

# GOD, EVIL, AND SUFFERING

## The Question of Theodicy

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# INTRODUCTION

- If you live long enough, you will suffer....
- Forms of suffering include:
  - Natural diseases
  - Natural disasters
  - Violence and war
  - Aging

# THE PROBLEM STATED

- Perhaps the most difficult intellectual challenge to the Christian faith is the presence of evil in the world
- How do we hold simultaneously three concepts: God's power, God's goodness, and the presence of evil in the world?
- “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing: whence then is evil?” (Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, part 10)

# MODIFICATION OF OMNIPOTENCE

- One way to lessen the tension is the rejection of omnipotence.
- “A variation of this is found in open theism. Here we have a God who can do all things, but does not know all future events. Thus, while possessing the power to do all, he may lack the knowledge of what would be good in a given situation. He may assure us that the victory will be his, but being limited in knowledge though not in power, he may be wrong” (Erickson, 388-89).

# MODIFICATION OF GOODNESS

- Another way to lessen the tension is to adjust the idea of God's goodness.
- Calvinistic determinism rejects human free will. Gordon Clark writes, "I wish very frankly and pointedly to assert that if a man gets drunk and shoots his family, it was the will of God that he should do it" (1961, 221).
- God is the ultimate cause of sin, not the immediate cause. God does not commit sin; humans commit sin although God wills it decretively, determines that it shall happen.

# DENIAL OF EVIL

- A third way to lessen the tension is to deny the reality of evil.
- Certain monistic or pantheistic religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, regard evil as *maya*, an illusion or distortion of reality.
- Christian Science believes that the only reality is God. All matter is unreal, temporal, and an illusion. Even human senses are sources of error and evil.

# WORLDVIEW RESPONSES TO SUFFERING

- Denial of God (naturalism or atheism)
- Denial of evil (Hinduism and Buddhism)
- God and evil are compatible (Christian theism)

# BIBLICAL THEMES ON EVIL

- Evil is a part of the creation of humanity as free beings, the result of original sin (Gen 2:17; 3:2-3; Rom 5:12; 8:19-23)
- Evil is the result of specific sins (Ps 51; Jos 7:24-25)
- Evil is the cause of innocent suffering (Job 1:8)

# BIBLICAL THEMES ON EVIL

- Evil within the mystery of God's divine providence
- “But Joseph said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen 50:19-20)

# BIBLICAL THEMES ON EVIL

- “Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath! <sup>6</sup> I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me, to seize loot and snatch plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets. <sup>7</sup> But this is not what he intends, this is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Are not my commanders all kings?’ he says. <sup>9</sup> Has not Kalno fared like Carchemish? Is not Hamath like Arpad, and Samaria like Damascus? <sup>10</sup> As my hand seized the kingdoms of the idols, kingdoms whose images excelled those of Jerusalem and Samaria—<sup>11</sup> shall I not deal with Jerusalem and her images as I dealt with Samaria and her idols?’ <sup>12</sup> When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, ‘I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes’” (Isa 10:5-12)

# BIBLICAL THEMES ON EVIL

- Evil within the mystery of God's divine providence
- “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. <sup>28</sup> They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (Acts 4:27-28)

# BIBLICAL THEMES ON EVIL

- DA Carson on Compatibilism:
  - God is sovereign but this does not mitigate human responsibility
  - Humans are morally responsible creatures but our actions do not make God contingent

# BIBLICAL THEMES ON EVIL

- **Libertarian free will** “means that our choices are free from the determination or constraints of human nature and free from any predetermination by God. All ‘free will theists’ hold that *libertarian freedom* is essential for moral responsibility, for if our choice is determined or caused by anything, including our own desires, they reason, it cannot properly be called a free choice. Libertarian freedom is, therefore, the freedom to act contrary to one's nature, predisposition and greatest desires. Responsibility, in this view, always means that one could have done otherwise” (Olson 2006, 20)

# BIBLICAL THEMES OF EVIL

- The Bible defines “good” as that which conforms to his will (Rom 8:28)
- God as the victim of sin (Acts 2:23-24)
- The persecuted global church (Matt 5; Jn 17:14-15; Act 5:41; Rom 8:31ff; Phil 1:29-30; 3:8)

# GOD AND EVIL

- God prevents evil
  - “Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her” (Gen 20:6; cf 31:2)
- God permits evil
  - “As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. So Jesus told him, ‘What you are about to do, do quickly’” (Jn 13:27; cf Acts 2:23)

# GOD AND EVIL

- God directs evil
  - “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen 50:20)
- God limits evil
  - “The LORD said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.’ Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD” (Job 1:12)

# THE BIBLE'S PORTRAIT OF GOD

- “Embedded in these passages is the teaching that God is good. In his sovereignty, he stands asymmetrically behind good and evil. He stands behind good until the good is finally creditable to him. He stands behind evil in such a way, although it never escapes the boundaries of his sovereignty, the evil is always creditable only to secondary causalities” (Carson 2015)

# THE DOCTRINE OF CONCORD

- “But we must remember that in all these passages it is very clear that Scripture nowhere shows God as directly doing anything evil, but rather as bringing about evil deeds through the willing actions of moral creatures” (Grudem, 322-23).
- The Doctrine of Concord states—“the simultaneity of first cause and second causes. God achieves his will through the genuine free will of mankind.”

# PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Suffering as a form of temporal discipline (Heb 12:4-11)
- Suffering prepares us to help others (2 Cor 1:3-4)
- Suffering as a form of witness (Matt 5:16)
- Suffering promotes humility (2 Cor 12:7-9)
- Suffering refines our faith (1 Pt 1:6-7)

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is your response to the three solutions to the problem of evil?
- How does human freedom affect the problem of evil?
- How would you minister to people who are suffering?