

Bioethics and the Religious Problem of Evil

John 6:65-69

65 And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father." 66 As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. 67 So Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" 68 Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. 69 "We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."

[Read Brenda's Story](#)

In his book, *Bioethics and the Christian*, David VanDrunen wrote, “A bioethical decision is not merely a response to a health-care crisis, but at the same time it is a response to suffering and the temptations that suffering brings” (61-62). Pain and suffering are inevitable, we live in a fallen world. How do we as Christians reach out to people like Brenda—especially when temptation leads them to make wrong decisions?

It seemed both necessary and fitting to finish our series on bioethics with a discussion of the *Problem of Evil*.

We’re going to look at two things this morning: first, a biblical understanding of evil and second, we’ll consider the question: How do we cope with . . . the *Religious Problem of Evil*?

I. A Biblical Understanding of Evil

A. The Cause(s) of Evil (kinds of evil, real problem of evil)

Who is responsible for evil? Is man responsible? Or, is God responsible? Are there different kinds of responsibility?

The answer to the last three questions is “Yes.”

Man's responsibility is always sinful. Man is morally culpable/morally guilty for evil. Apart from man's Fall in the Garden, evil would not have entered into the world of humanity. The Bible is clear, while man's move towards evil is mysterious; he is to blame for the evil found in this world.

What about God's responsibility? Here's where the difficulty begins. The Bible teaches that God is sovereign over all things (decrees, creation & providence). And so He must, in some sense, *ultimately* be responsible for evil.

General Sovereignty

Psa. 115:3 But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.

Psa. 135:6 Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.

Is. 14:27 "For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate *it*? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?"

Jer. 32:17 'Ah Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You,

Dan. 4:35 "All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And *among* the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'

Eph. 1:11 also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who [God] works all things after the counsel of His will,

Specific Sovereignty - Sovereignty Over Evil . . . This is a hard doctrine

Ex. 14:4 "Thus I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will chase after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD." And they did so.

2Kings 24:1-2 In his days Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up, and Jehoiakim became his servant for three years; then he turned and rebelled against him. 2 The LORD sent against him bands of Chaldeans, bands of Arameans, bands of Moabites, and bands of Ammonites. So He sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the LORD which He had spoken through His servants the prophets.

Is. 45:6-7 That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other, 7 The One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being (עֲשֵׂה) (שְׁלוֹם) and creating calamity (וּבְיָרֵא רָע); I am the LORD who does all these.

Lam. 3:38 *Is it* not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill (הַרְעוּת) go forth?

Rom. 9:11-13 for though *the twins* were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to *His* choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, 12 it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER." 13 Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."

Though responsible for evil, *God Does not Sin*

Deut. 32:4 “The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He.

Lev. 11:44 For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.

Matt. 5:48 “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

1John 1:5 This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.

Reformed Christians have long confessed that God is *responsible for* all the evil that exists. However, *God is not sinful* in his preordaining and controlling of evil.

The Cause of Evil: *Both God and man are responsible for evil*. Man is morally culpable; God is not [God's sovereignty and man's freedom . . .].

B. The Different Kinds of Evil

Theologians and philosophers have typically made a distinction between *moral* evil and *natural* evil. Both result from the Fall, but have different characteristics.

Moral evil is evil that results from morally responsible agents. It's the evil that man does to one another—murder, adultery, slavery, abuse, theft. . . .

Rom. 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Rom. 5:12-14 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—13 for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. 14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.

Natural evil is the result of the curse placed upon nature *because of the Fall.*

Gen. 3:17-19 Then to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life. 18 "Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; 19 By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Rom. 8:19-23 For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. 23 And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for *our* adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

Would there have been Tsunamis, tornados or earthquakes if Adam had never fallen? I don't know. However, they would not cause human suffering or death.

Would viruses and bacteria exist if Adam hadn't fallen? Based on my understanding of the natural world, viruses and bacteria would probably exist in an un-Fallen world. But, again, they would never be the cause of human death.

Cancer, genetic disorders, death by natural disasters generate pain and suffering and are *rightfully* described as natural evil.

C. The *Real* Problem of Evil

There are two ways to formulate the problem of evil. Unbelievers usually attack the Christian faith using what's called the *logical problem of evil*. How can an all-powerful, all-good God, coexist with evil. . . ?

Atheists consider this to be the "Achilles' heel" of Christianity. They see this as a contradiction and, thus, proof of falsehood.

If God were all-powerful, then He *could* prevent evil. If He were all-good, He would *want* to prevent evil. Thus, since Christians admit that evil does, in fact, exist, then the Christian God cannot exist.

This is *really* a poor argument—honest atheists have admitted this. We don't have time to look at all the reasons.

There are several ways to deal with *supposed* logical contradictions. You could clarify the premises (what does it mean for God to be all-good and all-powerful?). You could reject one of the premises (not an option here). A third option would be to simply add another premise—a 4th premise.

God is all-powerful, God is all-good, evil does exist *and*
God has a morally justifiable reason for all the evil He allows.

Problem solved, *supposed* contradiction erased. If God has a good reason—a *morally justifiable reason*—for the evil that he *powerfully* ordains & controls, then there's no contradiction.

However, there is a 2nd way to formulate the problem.

What theologians call the *religious* problem of evil (psychological or emotional). It boils down to this: *Can we trust God with evil?*

It's easy to ask this question . . . and there was a time in my life when I thought it was easy to answer . . . but life accelerates—bad things happen.

How do I trust God (who is sovereign over evil) when He can take my child from me?

How do I trust God when He can bring devastation into my life? And He can do so for reasons I may never comprehend (Job).

How can I trust God when, *what seems to be*, senseless pain and suffering occur?

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book entitled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I don't agree with his theology or his conclusions. But I want you to listen to the opening words of his book. I want you to hear him as a father grieving over his son (Read from pp. 1-3).

Can we trust God with the evil that He has ordained?

God has a morally justifiable reason for all the evil He allows.

However, God never shares that reason with us. . . . I'm not suggesting that God owes us the explanation—He doesn't.

But it's our very inability to understand that makes faith so hard.

Additionally, there's no avoiding one further truth: *God could have done things differently!*

Free will argument (Problem: free will may grant the possibility of evil, but *not the necessity*)

Free Will – While, constrained by our nature, we always do what we want.

Does God sin? No.

Will we have free will in heaven? Yes. Will we sin in heaven? No.

Did all the angels sin? No.

God could have done things differently—He could have created a world w/o sin. . . .

How do we deal with this problem?

II. Encouragement Concerning the Religious Problem of Evil

Is there any encouragement out there? Four things to consider:

A. Consider the Fall. What happened in the Fall?

What exactly was Adam's sin? You all know the story; I don't have to retell it.

God tested Adam—what was the nature of that test? (A proper understanding of that test will shed some perspective on the religious problem of evil.)

Adam and Eve both understood the difference between good and evil. That was not the point of their probation. Their test was whether or not they would trust God with good and evil.

But they didn't, instead they usurped His authority and attempt to *determine* good and evil for themselves.

Their sin was not trusting God. And when we don't trust God with good and evil, we commit the very sin of Adam. Think of the devastation caused by Adam's sin.

We don't see the world the way God does. We see a *miniscule* part of the overall plan of God.

We are not competent determiners of good and evil. Hence, we must trust God with it.

Consider this Chinese parable:

A Chinese farmer gets a horse, which soon runs away. A neighbor says, "That's bad news." The farmer replies, "Good news, bad news, who can say?" The horse comes back and brings another horse with him. Good news, you might say.

The farmer gives the second horse to his son, who rides it, then is thrown and badly breaks his leg. "So sorry for your bad news," says the concerned neighbor. "Good news, bad news, who can say?" the farmer replies.

In a week or so, the emperor's men come and take every able-bodied young man to fight in a war. The farmer's son is spared. Good news, of course.

B. Consider next that God suffers alongside of His people

Scripture teaches that God grieves, experiences sorrow and pain; He knows the feeling of unreciprocated love, He understands the sting of death, He feels the sadness and pain of rebellious children.

Gen. 6:6 The LORD was sorry (בִּחֵן) that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved (עָצַב) in His heart.

Mark 3:5 After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He [Jesus] said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

Eph. 4:30 Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Hos 11:1-9

Luke 13:34 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *the city* that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen *gathers* her brood under her wings, and you would not *have it!*

Luke 19:41-42 When He approached *Jerusalem*, He saw the city and wept over it, 42 saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes.

Ezek. 18:31-32 "Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O house of Israel? 32 "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord GOD. "Therefore, repent and live."

John 11:35 Jesus wept.

John 11:38 So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

God enters into our pain and suffering. This is never more true, never more apparent than at the cross.

C. Consider the Cross

At the cross, Jesus enters into the suffering and pain of his people taking upon Himself their sin, their sorrows, their grief, their guilt—our sin, our sorrows, our grief, our guilt.

Man is morally responsible for evil; Jesus bears that responsibility at the cross. At the cross, Jesus experiences all the pain and evil of the world, as the wrath of God is unleashed upon Him. *Jesus suffers eternally at the cross!*

Why? Because god so loved the world. . . .

At the cross:

Is. 53:35 He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. 4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. 5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well being *fell* upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed.

Matt. 27:46 About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "ELI, ELI, LAMA SA-BACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?"

At the cross, God confronts evil head-on and defeats it.

D. Finally consider the truth taught in John, chapter 6

The text that we began with—John 6:65-69

Jesus had been teaching some very difficult things. . . .

He described the "works of God" as believing in Him, He claimed that God was His Father in a unique sense, that He was the Bread of Life who came down from heaven, He implied that He was greater than Moses, that He was from God and had seen the Father. He told the people that they must eat His Flesh and drink His blood—a picture they should have understood, but didn't—He told the crowd that by doing this, they would live forever. He also taught that in order to come to Him, it must be granted by the Father (6:26-65).

Because of this, “many of His disciples (μαθητῶν) withdrew” and quit following Him. So He turns to the Twelve, “Are you going to leave?” * Peter response directly confronts the problem of evil—“To whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life.”

There are difficulties in following Christ—it's not always easy. We are constantly confronted with our own rebellion and lack of faith. But to walk away from God is condemnation—“To whom shall we go?”

We may not have all the answers; but to walk away from Christ is to walk away from the only source of meaning—the only source of comprehending anything. In [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3).

To walk away from God because of evil is to give up the very reason for walking. To stop trusting God is to give up the right to call anything, “evil.”

It is to walk away from the Standard of good & evil

In addition, to walk away from Christ is to walk away from eternal life—all hope (Brenda's story). It's to walk away from living long enough to see evil's defeat—to see injustice replaced by justice; to see pain and suffering replaced by glory.

I don't know why evil is a part of God's sovereign plan and I don't think we'll ever really understand it.

I do know that we don't want to sin in the likeness of Adam.

I know that God was perfectly content before He created. I know that by choosing to create, He also chose to enter into our suffering and pain. God did not abandon us!

I know that we could spend a lifetime mining the depths, the meaning and the love found at the cross.

John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*

I know (all too well) that getting angry with God is all too easy. But, walking away from God is not an option.

These four truths—the Fall, God's suffering, the cross and Peter's answer—they don't provide a complete answer to the problems of evil. But, if we would meditate upon them, they will lend enough comfort that we can have the attitude of Christ, "Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb 12:2).

There is joy set before you. There is eternal life set before us. If we endure, we too will enter His rest—pain and suffering will be gone!

Further Reading

(I certainly don't endorse everything in these books)

Dembski, William A. (2009). *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group.

Kushner, Harold S. (1981). *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. NY: Schocken Books.

Morgan, Christopher W. & Peterson, Robert A. (2008). *Suffering and the Goodness of God*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

VanDrunen, David. (2009). *Bioethics and the Christian Life: A Guide to Making Difficult Decisions*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.