also that the suffering of those initial weeks is only the tip of the iceberg. There will be military deaths and casualties. The war on terrorism will be a long one with mounting personal and economic costs. The clean up will also continue to take its ever-mounting toll in dollars, lives, and emotional breakdowns.

Former pastor Gordon MacDonald spent time with the Salvation Army in caring for people and removing debris and bodies from the rubble of the World Trade Center. He relates this encounter from his journal of September 21 in *Christianity Today:*{1}

> "Later in the night, I wandered over to the first-line medical tent, which is staffed by military personnel who are schooled in battlefield casualties. The head of the team, a physician, and I got into a conversation.
>
> "He was scared for the men in the pit, he said, because he knew what was coming 'downstream.' He predicted an unusual spike in the suicide rate and a serious outbreak of manic depression. . . . Many of the men will be unable to live with these losses at the WTC. It's going to take an unspeakable toll on them."

So why would God allow so much suffering? This is an ancient question. The problem of reconciling an all-powerful, all-loving God with evil is the number one reason that people reject God. I will try to clarify the question, provide some understanding, and make some comparisons of other

explanations.

Psalm 73 and Asaph's Answer

The Bible answers the question of where God was on September 11 in many passages, but I would like to begin with the answer from Asaph in Psalm 73. My discussion will flow from the excellent discussion of the problem of evil found in Dr Robert Pyne's 1999 book, *Humanity and Sin: The Creation, Fall and Redemption of Humanity.*{2}

In Psalm 73, Asaph begins by declaring that God is good. Without that assumption, nothing more need be said. He goes on in verses 2-12 to lament the excess and success of the wicked. In verses six and seven he says, "Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits." (Psalm 73:6-7). From this point Asaph lets his feelings be known by crying out that this isn't fair when he says in verse 13, "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence."

The wicked seem to snub their noses at God with no apparent judgment, while Asaph strives to follow the Lord to no benefit. We have all experienced this in one form or another. Some things in this world simply aren't fair. In the last ten verses of the psalm, Asaph recognizes that the wicked will indeed realize their punishment in the future. God's judgment will come. He also realizes that God is always with him and that is sufficient.

18th century philosopher David Hume stated the classical problem of evil by saying that if God were indeed all powerful He would do something about evil, and that if He were all-loving He would want to do something about evil. Since evil exists, God must either not be able or not want to do anything about it. This makes God either malevolent or impotent or both. But Hume chooses to leave out the option, as Asaph

resolves, that God is patient. Hume, like many before him and after him, grows weary with a God who is patient towards evil.

We long for immediate justice. But before we pray too earnestly for immediate justice, we'd better reflect on what that would be like. What would instant justice look like? Immediate justice would have to be applied across the board. That means that every sin would be proportionately and immediately punished. We soon realize that immediate justice is fine if applied to everybody else. Dr. Pyne quotes D. A. Carson as saying, "The world would become a searing pain; the world would become hell. Do you really want nothing but totally effective, instantaneous justice? Then go to hell."{3} I think we're all quite comfortable with a God that does not apply immediate justice.

Evil and the Sovereignty of God

Next, I want to focus on God's sovereignty. We understand that God knew what He was doing in creating people with the ability to choose to love Him or hate Him. In order for our love for Him to be real, our choice needed to be real and that means creating creatures that could turn from Him as well as love Him. In order to have creatures with moral freedom, God risked evil choices.

Some would go so far as to say that God couldn't intervene in our evil choices. But in Psalm 155:3, Psalm 135:6, and in Nebuchadnezzar's words of praise in Daniel 4:34-37 we're told it is God who does whatever He pleases. However, God does perform acts of deliverance and sometimes He chooses not to. We are still left with the question "Why?" In the book of Job, Job basically proclaims his innocence and essentially asks why? God doesn't really give Job an answer, but simply reminds him who is in charge. (Job 38:2-4) "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" the Lord asks Job.

The parameters are clearly set. God in His power is always

capable of intervening in human affairs, but sometimes He doesn’t and we aren’t always given a reason why. There is tension here that we must learn to accept, because the alternative is to blaspheme by assigning to God evil or malevolent actions. As Asaph declared, God is good!

This brings us to the hidden purposes of God. For although we can’t always see God’s purpose, we believe He has one in everything that occurs, even seemingly senseless acts of cruelty and evil. Here is where Jesus’ sufferings serve as a model. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before Him. (Hebrews 12:1-3) So then, we should bear our cross for the eternal joy set before us. (Hebrews 12:11, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18) But knowing this doesn’t always make us feel better.

When Jesus was dying on the cross all His disciples but John deserted Him. From their perspective, all that they had learned and prepared for over the last three years was over, finished. How could Jesus let them crucify Him? It didn’t make any sense at all. Yet as we well know now, the most important work in history was being accomplished and the disciples thought God was absent. How shortsighted our perspective can be.

The Danger of a Nice Explanation

But with this truth comes the danger of a nice explanation. Even though we know and trust that there is a purpose to God’s discipline and His patience towards ultimate judgment, that doesn’t mean we should somehow regard evil as an expression of God’s goodness. In addition, we can be tempted to think that if God has a purpose to evil and suffering, then my own sin can be assigned not to me but to someone else, namely God Himself because He had a purpose in it.

Dr. Robert Pyne puts it this way.

> We may not be able to fully resolve the problem of evil, and we may not be able to explain the origin of sin, but we can see the boundaries that must be maintained when addressing these issues. We share in Adam's guilt, but we cannot blame Him for our sin. God is sovereign, and He exercises His providential control over all things, but we cannot blame Him either. God permits injustice to continue, but He neither causes it nor delights in it.{4}

Another danger lies in becoming too comfortable with evil. When we trust in God's ultimate purpose and patience with evil we shouldn't think that we have somehow solved the problem and therefore grow comfortable in its presence. We should never be at peace with sin, suffering, and evil.

The prophet Habakkuk sparred with God in the first few verses of chapter 1 of the book bearing his name by recounting all the evil in Israel. The Lord responds in verses 6-11 that indeed the Babylonians are coming and sin will be judged. Habakkuk further complains about God's choice of the godless Babylonians, to which God reminds him that they too will receive judgment. Yet the coming judgment still left Habakkuk with fear and dread. "I heard and my inward parts trembled: at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. . . . Yet, I will exult in the Lord." (Habakkuk 3:16-19.) Habakkuk believes that God knows what He is doing. That does not bring a smile to his face. But he can face the day.

"We are not supposed to live at peace with evil and sin, but we are supposed to live at peace with God. We continue to trust in His goodness, His sovereignty, His mercy, and we continue to confess our own responsibility for sin."{5}

He Was There!

Though we have come to a better understanding of the problem of evil, we are still left with our original question. Where

was God on September 11th?

While the Christian answer may not seem a perfect answer, it is the only one which offers truth, hope, and comfort. Naturalism or deism offers no real answers. Things just happen. There is no good and no evil. Make the best of it! Pantheism says the physical world is irrelevant or an illusion. It doesn't really matter. Good and evil are the same.

To answer the question we need to understand that God does, in fact, notice when every sparrow falls and grieve over every evil and every suffering. Jesus is with us in all of our suffering, feeling all of our pain. That's what compassion means, to suffer with another. So the suffering that Christ endured on the cross is literally unimaginable.

> "The answer is, how could you not love this being who went the extra mile, who practiced more than He preached, who entered into our world, who suffered our pains, who offers Himself to us in the midst of our sorrows?"{6}

We must remember that Jesus' entire time on earth was a time of sacrifice and suffering, not just His trial and crucifixion. Jesus was tempted in the manner of all men and He bore upon Himself all our sin and suffering. So the answer is quite simple. He was there!

He was on the 110th floor as one called home. He was at the other end of the line as his wife realized her husband was not coming home. He was on the planes, at the Pentagon, in the stairwells answering those who called out to Him and calling to those who didn't.

He saw every face, knew every name, even though some did not know Him. Some met Him for the first time, some ignored Him for the last time. He is there now.

Let me share with you one more story from Gordon MacDonald's

experience with the Salvation Army during the initial clean up at the World Trade Center.

> "There is a man whose job it is to record the trucks as they leave the pit with their load of rubble. He is from Jamaica, and he has one of the most radiant smiles I've ever seen. He brings a kind of spiritual sunshine to the entire intersection. "I watch him—with his red, white, and blue hard hat—talking to each truck driver as they wait their turn to go in and get a load. He brightens men up. In the midst of those smells, the dust, the clashing sounds, he brings a civilizing influence to the moment.
>
> "Occasionally I go out to where he stands and bring him some water. At other times, he comes over and chats with us. We always laugh when we engage. "I said to him last night, 'You're a follower of the Lord, aren't you?' He gave me an enthusiastic 'Yes! Jesus is with me all the time!' "Somehow this guy represents to me the quintessential picture of the ideal follower of Christ: out in the middle of the chaos, doing his job, pressing a bit of joy into a wild situation." {7}

Notes

1. "Blood Sweat and Prayers," *Christianity Today,* Nov. 12,2001, p. 76.
2. Robert Pyne, *Humanity and Sin: The Creation, Fall and Redemption of Humanity,* pp. 193-209.
3. Pyne, p. 197.
4. Pyne, p. 204.
5. Pyne, p. 206.
6. Peter Kreeft, quoted in *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel, 2000, p. 45-46.
7. "Blood Sweat and Prayers," *Christianity Today*, p. 76.

© 2002 Probe Ministries

The Problem of Evil

Rick Rood helps us understand the challenging question of evil and why it is allowed to remain in this world. Speaking from a Christian worldview perspective, he gives us a thorough understanding of how Christians should consider and deal with evil in this world. The Bible does not shirk from addressing the nature and existence of evil AND our responsibility to stand against it.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

The Problem of Evil – Introduction

John Stott has said that "the fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith." It is unquestionably true that there is no greater obstacle to faith than that of the reality of evil and suffering in the world. Indeed, even for the believing Christian, there is no greater test of faith than this—that the God who loves him permits him to suffer, at times in excruciating ways. And the disillusionment is intensified in our day when unrealistic expectations of health and prosperity are fed by the teachings of a multitude of Christian teachers. Why does a good God allow his creatures, and even his children to suffer?

First, it's important to distinguish between two kinds of evil: moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil results from the actions of free creatures. Murder, rape and theft are examples. Natural evil results from natural processes such as earthquakes and floods. Of course, sometimes the two are intermingled, such as when flooding results in loss of human life due to poor planning or shoddy construction of buildings.

It’s also important to identify two aspects of the problem of evil and suffering. First, there is the philosophical or apologetic aspect. This is the problem of evil approached from the standpoint of the skeptic who challenges the possibility or probability that a God exists who would allow such suffering. In meeting this apologetic challenge we must utilize the tools of reason and evidence in “giving a reason for the hope within us.” (I Pet. 3:15)

Second is the religious or emotional aspect of the problem of evil. This is the problem of evil approached from the standpoint of the believer whose faith in God is severely tested by trial. How can we love and worship God when He allows us to suffer in these ways? In meeting the religious/emotional challenge we must appeal to the truth revealed by God in Scripture. We will address both aspects of the problem of evil in this essay.

It’s also helpful to distinguish between two types of the philosophical or apologetic aspect of the problem of evil. The first is the logical challenge to belief in God. This challenge says it is irrational and hence impossible to believe in the existence of a good and powerful God on the basis of the existence of evil in the world. The logical challenge is usually posed in the form of a statement such as this:

1. A good God would destroy evil.
2. An all powerful God could destroy evil.
3. Evil is not destroyed.
4. Therefore, there cannot possibly be such a good and powerful God.

It is logically impossible to believe that both evil, and a good and powerful God exist in the same reality, for such a God certainly could and would destroy evil.

On the other hand, the evidential challenge contends that

while it may be rationally possible to believe such a God exists, it is highly improbable or unlikely that He does. We have evidence of so much evil that is seemingly pointless and of such horrendous intensity. For what valid reason would a good and powerful God allow the amount and kinds of evil which we see around us?

These issues are of an extremely important nature—not only as we seek to defend our belief in God, but also as we live out our Christian lives.{1}

The Logical Problem of Evil

We have noted that there are two aspects of the problem of evil: the philosophical or apologetic, and the religious or emotional aspect. We also noted that within the philosophical aspect there are two types of challenges to faith in God: the logical and the evidential.

David Hume, the eighteenth century philosopher, stated the logical problem of evil when he inquired about God, "Is He willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is impotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" (Craig, 80). When the skeptic challenges belief in God on the basis of the logical problem of evil, he is suggesting that it is irrational or logically impossible to believe in the existence of both a good and all powerful God and in the reality of evil and suffering. Such a God would not possibly allow evil to exist.

The key to the resolution of this apparent conflict is to recognize that when we say God is all powerful, we do not imply that He is capable of doing anything imaginable. True, Scripture states that "with God all things are possible" (Mt. 19:26). But Scripture also states that there are some things God cannot do. For instance, God cannot lie (Tit. 1:2). Neither can He be tempted to sin, nor can He tempt others to sin (James 1:13). In other words, He cannot do anything that

is “out of character” for a righteous God. Neither can He do anything that is out of character for a rational being in a rational world. Certainly even God cannot “undo the past,” or create a square triangle, or make what is false true. He cannot do what is irrational or absurd.

And it is on this basis that we conclude that God could not eliminate evil without at the same time rendering it impossible to accomplish other goals which are important to Him. Certainly, for God to create beings in his own image, who are capable of sustaining a personal relationship with Him, they must be beings who are capable of freely loving Him and following his will without coercion. Love or obedience on any other basis would not be love or obedience at all, but mere compliance. But creatures who are free to love God must also be free to hate or ignore Him. Creatures who are free to follow His will must also be free to reject it. And when people act in ways outside the will of God, great evil and suffering is the ultimate result. This line of thinking is known as the “free will defense” concerning the problem of evil.

But what about natural evil—evil resulting from natural processes such as earthquakes, floods and diseases? Here it is important first to recognize that we live in a fallen world, and that we are subject to natural disasters that would not have occurred had man not chosen to rebel against God. Even so, it is difficult to imagine how we could function as free creatures in a world much different than our own—a world in which consistent natural processes allow us to predict with some certainty the consequences of our choices and actions. Take the law of gravity, for instance. This is a natural process without which we could not possibly function as human beings, yet under some circumstances it is also capable of resulting in great harm.

Certainly, God is capable of destroying evil—but not without destroying human freedom, or a world in which free creatures

can function. And most agree that this line of reasoning does successfully respond to the challenge of the logical problem of evil.

The Evidential Problem of Evil

While most agree that belief in a good and powerful God is rationally possible, nonetheless many contend that the existence of such a God is improbable due to the nature of the evil which we see in the world about us. They conclude that if such a God existed it is highly unlikely that He would allow the amount and intensity of evil which we see in our world. Evil which frequently seems to be of such a purposeless nature.

This charge is not to be taken lightly, for evidence abounds in our world of evil of such a horrendous nature that it is difficult at times to fathom what possible purpose it could serve. However, difficult as this aspect of the problem of evil is, careful thinking will show that there are reasonable responses to this challenge.

Surely it is difficult for us to understand why God would allow some things to happen. But simply because we find it difficult to imagine what reasons God could have for permitting them, does not mean that no such reasons exist. It is entirely possible that such reasons are not only beyond our present knowledge, but also beyond our present ability to understand. A child does not always understand the reasons that lie behind all that his father allows or does not allow him to do. It would be unrealistic for us to expect to understand all of God’s reasons for allowing all that He does. We do not fully understand many things about the world we live in—what lies behind the force of gravity for instance, or the exact function of subatomic particles. Yet we believe in these physical realities.

Beyond this, however, we can suggest possible reasons for God

allowing some of the horrendous evils which do exist in our world. Perhaps there are people who would never sense their utter dependence on God apart from experiencing the intense pain that they do in life (Ps. 119:71). Perhaps there are purposes that God intends to accomplish among his angelic or demonic creatures which require his human creatures to experience some of the things that we do (Job 1-2). It may be that the suffering we experience in this life is somehow preparatory to our existence in the life to come (2 Cor. 4:16-18). Even apart from the revelation of Scripture, these are all possible reasons behind God's permission of evil. And at any rate, most people agree that there is much more good in the world than evil—at least enough good to make life well worth the living.

In responding to the challenge to belief in God based on the intensity and seeming purposelessness of much evil in the world, we must also take into account all of the positive evidence that points to his existence: the evidence of design in nature, the historical evidence for the reliability of Scripture and of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In light of the totality of the evidence, it certainly cannot be proven that there are no sufficient reasons for God's allowing the amount of evil that we see in the world…or even that it is improbable that such reasons exist.

The Religious Problem of Evil – Part I

But the existence of evil and suffering in our world poses more than a merely philosophical or apologetic problem. It also poses a very personal religious and emotional problem for the person who is enduring great trial. Although our painful experience may not challenge our belief that God exists, what may be at risk is our confidence in a God we can freely worship and love, and in whose love we can feel secure. Much harm can be done when we attempt to aid a suffering brother or sister by merely dealing with the intellectual aspects of this

problem, or when we seek to find solace for ourselves in this way. Far more important than answers about the nature of God, is a revelation of the love of God—even in the midst of trial. And as God's children, it is not nearly as important what we say about God as what we do to manifest his love.

First, it is evident from Scripture that when we suffer it is not unnatural to experience emotional pain, nor is it unspiritual to express it. It is noteworthy for instance that there are nearly as many psalms of lament as there are psalms of praise and thanksgiving, and these two sentiments are mingled together in many places (cf. Pss. 13, 88). Indeed, the psalmist encourages us to "pour out our hearts to God" (Ps. 62:8). And when we do, we can be assured that God understands our pain. Jesus Himself keenly felt the painful side of life. When John the Baptist was beheaded it is recorded that "He withdrew to a lonely place" obviously to mourn his loss (Mt. 14:13). And when his friend Lazarus died, it is recorded that Jesus openly wept at his tomb (Jn. 11:35). Even though He was committed to following the Father's will to the cross, He confessed to being filled with anguish of soul in contemplating it (Mt. 26:38). It is not without reason that Jesus was called "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3); and we follow in his steps when we truthfully acknowledge our own pain.

We cross the line, however, from sorrow to sin when we allow our grief to quench our faith in God, or follow the counsel that Job was offered by his wife when she told him to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9b).

Secondly, when we suffer we should draw comfort from reflecting on Scriptures which assure us that God knows and cares about our situation, and promises to be with us to comfort and uphold us. The psalmist tells us that "the Lord is near to the brokenhearted" (Ps. 34:18), and that when we go through the "valley of the shadow of death" it is then that his presence is particularly promised to us (Ps. 23:4).

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord said, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you” (Isa. 49:15). He is more mindful of us than is a nursing mother toward her child! It is of the One whom we know as the “God of all comfort and Father of mercies” that Peter speaks when He bids us to cast our anxieties on Him, “for He cares for us” (1 Pet. 5:7). Our cares are his personal concern!

The Religious Problem of Evil – Part II

We noted that when suffering strikes it is neither unnatural to experience emotional pain, nor unspiritual to express it. But we also noted that when suffering strikes, we must be quick to reflect on the character of God and on the promises He gives to those who are enduring great trial. Now we want to focus on one of the great truths of God’s Word—that even in severe trial God is working all things together for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28). This is not at all to imply that evil is somehow good. But it does mean that we are to recognize that even in what is evil God is at work to bring about his good purposes in our lives.

Joseph gave evidence of having learned this truth when after years of unexplained suffering due to the betrayal of his brothers, he was able to say to them, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20). Though God did not cause his brothers to betray him, nonetheless He was able to use it in furthering his good intentions.

This is the great hope we have in the midst of suffering, that in a way beyond our comprehension, God is able to turn evil against itself. And it is because of this truth that we can find joy even in the midst of sorrow and pain. The apostle Paul described himself as “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10). And we are counseled to rejoice in trial, not because the affliction itself is a cause for joy (it is not), but because in it God can find an occasion for producing what

is good.

What are some of those good purposes suffering promotes? For one, suffering can provide an opportunity for God to display his glory—to make evident his mercy, faithfulness, power and love in the midst of painful circumstances (Jn. 9:1-3). Suffering can also allow us to give proof of the genuineness of our faith, and even serve to purify our faith (1 Pet. 1:7). As in the case of Job, our faithfulness in trial shows that we serve Him not merely for the benefits He offers, but for the love of God Himself (Job 1:9-11). Severe trial also provides an opportunity for believers to demonstrate their love for one another as members of the body of Christ who "bear one another's burdens" (1 Cor 12:26; Gal. 6:2). Indeed, as D.A. Carson has said, "experiences of suffering… engender compassion and empathy…, and make us better able to help others" (Carson, 122). As we are comforted by God in affliction, so we are better able to comfort others (2 Cor. 1:4). Suffering also plays a key role in developing godly virtues, and in deterring us from sin. Paul recognized that his "thorn in the flesh" served to keep him from boasting, and promoted true humility and dependence on God (2 Cor. 12:7). The psalmist recognized that his affliction had increased his determination to follow God's will (Ps. 119:71). Even Jesus "learned obedience from the things He suffered" (Heb. 5:8). As a man He learned by experience the value of submitting to the will of God, even when it was the most difficult thing in the world to do.

Finally, evil and suffering can awaken in us a greater hunger for heaven, and for that time when God's purposes for these experiences will have been finally fulfilled, when pain and sorrow shall be no more (Rev. 21:4).

Note

1. The line of reasoning in the first three sections of this article can be found in many sources on the problem of evil.

Chapters 3 and 4 of William Lane Craig's book cited in the resources below has served as a general guide for my comments here.

Resources for Further Study:

• Blocker, Henri. *Evil and the Cross*. Tr. by David G. Preston. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994.
• Briggs, Lauren. *What You Can Say…When You Don't Know What to Say: Reaching Out to Those Who Hurt*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1985.
• Carson, D.A. *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990.
• Craig, William Lane. *No Easy Answers: Finding Hope in Doubt, Failure, and Unanswered Prayer*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1990.
• Dobson, James. *When God Doesn't Make Sense*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1993.
• Dunn, Ronald. *When Heaven is Silent: Live by Faith, Not by Sight*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994.
• Feinberg, John S. *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problem of Evil*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994.
• Ferguson, Sinclair B. *Deserted by God?* Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993.
• Geisler, Norman L. *The Roots of Evil*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978.
• Kreeft, Peter. *Making Sense Out of Suffering*. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986.
• Lockyer, Herbert. *Dark Threads the Weaver Needs*. Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1979.
• McGrath, Alister E. *Suffering & God*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995.
• Plantinga, Alvin C. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974.

©1996 Probe Ministries.

Hope For a World Gone Bad

“Give me your money,” snarled the young intruder. He climbed my staircase, brandishing a knife and flashlight. Noises in the basement had distracted my Sunday afternoon study. I investigated when the sounds persisted. On the way to the basement I came face to face with a menacing looking 20 year-old. Recognizing the danger, I gave him the dollar bill in my wallet, then opened drawers as he ordered. My eyes kept darting back to the flashing knife blade. He snatched a small plastic bag containing white detergent. “What’s this?” he demanded. “Laundry soap.” “No, it’s drugs,” he countered.

Perhaps he was on drugs or out for revenge and had the wrong house. I assured him I hadn’t stolen his truck. When he seemed convinced of his error, he became nervous, cut the kitchen phone line, and headed for the door, “Just don’t call the cops,” he pleaded. Then he fled.

On the phone to 911, my heart pounding, I described the invader. Reports, investigations, and questioning ensued. For the next several nights’ sleep was fitful. Reinforcing the doors helped increase feelings of security. So did the news that this criminal was captured and sentenced to three years in prison.

But if this could happen in my own home, what hope was there for genuine safety?

FARAWAY THOUGHTS

The petite, fortyish woman sat in the imposing gray room with a high, ornate ceiling, her thumb toying with the ring on her left hand. Despite murmuring in the background, Melissa’s thoughts were far away in the past, 15 years earlier—her

wedding day. Bright lights, festive flowers, and joyful friends filled the church. She felt secure seeing Tom's smile and welcoming gaze as she strode down the aisle. "Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife … for as long as you both shall live?" asked the black-robed minister. "I do," replied Tom with confidence,

A tear meandered down her cheek. Suddenly everyone in the gray room rose as if something important were happening. The entrance of another black-robed man interrupted Melissa's daydream. She heard Tom's voice: "Your honor, I am convinced that this marriage cannot be saved. There is no hope of reconciliation."

No hope? she wondered. Does he think that our 15 years of life, work, children, promises, struggles and successes amounted to nothing?

With her dreams dashed, the possibility of more unrealized expectations loomed enormously painful, was anything worth hoping for anymore?

IMAGES OF OUR WORLD

"Turning to international news we have some startling video to show you from Eastern Europe," intoned the television newscaster somberly. "We must warn you that the pictures you are about to see are quite graphic and, because of the violence they depict, may not be suitable for small children."

The screen fills with images of emaciated, shirtless men, apparently prisoners behind a barbed-wire fence. The despair on their faces haunts you. Next come scenes of what was an outdoor marketplace. A bomb had landed at midday, sending shredded canvas, shattered tables, bloodied limbs, and broken bodies everywhere. Then the scene switches to hot, tired, thirsty Caribbean refugees in overloaded rafts, bobbing in the ocean.

The TV images seem familiar by now and almost blend together. Where was that carnage and starvation? Somalia? Rwanda? Sudan? South Africa?

A vulture stalks a starving infant. Middle Eastern children throw stones. Their relatives wield automatic weapons. Their leaders shake hands and hail peace on the White House lawn. Will it last? Might a terrorist state harvest a nuclear bomb?

Can peace come to these troubled nations? Agreements are signed and broken. Often chaos reigns. “The world has gone bad,” you decide, “What hope is there of people ever getting along?”

There is a good chance that you or someone you know has been a crime victim. Marriage is supposed to last forever. Now divorce increasingly rips apart hearts and homes, and with prospects of international peace rising and falling like a refugee raft on a stormy sea, is there anything that can save us from destroying ourselves? Will a baby born into our world today live to reach adulthood?

HUNGRY FOR HOPE

Two millennia ago a baby was born into a similarly troubled world. A foreign power occupied his parents’ homeland. Poverty, greed, theft, and corruption were commonplace. Marriages faltered. Authorities ruled that a husband could divorce his wife simply for burning supper.

At the time of this baby’s birth, people were hungry for hope. They wanted freedom from violence, family strife, and political uncertainty. They wanted the assurance that somebody loved and cared for them, that life counted for something, that they could muster the strength to face daily challenges at home and work.

Ironically, some saw hope in the birth of this particular baby. His mother, during her engagement, had become pregnant

out of wedlock while strangely claiming to remain a virgin. Though he was born in a humble stable, learned leaders traveled great distances to have the child as a king.

In his youth scholars marveled at his wisdom. In his thirties he began to publicly offer peace, freedom, purpose, inner strength, and hope to the masses. His message caught on.

A woman who had suffered five failed marriages found in his teaching "living water" to quench her spiritual and emotional thirst. A wealthy but corrupt government worker decided to give half of what he owned to the poor and repay fourfold those he had swindled. Hungry people were fed. Sick people became well.

The young man's family thought he had flipped. His enemies plotted his demise and paid one of his followers to betray this innocent man. His closest friends deserted him. He was tried, convicted, sentenced, and executed. In agony during his execution he yelled out a quotation from one of his nation's most revered ancient writers: "My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?"{1} At that moment he felt very alone, perhaps even hopeless.

FORSAKEN

Many crime victims feel forsaken by God. So do many divorced people, war prisoners, and starving refugees. But this young man's cry of desperation carried added significance because of its historical allusion.

The words had appeared about a thousand years earlier in a song written by a king. The details of the song are remarkably similar to the suffering the young man endured. It said, "All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads …. They have pierced my hands and my feet…. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."{2}

Historians record precisely this behavior during the young

man's execution.{3} It was as if a divine drama were unfolding as the man slipped into death.

Researchers have uncovered more than 300 predictions or prophesies literally fulfilled in the life and death of this unique individual. Many of these statements written hundreds of years before his birth-were beyond his human control. One correctly foretold the place of his birth. {4} Another said he would be born of a virgin. {5} He would be preceded by a messenger who would prepare the way for his work, {6} He would enter the capital city as a king but riding on a donkeys back {7} He would be betrayed for thirty pieces of Silver, {8} pierced, {9} executed among thieves, {10} and yet, though wounded, {11} he would suffer no broken bones.{12}

Peter Stoner, a California mathematics professor, calculated the chance probability of just eight of these 300 prophecies coming true in one person. Using conservative estimates, Stoner concluded that the probability is 1 in 10 to the 17th power that those eight could be fulfilled by a fluke.

He says 10^{17}silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one coin with red fingernail polish. Stir the whole batch thoroughly. What chance would a blindfolded person have of picking the marked coin on the first try? One in 10^{17}, the same chance that just eight of the 300 prophecies "just happened" to come true in this man, Jesus. {13}

In his dying cry from the cross Jesus reminded His hearers that His life and death precisely fulfilled God's previously stated plan. According to the biblical perspective, at the moment of death Jesus experienced the equivalent of eternal separation from God in our place so that we might be forgiven and find new life.

He took the penalty due for all the crime, injustice, evil, sin, and shortcomings of the world-including yours and mine.

Though sinless Himself, He likely felt guilty and abandoned. Then-again in fulfillment of prophecy {14} and contrary to natural law-He came back to life. As somewhat of a skeptic I investigated the evidence for Christ's resurrection and found it to be one of the best-attested facts in history. {15} To the seeker Jesus Christ offers true inner peace, forgiveness, purpose, and strength for contented living.

SO WHAT?

"OK, great," you might say, "but what hope does this give the crime or divorce victim, the hungry and bleeding refugee, the citizen paralyzed by a world gone bad?" Will Jesus prevent every crime, reconcile every troubled marriage, restore every refugee, stop every war? No. God has given us free will. Suffering—even unjust suffering—is a necessary consequence of sin.

Sometimes God does intervene to change circumstances. (I'm glad my assailant became nervous and left.) Other times God gives those who believe in Him strength to endure and confidence that He will see them through. In the process, believers mature.

Most significantly we can hope in what He has told us about the future. Seeing how God has fulfilled prophecies in the past gives us confidence to believe those not yet fulfilled. Jesus promises eternal life to all who trust Him for it: "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."{16}

He promised He would return to rescue people from this dying planet.{17}

He will judge all evil.{18}

Finally justice will prevail. Those who have chosen to place their faith in Him will know true joy: "He shall wipe away

every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain."{19}

Does God intend that we ignore temporal evil and mentally float off into unrealistic ethereal bliss? Nor at all. God is in the business of working through people to turn hearts to Him, resolve conflicts, make peace. After my assailant went to prison, I felt motivated to tell him that I forgave him because of Christ. He apologized, saying he, too, has now come to believe in Jesus.

But through every trial, every injustice you suffer, you can know that God is your friend and that one day He will set things right. You can know that He is still on the throne of the universe and that He cares for you. You can know this because His Son was born (Christmas is, of course, a celebration of His birth), lived, died, and came back to life in fulfillment of prophecy. Because of Jesus, if you personally receive His free gift of forgiveness, you can have hope!

Will you trust Him?

Notes

1. Matthew 27:46.
2. Psalm 22.
3. Matthew 27:35-44; John 20:25.
4. Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1.
5. Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18, 24-25; Luke 1:26-35.
6. Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:1-2.
7. Zechariah 9:9; John 12:15; Matthew 21: 1-9.
8. Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:15.
9. Zechariah 12:10; John 19:34, 37.
10. Isaiah 53:12.
11. Matthew 27:38; Isaiah 53:5; Zechariah 13:6; Matthew 27:26.
12. Psalm 34:20; John 19:33, 36.

13. Peter Stoner, Science Speaks, pp. 99-112.
14. Psalm 6:10; Acts 2:31-32.
15. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pp. 185-273.
16. John 5:24.
17. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.
18. Revelation 20:10-15.
19. Revelation 21:4 NAS.

©1994 Rusty Wright. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Reprinted with permission from *Pursuit* magazine (© 1994, Vol. III, No. 3)