

Apologetics – The Problem of Evil - 1

“This issue can be stated in various ways: If God were all-powerful, He could prevent evil. If He were good, He would prevent evil. But there is evil. So God is not powerful or not good, or perhaps neither good nor powerful. Or perhaps there is no God.

Most people have experienced great suffering, loss and pain, and even believers cry out to God at such times, hoping to understand why such evil has entered their lives. “Why, Lord?” is an almost universal response to suffering. Seemingly undeserved suffering and pain is not easily reconciled with the idea of a good, all-powerful God. The word that theologians use when discussing this issue is theodicy, which comes from the Greek words for “God” and “just.” How can God allow or even cause evil and yet be righteous? How can the existence of God be harmonized with the existence of evil? That’s the problem.³

How should believers approach this issue? Is there a reasonable, biblical defense? Defenders of Christianity have constructed several responses. However, those we’ll examine today are all weak and unsatisfactory. We’ll look at these because they are common in Christianity. We should avoid these approaches in our dealings with critics and skeptics.

Weak and Unsatisfactory Answers

1. God allows evil so that, in triumphing over it, God displays His power and name throughout the earth.

Romans 9:17 *For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.*

This verse implies that God raised up an evil ruler so that He might display His power in defeating him. This is not a bad answer altogether, but it does not really answer the objections posed above. It side-steps the issue. The question still remains: Why is evil required to display God’s power and glory? Much evil goes unpunished, unlike the case of Pharaoh. How does evil, especially when that evil seems to go unpunished, display God’s power? God’s power was evident in Pharaoh’s case, but not seemingly in every case.

2. Evil is just an illusion. If you have the right attitude, it can’t harm you.

Followers of certain Eastern religions (e.g., Buddhism) and cults (e.g., Christian Science) profess to believe this doctrine. If you don’t believe in evil, nothing evil can happen. Some Christians have also suggested that evil is more of a lack of good than anything that exists independently.

But evil does truly exist. Only blind fools believe that pain and suffering are not real. If evil is just an illusion, it's a very strong one. Someone could easily say, "How could God allow such a terrible illusion of pain and suffering?" It is true that evil cannot exist by itself—it depends upon the corruption of that which is good. Nevertheless, evil is real and powerful. It's irrational to deny it.

3. God cannot overcome all evil.

In 1981 Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a popular book entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. His explanation of evil was that although God does the best He can, He is unable to prevent evil in some cases. God is good and is doing all He can, but sometimes His hands are tied, especially when it comes to people suffering the consequences of their own free choices.

Kushner wants to retain God's goodness, but he does it at the expense of God's omnipotence, omniscience, and sovereignty. The Scripture repeatedly teaches that God is both good and all-powerful. One cannot deny any of God's attributes without denying God Himself. A weak God is no solution to this problem. Kushner presents a wimpy "god" who is in subjection to his own creation, which is absurd. With such a weak "god," there's no certainty that evil ever will be overcome. Perhaps there will be no eternal triumph of good over evil in that case.

4. God has created the best possible world.

Some philosophers have argued that since God is good, and that He created the world the way it is, it must be the best possible world. If it could have been better, God would have made it better. The fact that it is not better must mean that it's as good as it could be. Certain evils are necessary to achieve certain good ends. For example, it's good to show compassion for those who suffer, so evil is necessary to allow for the good of compassion. It's logically necessary for some evil to exist in the world.

The world was created good ([Gen 1:31](#)), but not perhaps as good as it could have been. Nothing in creation rises to the level of God Himself, the ultimate standard of good. Creation cannot be as "good" as God. Although God is perfect, He is capable of creating imperfection. Adam was imperfect—he was alone and found no mate among all the animals God had made. Both Adam and Satan were created good, but with the capacity for sin. God *can* use evil for good ends, but it seems reasonable that evil is not really necessary to achieve good ends. Much more good would exist if evil did not exist.⁴

5. God allows men to make their own free choices.

This is one of the most common defences today. Evil came about by the free choice of a man, Adam. That choice was in no way foreordained or controlled by God. God is good and wants people to do good, but does not exercise any influence over the choices people make. Once a choice is made, people must live with any consequences that occur from that

decision. These consequences may be evil. God lets us do what we want, even if it's evil or creates suffering. He does not suspend the laws of gravity to prevent us from falling down the stairs. He does not miraculously redirect the hammer when it's about to hit our thumb. If our choices extend suffering and pain to others, that's just too bad.

The Bible teaches that man does possess a degree of freedom. He acts in accordance with his inner desires, whether they are holy or wicked. Man is not the helpless victim of circumstances. Genetics and background do not determine the outcome of one's life. So man is indeed free to certain extent.

However, the Bible also teaches that God alone is truly free. God is free; man is limited in his freedom. Further, God is fully capable of influencing or foreordaining the "free" choices of man. Scripture frequently speaks of God determining man's choices (cf. [Gen 50:20](#); [2 Sam 24:1](#); [Prov 16:9](#); [Luke 24:45](#); [Acts 2:23, 4:27-28](#)). Even in the matter of salvation, Paul claims that God is sovereignly controlling man's choices ([Rom 9:11-15](#)). The wicked choices of evil men do not obstruct God's plan. Sometimes, in fact, God uses such men and their choices to further His plan. A perfect example of this is the crucifixion of Jesus.

6. God builds our character through suffering.

This argument suggests that God uses evil and suffering to bring man to a state of spiritual maturity. The expression "no pain—no gain" is true in a spiritual sense. Suffering teaches us important lessons that we would not learn otherwise.

We commonly hear this explanation when loved ones are suffering, and it is comforting to know that pain may be of some meaningful use. The Bible does teach that pain can build character (e.g., [Rom 5:3-5](#); [James 1:2-4](#)). Even the discipline of a father is helpful in the maturing process.

Perhaps if all cases of evil brought about the growth of a believer, this defense would be more acceptable. But in most cases, evil does not help anyone. People the world over, Christians and pagans alike, suffer and learn nothing from it. Evil often seems to be meaningless, random, and irrational. Also, maturity for believers can develop through other means than suffering. Suffering is not absolutely required for growth to take place. Further, the ultimate cause for Christian maturity is God's grace, not the presence of evil.

7. God is not directly responsible for sin.

Because God is sovereign, one could argue that all sin and evil is really God's fault. That's the defence Adam and Eve tried with God. But the Bible teaches that God tempts no one to sin. The serpent, not God, tempted Eve. God is the ultimate cause of all things, but only indirectly so. Secondary causes are really to blame for evil.

This “divine permission” scheme suggests that God somehow controls evil apart from controlling the one who is doing the evil. God orders circumstances and leaves the creature to the power of his own choice, unaffected by God.

This defence merely shifts the blame one step away from God. It makes God into a Mafia boss who breaks no laws himself but commands his henchmen to do so. Scripture warns us that enticing someone else to sin is still sin ([Deut 13:6f](#); [Prov 1:10](#)). A person who hires a hit man to murder someone else is equally responsible for the murder. So to blame secondary causes rather than the ultimate cause does not really prevent the blame from falling on God.

8. God is outside the law (*ex Lex*)

God need not follow the Laws He prescribed for men. Human morality does not apply to God. For example, He can take life without being guilty of murder. He can do anything that suits His own purposes, even if it contradicts Scripture.

There is some truth in this approach, because some of the Laws of Scripture and morality do not apply to God. For example, God can and does take life, yet is not guilty of murder. He is the creator and has the right to do whatever He wants with creation.

However, the Law of God reflects the character of God. The holiness, justice and goodness of God are part of His character, and God is thus incapable of violating such attributes. God does, for the most part, honor the Laws that He gave for men. God behaves according to biblical standards. Hence, God cannot unjustly torment men and still not be guilty of sin. Unrighteousness is sin no matter who is guilty of it.

9. We'll appreciate heaven more because of our temporary earthly experience with evil.

Without enduring the results of evil, believers would not know how wonderful it is to live without them. The enjoyment of heaven will be heightened because believers will be able to look back on their earthly lives of suffering and pain and realize how much better heavenly life is without the presence of evil. In order to really enjoy the bliss of heaven, believers had to suffer under evil.

Again, there is some truth to this idea, but it does not explain why evil is necessary to experience the bliss of heaven. Were Adam and Eve less than perfectly happy in the Garden before the fall? Did they really need to experience sin and its consequences to appreciate what they had before evil was introduced? Likewise, one's experience of heavenly bliss does not seem to *require* that he also experience the pains of evil. Could God not make the joys of heaven complete without the previous experience of evil? No doubt believers will appreciate heaven because evil will be eradicated, but the idea that evil is necessary in order to appreciate heaven does not satisfy.

10. The presence of evil has no meaning for an unbeliever.

Even if believers explained what Scripture says about evil, the unsaved won't understand it because they cannot grasp spiritual truth. Those who deny that God exists have no basis for complaining about the presence of evil because without an absolute standard of good, there can be no evil. If there is no God, then morality is impossible.

It is useful to bring this to the unbeliever's attention. The believer can point out that without God, suffering has no meaning or purpose. It's just bad luck. Further, the atheist has the added problems of explaining both good and evil, and how life can be meaningful at all without God. He's in a far worse conundrum than the believer is.

While this response has some merit, it doesn't directly address the issue. It simply tells the unbeliever that he has a bigger problem than figuring out where evil comes from. This is simply a refusal to discuss the issue. It just shifts the argument away from the problem.

Conclusion: Some of these responses maybe valuable, but none of them explain away the problem of evil. Ultimately, they all prove unsatisfactory in one way or another. Most of them attempt to solve the problem at the expense of God's attributes. We should be very cautious when using these approaches in our dealings with critics and sceptics.

As you can see, the problem of evil is a great one indeed. However, it is not insurmountable. The key to an appropriate response is a commitment to biblical revelation. The Bible has the answer to the problem, as we will see in the next lesson.