

"If God is God, he is not good. If God is good, he is not God. If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy; and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But His creatures are not perfectly happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both."¹

Thus is stated the problem of evil. If God is not perfectly good, then we ought not be surprised that evil exists, for it is a part of God's nature. If God is not unlimitedly powerful, then God cannot be blamed for the existence of evil, for He could not prevent it.

Evil would be no problem for us unless, side by side with our daily experience of evil in this painful world, we had received what we think is good assurance that God is righteous, and powerful, and loving. But since we have such assurance, **the fact of evil stands as the most serious objection there is to the Christian belief in a God of Love.**



But God IS Love (1 John 4:16)! This affirmation is the centerpiece of the New Testament, presented by various methods and metaphors by some half-dozen writers. It is the testimony of the Church through the ages that because of God's love "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them*" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

The problem of evil strikes at the very heart of these affirmations. It asks, on the one hand, whether God can be good and permit evil to exist, while on the other it questions the justice of God's holding our evil against us at all. **Nothing less is at stake than the very meaning of the Gospel.**

Pollster George Barna recently asked, "If you could ask God only one question and you knew God would give you an answer, what would you ask?" The #1 question people had was, "*Why is there pain and suffering in the world?*"

To respond to this, we must begin with the affirmation that **evil is real**. Pain and suffering are not figments of our imagination. If there were no evil, Jesus' ministry of reconciliation would be meaningless, for there would be nothing to reconcile. **The Bible makes it very clear that God became human in order to defeat a real enemy.** Evil is twisted-ness, bent-ness, a perversion of the good. It is parasitic, and cannot exist apart from good. Yet evil is not merely the absence of good, but is a reality with its own destructive—and often terrifying—power.

So it is that the most urgent question facing Christian faith is this:
How can we explain such evil as exists in the world if God is both good AND powerful?

¹ What follows is technically called a "theodicy," or an effort to grapple theologically with the problem thus presented. The argument I present is helpful to me; not all theologians would agree with it . . . but in rejecting this argument they have some other significant problems with which to deal.

Theologians from the earliest times have struggled with this question. Obviously, we have some alternatives: (1) God would remove evil if He could, but God is not able to do so [i.e., *God is good but not powerful*]; (2) God is able to remove evil but is not willing to do so [*God is powerful but not good*]; (3) God is *neither willing nor able* to remove evil [*God is neither good nor powerful*]; (4) God is *both willing and able* to remove and/or prevent evil [*God is both good and powerful*]. Only the fourth option is acceptable to Christians; but the problem is now intensified rather than removed.



It's important to remember that as we attempt to understand the ways of God, we're inevitably tempted to extend faith's dim sense of a hidden divine purpose into an open map of providence such as could be available to God alone. Ours is a pilgrimage of faith seeking understanding. Humility is in order.

Let us say again that evil is real. Evil is a reality with which we must contend almost every moment of our lives. **But this does not mean that God creates or sends evil.** A good God will not intentionally use evil means to accomplish noble purposes.

Some people are ready to passively assign everything that happens to God's will. I am not willing to do that. I have heard, and so have you, some very offensive explanations of events offered as the result of such poorly conceived and half-baked piety.

Assurances about the will of God in situations of grief are often not only empty of comfort but are also quite unfair to God. I would be most upset if someone attributed to me a part in a terrible accident or evil unless it had been established on the basis of convincing evidence that I was, indeed, responsible for it. **Do we dare accuse God of being an accomplice, if not actually the perpetrator, of crimes for which we would send each other to prison and to death?**

Now because God *is love*, if God could have His way, and at the same time leave us genuinely free, it seems clear that God would prefer for there to be no sorrow or suffering. I believe this is true because of Jesus' attitude toward human suffering while He walked among us. Jesus always used His power to relieve suffering, not to cause it. I also believe that this is God's attitude toward suffering because there will be a place and time when God will "wipe away all tears" from the eyes of His redeemed children. There will come a time when "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

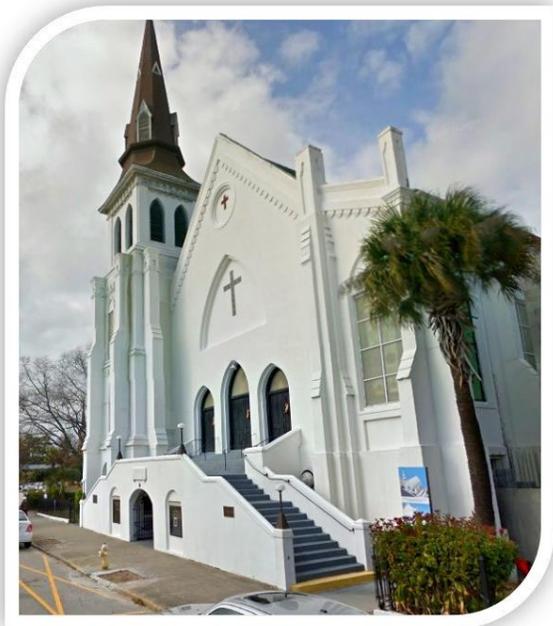
In my initial statement of the problem of evil, I raised a question about the power of God. **Remember that it is only if God, as an omnipotent being, could guarantee the absence of genuine evil in a real world, that the presence of evil is contradictory to the goodness of God.**

The Bible gives ample witness to the omnipotence of God (Genesis 18:14; Matthew 19:26; Luke 1:37), but we do well to remember that "omnipotence" means the power to do all that is logically possible, not to do that which is logically impossible. C.S. Lewis noted that "We may attribute miracles to God, but not nonsense." The idea of a round triangle, for example, is nonsense.

Lewis went on to observe that “if you choose to say that ‘God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it,’ you have not succeeded in saying anything about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the other two words, ‘God can’. . . .”

If the world as we know it is real, then God cannot BE ALL of reality, and thus HAVE ALL of the power, because that is pantheism. If anything, particularly any human person, is to have an actual existence, then it must have some degree of separateness, some degree of power with respect to God. If you and I are to have any power to act that is really real, then, though that power had to originate with God, God had to relinquish control over the power given to us so that we could exercise it.

Given these realities, we can say that God’s power is absolutely the greatest possible. But even the Greatest Possible Power is still one power among others in a world where creatures have real power. God has chosen to entrust a certain amount of divine power to you and to me. This is a crucial point.



Because of God’s own choice in creation, the persons for whom God has a will also have wills of their own. We humans must have real freedom if we are to be personal in the way that our Creator is Personal . . . if we are to be made in the Image of God. We may eventually become transformed into the new persons whom the New Testament calls “children of God,” but we cannot be created ready-made as this.

Now God must certainly have such power that the biblical view of prophecy and fulfillment is sustained and that the ultimate victory of good over evil is assured; but by creating human persons, God has in some mysterious way chosen to be self-limited to the extent that **God is no longer able to prevent the possibility of evil.**

This means that by virtue of our God-given freedom, you and I each have a limited capacity to create, and within the scope of our creative power lies the ability—*though not the necessity*—to create evil. Because we have exercised—and we continue to exercise—this power, **we humans created evil on the earth.**

The consequence of this creation was, and is, death. We have cut ourselves off from the Vine, Who is our Life. Adam and Eve were ejected from the Garden, and our own lives face the inevitable boundary of death as well. **The Bible also indicates that human sin is the cause of natural evil.** God told Adam that the ground was cursed because of him (Genesis 3:17); and Paul wrote that the whole creation groans while it waits for release from the destructive power of evil (Romans 8:19-22).

The Bible attributes moral evil to human choosing, and attributes natural evil to moral evil. The first humans chose wrongly, and in so doing brought down a curse upon themselves and upon all of creation with them. And as much as we wish it to be otherwise, the Bible offers no real explanation of evil beyond Genesis 3’s placing of the blame for the evil of this world squarely upon human choices.

It seems, then, that the possibility of evil is inherent in the very nature of a world where souls can meet. And you and I, together with every other person who has ever lived, have each chosen to use our God-given freedom to hurt other people, and this may account for a very large part of human suffering. It is we humans, not God, who have produced whips, prisons, slavery, torture chambers, guns, bayonets, and bombs.

What sort of world did God originally intend? Perhaps we will never know. We can only affirm that it must have been far, far better than our present fallen state, perhaps better than the glory toward which we now move. Peter Kreeft commented that “Criticizing God for not destroying evil now is like reading half a novel and criticizing the author for not resolving the plot.”

Because evil and its consequent suffering result from indefensible free choices against the good, its appearance and its nature must remain a mystery. **Sin is unreasonable by its very nature.** And, as it came into being, Sin brought with it suffering and disease, pain and death. These trials are capable of being used to mold depth and strength of character, but in the beginning such means were neither necessary nor intended.

As you and I look at evil in the world around us, **it is essential that we keep foremost in our minds the biblical understanding of a personal, loving God, one whom Jesus taught us to call “our Father.”** The goal of every parent, human and divine, is the development of mature children. But even the most loving human parents don’t protect their children from all pain and suffering. Protecting children from the consequences of their choices is cruel. It is not loving at all. And God so values the freedom that is essential to our maturity that He is willing to allow this freedom to be used against Him.

The Bible is clear that God’s heart intends blessing for us, not destruction (Jeremiah 29:11), and God still retains such power over evil as to be able to make it an instrument in His cosmic purpose. **God alone can work in the chaotic and cruel wake of evil to create the possibility of good coming from it.**

In Romans 8:28 Paul did not say that everything that happens in the lives of God’s people is good, but that “God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.” That is, if invited, God will take the broken pieces of our lives and make something beautiful from them, something redemptive and healing and hopeful. And it’s important to note that Romans 8:28 is not a blanket promise for everyone, but is rather a word of hope only for those who willingly join their lives to God’s purposes.



God does not promise that you and I are going to be protected from tragedy, or even from persecution and death. Tragedies come, marriages break up, church buildings burn, diseases strike, untimely deaths occur—among God’s people, too. **Christian faith does not immunize us against the irrational madness of our world, nor does Christian commitment provide assurance that everything that happens to us will be in conformity with God’s will.**

The promise of Romans 8:28 is that *God can always work in every situation to bring some good from it*—if we invite and allow it through the power of Christ. Take God out of such situations and there is left only a blood-soaked, murky, depressing, enslaving mess.

Good comes from evil only to the extent that God redeems it. The reality of our redemption does not diminish the awfulness of evil; to the contrary, the horror of the Cross emphasizes the depth of evil that must now be undone.

Even with this affirmation of hope, though, it still seems to me that, in the last analysis, the horrors of evil really do land “in God’s lap.” While God did not make evil actual, God did make evil possible—and God *knew* that, through our freedom, it would become so. Carl Bates, preaching in Pittsburgh in 1984, offered an interpretation that has helped me a great deal as I’ve struggled with this problem.

Dr. Bates suggested that the deepest meaning of the Cross might be other than the redemption we rightly associate with it. Dr. Bates said that **the deepest meaning of the Cross is that, on the Cross, God has taken responsibility for having chosen to make us truly free, and has taken into His own being the pain that has resulted from that choice.** God is with us, in ways far beyond our knowing, and God alone is able to bear within His heart the awful price by which we have been set free.



If at times we’re appalled by the depths to which, in the history of this world, wickedness has been allowed to descend, and the extent to which it has been allowed to prevail, we may take these depths and this extent as the measure of the value God sets on our created freedom being genuinely free. Where there appears to be an irreconcilable contradiction between the omnipotence and the goodness of God, there our finite wisdom has come to the end of its tether, and *we do not understand the solution that we yet believe in.*

As we consider last week’s tragedy in Charleston, we can look back to God’s complete defeat of evil at Calvary’s Cross and the Empty Tomb; but you and I still live in the interim between Jesus’ Resurrection and his Return. We live in the season between D-Day and V-E Day, a time in which evil seems as powerful as ever, even though we know how the story ends.

In the end, the problem of evil defies a completely satisfactory “solution.” This is a mystery that we can’t explain, with which we are never done, and that is more serious than most of our statements about it. Perhaps we can come to terms with the mystery by settling for victory over it, remembering that God has transformed an ugly cross into a throne, a horrible death into the Source of our life, and a work of pure evil into the possibility of our salvation. God caused blazing, redeeming Light to burst forth from a tomb!

To God be the glory, great things He has done!

Dave

