

Essentials of the Faith Lesson 6

“How Can God be Good, All Powerful, and Evil Exist?”

I. What is the “Problem of Evil”?

1. *The objection to the existence of the God of the Bible (“the logical problem of evil”)*

- a. If God were all good, he would want to prevent evil.
- b. If God were all powerful, he would be able to prevent evil.
- c. But evil exists.
- d. Therefore, if God exists, he is either not all good or not all powerful.

2. *The attempt to defend the ways of God (“theodicy”)*

- a. Begins with belief in God
- b. Deals with the question, “How is it that God remains good in light of the fact that there is evil in the world?”

II. What is Evil?

We can’t claim to deal with the problem of evil unless we know what we mean by “evil.”

- 1. *Evil is a perversion of something God has made. Evil is not a thing in itself. Therefore, it is right to say that God did not create evil.***
- 2. *Moral evil is a rebellion against God’s good design and disobedience of his commands. It is a claim to deity, an attempt to usurp God’s sovereignty.***
- 3. *Natural evil is the effect of moral evil on the world as a whole, resulting in human suffering for non-moral causes (like the suffering that happens due to natural disasters).***

III. Review of EOF Lesson 1: The Sovereignty of God

However we explain the problem of evil, we cannot nullify the clear biblical teaching on the sovereignty of God. In fact, this will help us approach the question of evil rightly.

- 1. *God has planned the universe in such a way that he has “rendered certain” everything that will happen in that universe.***
- 2. *God has entered into the universe to participate in the outworking of his own plan.***
- 3. *God exercises control over all the events of the universe as they unfold according to plan.***

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4. But God does not DO everything that happens.

- a. Example: June 25, 1988 – Andrew V. Snider marries Pamela B. Kenyon
- b. I married Pam because God ordained that it would be so (primary cause).
- c. I married Pam because I wanted to! (secondary cause)

5. Humans have “free will” because they do what they want to do. Of course, the human will is in bondage to sin, and it is subject to outside influences, so it is free only in a very specific sense. The idea that human will is free in an absolute sense is radically contrary to our experience.

IV. The problem of evil & theodicy in light of God’s sovereignty

It is important to begin by reviewing what we know clearly about God based on Scripture.

- God is self-sufficient and unable to be coerced
...so we can be sure no one or nothing is forcing God to do anything he does.
- God is incomprehensible and has an infinite perspective
...so we must admit that God is capable of formulating a plan that we can’t fully understand.
- God is all-wise and capable of formulating the best plan for the universe
...so we can be sure that God’s plan is better than anything we could come up with!
- God is sovereign and has the right to carry out his plan
...so we must be willing to humbly take our rightful place in his universe.
- God is all-powerful and is able to carry out his plan
...so we can rest in the knowledge that nothing can prevent God from carrying out his good plan.
- God is all-knowing and cannot be taken by surprise
...so we can be sure God is always acting according to his purposes and is never improvising.
- God is all-good and has absolutely pure motives and actions
...so we can trust God even when we don’t understand what we see in this world.
- God is loving and is committed to personal relationships
...so we can be sure that even as evil brings grief and anguish into human experience, God is doing good for his people.
- Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that God is in complete control of all the events of the universe and is worthy of our trust in view of our inability to comprehend his ways.

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Preliminary Conclusion: This line of thinking leads us toward accepting evil as a part of God’s sovereign plan for the universe, even though this may create tension and some difficult questions for us. So, let’s look at how God’s people in Scripture reacted to evil. This may provide either corroborating or contradicting evidence.

V. Theology in action – biblical responses to the sovereignty of God over evil events

The way faithful people in Scripture respond to evil in their lives follows this line of reasoning.

1. ***Having lost everything as a result of evil committed against him and his family by Satan: “Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:20-21)***
2. ***Having suffered severely as a result of evil committed against him by his brothers, in the end “Joseph said to them, ‘Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them” (Gen 50:19-21)***
3. ***Speaking of his “thorn in the flesh,” which was a “messenger of Satan” given “to harass” him and keep him humble, Paul said, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor 12:9).***
4. ***To Christians who were suffering evil in the form of persecution, Peter wrote: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet 5:6-10).***

VI. “But are you saying God WANTS all this horrible stuff to happen??”

Understanding the question of “God’s will” is a key factor in approaching the question of evil.

1. ***Yes, in a way—God’s sovereign will has decreed that evil things will happen. Evil has become a part of God’s universe.***
 - a. Creation was initially “very good” (Gen 1:31)

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- b. Yet Jesus is the Savior that was foreknown from the foundation of the world (1 Pet 1:20), who was put to death by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23), and we are chosen in him from the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). So evil—and redemption from it—was integrated into God’s plan for the universe.
 - c. Another angle: for any particular evil event, could God have prevented this occurrence?
- 2. ...and no—God is still God.**
- a. The evil that creatures do is repulsive to God

“but they did what was evil in my eyes and chose that in which I did not delight” (Isa 66:4)

“You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” (Hab 1:13)
 - b. God’s holy and righteous character remains the standard for all human conduct (“You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy,” Lev 19:2, cf. 1 Pet 1:15-16).
- 3. Conclusion: God has ordained that many things that will happen in his universe are contrary to his character. Since his character is unchangeable, and since he is worthy of our trust, it is reasonable to conclude that God has in mind a purpose, a “greater good,” that justifies the existence of evil.**

VII. Summary: The “Greater Good” Defense

- 1. God has a rationale for including evil in his decree for the universe. This reasoning arises from his holy, loving, and righteous character and is sufficient for the evil that happens.**
- 2. Since God works everything “according to the counsel of his will” (Eph 1:4), we can be sure that God’s allowance of evil in the universe is purposeful.**
- 3. Yet “God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one” (James 1:13). Creatures are morally accountable for evil because they commit it. God does not.**
- 4. In fact, God is able to direct evil for his own good purposes (for example: Joseph in Gen 50:20, Job in 1:20-21, Paul in 2 Cor 12:9-10; also Saul in 1 Sam 16:14; Ahab in 1 Kings 22:19-23, Israel in Hab 1:5-6, etc.)**
- 5. So the evil that happens in the universe is not an “exception” to God’s sovereignty, yet God himself is not guilty of evil.**

VIII. Why did God not just prevent (or eradicate) evil altogether?

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1. *As far as we can tell, this would have contradicted his purposes in creating this particular universe.*
2. *We only know certain of God’s attributes because of his response to evil (grace, mercy, justice).*
3. *Redemption is central to God’s purposes for the universe. In other words, God displays his glory in redemption and judgment, both of which entail the existence of evil.*
4. *And so, the problem of evil leads us to the cross, where God displayed his grace and love alongside his righteousness and justice.*