

How Can I Believe In God When The World Is So Bad?

By Martin Pickup

An innocent teenager is killed in a violent traffic accident. A newborn baby is stricken with a genetic disease that plagues the child for the duration of its brief life. A kindly woman who spends her days helping the less fortunate is murdered by a malevolent criminal who lives to a ripe old age. If there really is a God as the Bible says—one who truly cares about the human predicament—why does he allow such suffering in the world? And why do terrible things like this happen in the first place?

What I'm talking about is traditionally called *the problem of evil*. It is perhaps the most difficult issue confronting Biblical theism, and it has plagued theologically-minded people for centuries.

Approaches to the Problem

Many believers in God quickly give a pat answer to the problem of evil: "It's not God's fault there's evil in the world. It's Satan's fault." On the surface, this seems to make sense. Though the Bible gives very little information about the devil, it does affirm that he exists and that he and other angelic beings once rebelled against God. Scripture says that from the beginning of time Satan has enticed human beings to violate the will of God, thereby forcing the divine Judge to curse his own creation.

But the problem here is that the same Bible also affirms that God is the Creator of all things, and that would include the devil. So even if we say that God didn't create Satan to be evil and that Satan used his God-given free will to rebel against the path of righteousness, God still seems to be the ultimate source of the problem. Shouldn't an all-knowing, all-powerful Creator

have foreseen the havoc Satan has wrought and prevented it from the outset? The Bible's own high theology comes back upon itself, laying the blame for the origin of evil squarely on God's shoulders. Even if we say (properly I think) that, by making free-will creatures like man and the angels, God is responsible only for creating the *possibility* of evil, not its actuality—that fact doesn't get God completely off the hook. In his omniscience, didn't God know what Satan was going to do even before he created him? Yet God created Satan anyway.

In addition to the origin of evil, there is the problem of the continuation of evil and human suffering in the world. Why hasn't God put an end to this problem? Some people conclude that God must not have the ability to alleviate human suffering. This position is called *finitism* since it limits the extent of God's power. An even more pessimistic approach is *sadism*, a view that suggests that God is either be a malevolent being who wants human beings to suffer or a being who is at best ambivalent to humanity's pain. Some days he blesses us with happiness; on other days he curses us with despair. Though these two views have had their advocates, the more common response to the continual presence of evil in this world is *atheism*. This view says that the reason why God does not remove suffering from the world is simply because God does not exist. Atheists see life as an accident of evolution, and suffering is just one of life's intrinsic components.

Biblical Theodicy

The Bible denounces all of these approaches to the presence of evil and offers an alternative position instead. It would be better to call it a promise. The Bible teaches that when God initially made the world, it was in a perfect state. But human sinfulness corrupted the world and brought about hardship and travail. God's promise is that the sacrificial death of his Son is the remedy to sin and the means of thwarting Satan. Jesus' return will mark the end of suffering

for all those who follow him. When Jesus returns, the obedient will be blessed eternally, impenitent sinners will be judged, and this sin-cursed world will be superseded by a world of pristine perfection and glory. “The present heavens and earth by his word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men ... But according to his promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:7, 13). God’s promise is that one day all things will be made right, and that the suffering of human beings in this present life will seem like “momentary light affliction” when compared with the future “eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17). In a nutshell, this is the Bible’s theodicy—its defense of God’s righteousness.

So why hasn’t God already done all of this and taken care of the problem? Why hasn’t Jesus already returned and put an end to evil and suffering? The Bible assures us that the reason is not because God lacks either power or compassion. It is because his heart is filled with mercy: “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). God has delayed the final judgment because he is offering an opportunity for reform and pardon to those sinners who, if given the chance, will choose to repent. God wants no one to fall needlessly under eternal condemnation. But the Bible warns that a day of judgment will come eventually. It will appear when people least expect it, just like a thief in the night (1 Thess. 5:2). At that point evil and suffering will cease, and righteousness will reign triumphant forever.

The atheist scoffs at all of this, of course. He sees Christianity’s hope in God’s future eradication of evil as nothing but the desperate wish of simple-minded people. Like the *deus ex machina* of the ancient Greek plays, the God of the Bible is suddenly brought forth on the stage, magically coming to man’s rescue and solving all of life’s problems. “Ridiculous!” spouts the

atheist. Okay, I understand why it may look that way. But an atheist needs to consider the fact that he himself may have a prejudice born of desperation. Perhaps the reason why atheists are so quick to eschew Biblical theism is because the God of the Bible demands that they change their lifestyle or face the reality of eternal judgment. Wishful thinking and a lack of objectivity can taint the minds of unbelievers just as much as it can taint the minds of believers.

“But why,” asks the atheist, “did God make free-will creatures in the first place? Why did he make creatures who potentially could perpetrate evil?” The Bible gives no explicit answer to this question, but we need to recognize that the same freedom of will that permits evil choices also permits good choices. Though a free will is what allows evil to occur, it also is what allows good to occur. God could have made us all robotic creatures, programmed to act always in a certain way—but this would have prevented us from being able to love and extend benevolence to the under-privileged and needy. God could have made us creatures of instinct like the animals, but then we would, like the animals, be nothing more than amoral creatures without the capacity to do morally good things. Free will may have opened the door for the possibility of evil, but free will is also what was necessary for there to be a possibility of goodness. Righteousness, mercy, compassion, self-sacrifice, and sundry other examples of moral goodness are realities in this world only because we have the capacity for making moral choices.

The Need for Humility

Does the Bible answer all of our quandaries about evil? No, I don't think so. Like everyone else, I have questions that remain unresolved. There are many terrible things that happen in this world that I cannot explain. But to my mind the only hope for making sense of this world lies within the model of Biblical theism. Atheism provides no remedy to the problem of evil at all. In the face of human suffering, atheism condemns the idea of God, but proffers no

alternative solution of its own. Denying God's existence only allows a person to feel free to disregard other human beings and selfishly pursue his own desires just as any animal would do. Such behavior only increases evil and suffering in this world; it does not alleviate it.

Perhaps humility is the fundamental requirement when it comes to dealing with the problem of evil. A Biblical theist looks at human suffering and presumes that a moral God must share his disdain for it. Confident that all things will be made right in God's time, the believer allows God to direct his steps so as not to add to the amount of evil in the world. The atheist, on the other hand, looks at human suffering and presumes that any God who could permit it to continue must be immoral and therefore unworthy of his belief. So he chooses atheism, a choice that conveniently allows him to live life in his own self-indulgent way.

In spite of my lingering questions about life, it is still more reasonable to me to believe that there is a God, and that he is exactly as the Bible describes him to be: an inherently moral being who gave us the capacity to understand the immorality of evil and who promises to rectify its painful consequences when the time is right. I am willing to grant that my Creator's perspective about "the right time" is more trustworthy than mine, even as I hope that my children accept that my middle-aged perspective about life is usually wiser than theirs. I readily admit that I do not always understand why God allows bad things to happen to certain people, but these times of perplexity do not change the fact that the promises of the God of the Bible are far more sensible than the dour pessimism of atheism. My questions about the existence of evil do not overturn the positive evidence for Jesus that we will examine in the next section of this book.

Human suffering doesn't cause me to reject God's existence; it actually causes me to affirm his existence all the more. For only God's presence behind this veil of tears adequately validates the moral outrage I feel at the injustices of life. Rather than prompting me to deny him,

the evils of this world give me confidence that there exists a moral Creator who will not tolerate such wickedness indefinitely. Divine judgment, though slow in coming as I count slowness, is inevitable. And it's a funny thing: in my musings about these matters, I notice that my impatience with the Judge's apparent tardiness diminishes a bit as I contemplate my own contributions to the problem of evil in this world. I realize that I have done things in my life that have hurt other people. I have walked in selfishness rather than seeking to serve other human beings. In short, I recognize that I myself am one of the sources of evil in this world. It is in such moments of introspection that I detect in myself a different attitude emerging about judgment's delay. Instead of impatience at its tardiness, I feel a sense of gratitude for God's compassion in giving more time for sinners like me to change.