

If God Exists...



*Why Is There So Much
Evil and Suffering?*

Aaron J. Werner, M.Div., Ph.D.

A Christianity which will bear witness to God's Word . . . will not be afraid to engage in an intellectual and philosophical contest with the prevailing dogmas of its day.

--Oliver O'Donovan, University of Edinburgh

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Disclaimer: These contentions are not necessarily the theological or philosophical positions of Liberty University.

If God Exists, Then Why is There So Much Evil in the World?

One of my favorite TV shows is *The Deadliest Catch*—a documentary about the Alaskan fishing industry. Experts view it as one of the deadliest jobs in the world. The final episode of the first season describes the fate of a commercial fishing vessel. On December 2, 1981, a violent storm assailed the fishing vessel St. Patrick.¹ After several hours, the vessel started pitching more than 90 degrees. Fearing the boat would capsize, the captain ordered the eleven-person crew to abandon ship. Only two survived in the frigid water. The rest, including the captain, perished. When the news reached the builders of the St. Patrick, they were perplexed—for they had designed the vessel to withstand any storm that the ocean could conjure. Ironically, the day after the crew abandoned vessel, the U.S. Coast Guard found St. Patrick—floating safely on the sea. How did this happen? Those who designed the St. Patrick placed so much ballast in her keel that she would, if capsized, immediately right herself. Unfortunately, the captain did not know this fact. His ignorance cost him not only his life but also the lives of eight others. Had he known his ship better, he and his crew would have survived.

Like the St. Patrick's ill-informed captain, many people abandon their faith in Christianity when they feel it is unstable and unable to survive in the tumultuous sea of ideas. In my experience, many who abandon their faith in God do so because of “the problem of evil.” The problem of evil refers to the apparent contraction between the God of the Bible and the amount of evil and suffering we observe. For instance, if God is omnipotent (all-

¹To view this video go the final episode and watch from the DVD from 12:30 to 17:30.

powerful) and omnibenevolent (all-good), then why does he allow atrocities such as the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, the 2004 Asian Tsunami, hurricanes like Katrina, the Jewish Holocaust, the Virginia Tech shootings, or the Tornados of 2011? Is God unable to prevent these things? If so, then God is not omnipotent. If God can prevent such things (and he chooses not to do so), then his goodness appears suspect. Either way, skeptics claim, the degree of evil in the world suggests that the God of the Bible does not exist.

According to prominent philosophers, the problem of evil is “the greatest intellectual obstacle to belief in God.”² How should a Christian respond to this challenge? I believe that the best way to answer this difficult question is to scrutinize all of the possible answers to this question and then determine which is most reasonable. So, “*Come now, let us reason together.*”³

What is Evil?

Before we can discuss various solutions to the problem of evil, we must first define what we mean by evil and explain its origin. Students often ask me, “Did God create evil? If not, who (or what) created evil? If so, how then is God not guilty of evil for creating evil?”

I do not believe God created evil. However, I also reject the idea that evil exists apart from God. Rather, I define evil as the privation of good. In other words, evil is not a thing, lurching around, looking for an opportunity to cause mayhem. Some people view Satan this way—pure evil, roaming around looking for someone to devour. However, the actual Satan possesses good

²Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations of a Christian Worldview*, 536.

³Isaiah 1:18

attributes such as intelligence, strength, cunning, and perhaps even beauty. Nevertheless, he uses these good attributes to do evil.

Evil is not a thing. It is the absence of a good thing. In other words, evil does not have ontological existence, or “thingness.” Evil is like a shadow. A shadow is not a thing, but the absence or diminishment of a thing—light. Evil is like a moth-hole in a wool sweater or a rust-hole in an old car. The holes are not a thing, but the absence of the thing (metal or wool) that should be there. Likewise, evil in the world is not a thing in the world, but the absence of goodness—God’s goodness. Hence, God did not create evil, for evil is not a thing.⁴ However, he did create the possibility of displacing or shielding his goodness. Please do not misunderstand me—evil is very real. Just as darkness is real, so evil is real. Just as we can perceive coldness at night, so we can perceive evil. Evil is the privation of good.

Some students ask me, “If God created the possibility of evil, then isn’t he, ultimately, responsible for the evil in the world? I respond by pointing out that blaming God for evil is like blaming the sun for the coldness and darkness we experience at night.⁵ The sun cannot cause coldness or darkness—it can only warm and brighten. Likewise, God cannot directly cause evil. He can only do what is good and right. However, by removing his sin-restraining hand, he can allow us to do evil that we wish to do.

⁴I am familiar with verses like, Isaiah 45:7 which states, “*I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.*” I am also familiar with verses like Exodus 4:11 in which God says to Moses, “*Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD?*” However, I will argue later that God has good reasons for allowing such evils to occur.

⁵Jonathan Edwards made this in *Freedom of the Will*, 1754, page 404.

Jonathan Edwards wrote,

Sin is not the fruit of any positive agency or influence of the Most High, but on the contrary, arises from the withholding of his action and energy, and under certain circumstances, necessarily follows on the want of his influence.⁶

In other words, sin and evil results when God removes his evil-restraining hand so that created beings such as fallen angels and rebellious humans become free to sin as much as they wish.

However, if God is good, why would he ever remove his sin restraining hand? I believe that God never completely removes his sin restraining hand, for if he did, mayhem would ensue. Perhaps he tightens and loosens his sin-restraining grip from time to time, and from person to person, for good reasons. But, what possible good reasons could God have for allowing evil and suffering? Below I provide thirteen good reasons for why God might allow bad things. First, however, we must discuss some flawed answer the problem of evil.

Possible Answers to the Problem of Evil

There are many ways to answer the problem of evil. Many of them, though, appear to be self-refuting, or they do not correspond with reality. An analysis of these answers, therefore, should reveal their plausibility.

Evil Is Not Real

One way to answer the problem of evil is to suggest that evil does not exist—it is only an illusion. The problem with this position is that it does not correspond well with reality. Evil is real regardless of whether or not one believes in evil. For example,

⁶Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 1754, page 404.

even the people of India (those who believe that evil and suffering are mere illusions) look both ways before crossing a busy street. Likewise, bullets do not care if a person in their path believes in bullets or not. Evil is real. Consequently, denying the existence of evil and suffering is not a practical solution or a livable solution to the problem of evil.

God Does Not Exist

Another way to answer the problem of evil is to argue that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God does not exist. One can summarize this position in the following way:

- (1) God exists.
- (2) God created the world.
- (3) God is omnipotent.
- (4) God is omnibenevolent.
- (5) An omnipotent God could create any world he desires.
- (6) An omnibenevolent God would create a world without evil.
- (7) The world contains evil. (Therefore)
- (8) God does not exist.

The problems with this position include the objections mentioned above. However, the most significant problem with this position is that it is self-refuting. Here is why: The recognition of true evil proves God exists. This inescapable pattern of thought caused a young C. S. Lewis eventually to question his atheism. He explained,

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.⁷

⁷C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2001), 38.

Lewis continued, “If there were no light in the universe and therefore no creature with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be a word without meaning.”⁸ In other words, Lewis realized terms like *evil* and *wrong* are meaningless—that is, meaningless unless there is a real and objective moral law. However, there can be no obligatory (objective) moral law without a moral law-giver (an authority behind the law). Hence, the evil and injustice in the world prove that there must be a God.

If God does not exist, then moral right and wrong (evil) cannot exist because there is no binding moral standard on which to judge the morality of actions or events. In other words, if God does not exist, a person’s preference for (or abhorrence against) something like say, child abuse, is fundamentally no different from a person’s preference for (or abhorrence against) broccoli. If God does not exist, then evil atrocities such as the holocaust, rape, and child abuse, are not evil—they are “what happens” when life happens. Consequently, it is not wrong when a black hole engulfs a planet—it is just is. Likewise, it is not wrong when a mother shark eats her young, or when a male polar bear eats his son to reduce competition. If there is no God, and we are mere animals (albeit, animals with complex brains), then it is not wrong for humans to eat their young. If atheistic (naturalistic) Darwinism is true, then one could see moral atrocities (such as rape and the holocaust) as beneficial to society by allowing natural selection to ensure the survival of the fittest. In short, when atheists use the existence of evil to argue against God's existence, they end up disproving atheism.⁹

⁸Lewis, 39.

⁹For a fuller articulation of this argument, see my moral argument for the existence of God.

God Is Not Omnipotent

A third way to answer this problem of evil is to suggest that God is not omnipotent.¹⁰ Proponents of this position suggest that Satan “*prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*” (1 Peter 5:8), and God cannot do very much about it. One can summarize this position in the following way:

- (1) God exists.
- (2) God created the world.
- (3) God is omnipotent.
- (4) God is omnibenevolent.
- (5) An omnipotent God could create any world he desired.
- (6) An omnibenevolent God would create a world without evil.
- (7) The world contains evil. (Therefore)
- (9) God must not be omnipotent—premise (3) is not true.

The problem with this position is twofold. **First**, it is biblically flawed. The Bible teaches, in many places, that God is omnipotent. For instance, 2 Corinthians 6:18 says, “*I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.*” Likewise, Luke 1:37 says, “*Nothing is impossible with God.*” Hence, God could (if he wanted to) squash Satan as we squash an annoying ant. Alternatively, God could bind Satan in chains as described in Revelation 20:1-2, which says, “*I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.*” In short, God could prevent Satan from prowling around. Yet, for some reason, God chooses not to do so. Since God is good, I believe he must have good reasons for allowing Satan to live. I will provide thirteen such reasons below.

¹⁰Some call this position *open theism*. This heretical idea is gaining adherents among contemporary evangelical Christians.

Second, this answer is logically flawed. Premise (5) is not necessarily true. There is no reason to believe that an omnipotent God could create any world that he desired. Some Christians are uncomfortable with the idea God cannot do everything. However, this should not disturb us. Rather, it should comfort us. For instance, if God is omniscient (all-knowing), he cannot (by definition of being all-knowing) learn or be surprised. Likewise, if he necessarily exists, then he cannot cease to exist. Similarly, if he is perfectly just, he cannot be unjust. In short, an omnipotent being cannot do things that are, by definition, contrary to his essential attributes or nature. Hence, the idea that “an omnipotent God could create any world he desired” seems inconsistent with the nature of God. Perhaps God could not have created a world where free beings could not choose to do evil. Maybe the possibility of evil is necessary so that human beings can choose to do good. Perhaps love, for instance, is not achievable without the possibility of hate.

God Is Not Good

A fourth way to answer the problem of evil is to suggest that God is not omnibenevolent—not completely good. One can summarize this position in the following way:

- (1) God exists.
- (2) God created the world.
- (3) God is omnipotent.
- (4) God is omnibenevolent.
- (5) An omnipotent God could create any world he desired.
- (6) An omnibenevolent God would create a world without evil.
- (7) The world contains evil. (Therefore)
- (10) God must not be omnibenevolent—premise (4) is not true.

The problem with this position is twofold. **First**, it is biblically flawed. The Bible teaches, in many places, that God is omnibenevolent. For example, Psalm 100:5 says, “*For the Lord is good and his love endures forever.*” Similarly, Psalm 145:9 states, “*The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.*” **Second**, this answer is logically flawed. Premise (6) is not necessarily true. There is no reason to believe that an omnibenevolent God would be obligated to create a world without evil. He may have good reasons for allowing bad things—which is my answer to the logical problem of evil.

God Has Good Reasons

A fourth way to answer the problem of evil acknowledges the reality of evil, as well as God’s omnipotence and omnibenevolence. One can summarize this position in the following way:

- (1) God exists.
- (2) God created the world.
- (3) God is omnipotent.
- (4) God is omnibenevolent.
- (5) An omnipotent God could create any world he desires.
- (6) An omnibenevolent God would create a world without evil.
- (7) The world contains evil. (Therefore)
- (11) God must have good reasons for allowing evil.

But, what possible reasons could an omnibenevolent God have for allowing the degree of evil that we experience in our world?

Possible Reasons

An omnipotent God could create a world without evil. Likewise, a loving and good God would not allow evil without good reasons. So, what good reasons might God have for allowing

evil into his world? The following are thirteen reasons that seem, to me, to explain the evil and injustice we observe in the world. I have listed them in what I believe to be *increasing* explanatory power. In essence, they are the reasons the Bible gives for the evil we see in the world.

One: God's Instruction

Some of what we call evil occurs so that God can instruct, educate, or train his children. For example, the Bible says, in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, "*Praise be to...the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.*" In other words, God allows some people (perhaps stronger or mature Christians) to endure pain and suffering, so that they can help weaker Christians (and, perhaps, non-Christians deal) with similar difficulties. So, if you have experienced suffering, perhaps God was preparing or educating you on how to provide comfort to others. If God has comforted you in your suffering, you should look around to see whom you could help through a similar situation. Similarly, if you are experiencing suffering, then look for the help of those who have walked down a similar path. For instance, our first baby died when my wife (Kathy) was in her second trimester. After being comforted by God through a complicated DNC and a difficult recovery, Kathy has been able to comfort many others experiencing similar difficulties.

Two: God's Mercy

Some of what we call evil might be the result of God's mercy. I think this answer can explain why God allows certain atrocities, such as innocent babies dying before they are born. If we assume that babies who die go to heaven, and if we assume that God

(possessing middle knowledge) knows that the baby (if given a full life) would have rejected his grace, or would have suffered unnecessarily in life, then dying in the womb might be the preferred option. Job felt this way. He wrote,

Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse? For then I would have lain down and been quiet; I would have slept; then I would have been at rest, with kings and counselors of the earth.¹¹

Consequently, some of what we call evil might be the result of an all-loving, all-knowing God protecting his children from more severe evils and suffering.

Three: God's Testing

Some of what we call evil is allowed by God as a test of our faith. 1 Peter 1:6-7 says, “*You may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith . . . may be proved genuine.*” Nothing helps separate the “wheat from the tares”¹² better than the persecution of the church. This kind of persecution is so effective at purifying the church that the Bible tells us that it is according to God's will and that we should expect this kind of suffering. Peter wrote,

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange was happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed . . . So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.*¹³

¹¹Job 3:11-14 (ESV).

¹²In other words, the “sheep from the goats,” or true Christians from false Christians claiming to be true Christians. See Matthew 13:29.

¹³1 Peter 4:12-19.

Instead of questioning why there is so much suffering in the world today, I question why God does not allow (or cause) even more. If I lived in some other part of the world, perhaps my view would be different. For instance, as I type this sentence, 900 Christian families are evacuating their homes in Mosul, Iraq to avoid execution by Muslims who gave the ultimatum: “Either convert to Islam or pay the jizyah or leave the city, or face death,”¹⁴ In the past two weeks, Muslims have executed thirteen Christians in Mosul. If God allowed similar persecution to occur in America, many would no longer profess the name of Christ. Consequently, the number one cause of atheism (hypocritical Christianity) might reduce significantly. A purified church and a more glorified God may result.

Four: An Opportunity for Eternal Reward

God may allow some of what we call evil as a blessing in disguise. In other words, perhaps some of what we call evil is an opportunity to receive additional, everlasting rewards. According to the Bible, Heaven will not be the same for everyone who enters her gates. For instance, 2 John 1:8 says, “*Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully.*” Likewise, 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 states,

If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

¹⁴www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/10/11/iraq.violence/index.html Accessed October 12, 2008. Mosul is Iraq’s third largest city with a population of approximately 1.8 million. Jizyah is a special tax levied upon non-Muslims living in a Muslim controlled area.

Undoubtedly, the reward in this passage cannot be heaven because those whose life-deeds are insufficient will lose their rewards but still enter Heaven. Consequently, there must be levels of reward in Heaven. Perhaps those who pass the trials and sufferings mentioned in 1 Peter may receive these eternal, everlasting rewards. Perhaps Job's trial, though it reduced the quality of his earthly life, resulted in a better eternity.

I believe that these eternal rewards will make our temporary suffering seem infinitely insignificant. Paul wrote, in 2 Corinthians 4:17, "*Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*" I believe that Paul is using the phrase "light and momentary" facetiously because a few chapters later, he defined "*light and momentary.*" He wrote, "*Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked*" (2 Corinthians 11:24-25). Hence, God may allow "*light and momentary*" suffering to see who will stick with him during the tough times....so that he can reward those people for all eternity with honor that far outweighs any suffering endured in this life. If I am correct, and heaven will not be the same for all, then we should view suffering as a blessing or an opportunity to gain eternal reward.

We ought to view much of what we call evil from Heaven's perspective. From heaven's perspective, the purpose of this life is not to make us happy here on earth, but make us happy for all eternity. Most people are willing to sacrifice a few years of their life to increase the quality of the majority of their remaining years. For instance, many suffer through the rigors of college and law school so that they can have a higher quality of life once they graduate. However, few people are willing to sacrifice this life for

the next one. Instead, even professing Christians cling to the pleasures of this life as if there is no heaven.

Living for the pleasures of this life is completely foolish and betrays our lack of faith in God. For instance, suppose a billionaire offered to give you either ten thousand dollars today, or if you were willing to wait thirty days, ten million dollars. Which option would a rational person choose? Unless you doubted that you would live beyond thirty days, a rational person would forgo the temporary pleasures of the immediate reward and choose the greater pleasure of the delayed reward.

The Christian life is similar. Consequently, when suffering comes into our lives, we should thank God for the opportunity, and rejoice that he considered us worthy to receive the blessing of suffering. Then, we should continue to worship and glorify God despite our suffering. This kind of faith in God is the kind that gets the unbelieving world's attention. They are not impressed when we thank God for our fancy cars, our big homes, and our healthy children. They are, however, impressed when we continue to be satisfied when we lose every material thing. When we lose our health, our wealth, our children, and every other good thing God has given us—and we continue to say, “God is enough. Only he can satisfy. He is my treasure.” In short, some of what we call evil may be a blessing in disguise.

Five: God's Tractor-Beam

Some of what we call evil is allowed or caused by God to bring people closer to him—especially those who have drifted away from him. For instance, consider Hosea 5:14-15 in which God states,

For I will be like a lion ... I will tear them to pieces and go away; I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them. Then I will go back to my place until they

admit their guilt. And they will seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me.

The people responded, “*Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds*” (Hosea 6:1). Although this response may seem cruel, ultimately, it is an act of love. For instance, in 2001, physicians diagnosed my stepfather with terminal cancer. By the time the doctors identified the problem, cancer has spread into his lymph nodes and lungs. Although they gave him six months to live, he survived for another six years. This experience caused him to become closer to God than any other point in his life. As a result, he died in a significantly better relationship with God than he would have if he had lived a full, cancer-free life. In his own words, cancer was one of the best things that ever happened to him. In a way, it was a blessing. Cancer, for him, was a greater blessing than winning a lottery. Worldly success (such as winning a lottery or picking the right stocks) often takes our eyes off God, but persecution, suffering, and other things that we generally refer to as evil, often bring us closer to God. Therefore, in a sense, much of what we call evil is a blessing in disguise. Conversely, much of what we think of as a blessing is a curse if it causes us to take our eyes off God.

Six: God’s Justice

Some of what we call evil is God dispensing justice. In other words, some of what we call evil is not evil at all. Instead, it is the deserved punishment of our rebellion—what the Bible calls sin. For example, I think most readers would agree that it is morally wrong to demand, for no good reason, \$150 from a single mother who must work three jobs to feed her four children. But, suppose that she willfully and dangerously speed her vehicle through an

active construction zone on the highway. Suppose also that she had no good reason for doing so except that she was missing her favorite TV show and was trying to get home as soon as possible. If a police officer pulls her over, and justly writes her a ticket for the standard fine of \$150, then no moral crime has been committed on his behalf. In the latter case, demanding the money from the single mother seems completely just for she has broken the law.

Let's suppose that the crime committed is greater than speeding. Suppose the crime is murder—unjustified killing. Although most of you would agree that it is evil to lock a man in a small jail cell for the remainder of his life, doing so to a guilty serial killer seems to be a justified action. Furthermore, suppose this serial killer is an unremorseful, child-molesting serial killer that said, “If I escape, I will kill children again.” Is it evil to dispense justice upon such a malevolent being? I don't think so. Failing to dispense justice would be evil. If the judge in charge of dispensing an appropriate amount of justice said to this criminal, “I forgive you, so please don't hurt any more children,” we would demand that the judge be removed from his duties and stripped of his position. Likewise, it is not evil when God dispenses divine justice upon guilty law-breaking, rebellious humans. If he did not, he would be sinning. One example of God dispensing justice is the account of Noah's flood. Genesis 6:5-7 says,

The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, “I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them.”

This calamity killed a higher percentage of the world's population than any war, natural disaster, and plague. Yet, God caused it to

occur. In this case, God destroyed everyone on earth except one family. Another example of God’s justice is that of Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 19:24 says, “*The Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah.*” In both instances, God destroyed nearly everyone—sparing only a remnant.

Some people don’t think that an omnibenevolent God would punish sin. Those who make this claim fail to realize that God is (in addition to being perfectly loving and perfectly) also merciful, is just. In other words, God cannot simply forgive sin any more than an earthly judge can forgive (let off the hook) a guilty murder. God must dispense perfect justice. Otherwise, he would be sinning himself.¹⁵ Just as a medical doctor is not unloving when he kills cancer or a removes leg infected with gangrene, God is not unloving when he removed spiritual cancer or infection from his creation. Likewise, a grocer is not evil when he removes and destroys several spoiled apples from his display. Moreover, if all of the apples were spoiled, I think all would agree the grocer is obligated to destroy them all to make room for good apples.

Perhaps God, in His omniscience, knows who will, given sufficient opportunity, repent, and who will never repent. Perhaps he distributes justice upon these recalcitrant beings before their allotted time is up as a warning to the rest of the world. My biological father once did something similar.

Jed and the Rabbit. When I was young, my family had a chocolate lab named Jed. In my opinion, this dog was cognitively impaired and un-trainable. We couldn’t even teach him how to sit down. Then, one day, my father had an innovative idea. One of our rabbits contracted an incurable communicable disease. To protect our other rabbits, my father reluctantly decided to take our bunny out into the woods and mercifully end its life. As he was

¹⁵For more on this idea see my article titled “What Must I Do to Get to Heaven?”

doing so, my father noticed that Jed, the chocolate lab, was following him. That's when my dad decided to utilize the rabbit's unfortunate predicament to teach our dog a lesson. Rather than kill the rabbit quietly, my father set it down on the ground and shouted, "Sit, sit down, sit bunny, sit." The oblivious bunny ignored my father. So, with the dog watching, he killed the bunny—instantly and painlessly—and buried the unfortunate rabbit. Then, shovel in hand, he looked over at Jed and shouted, "Sit." Amazingly, the dog obeyed without hesitation. Perhaps God, in a similar way, uses those who he knows will not receive his grace, to warn those who may.

If God punished (judged) people when they rebelled in the past, then we have no reason to believe he will not punish those of us who rebel and break his laws, incurring his wrath today. Yet, all of us have rebelled against him by breaking his laws—incurring his wrath. John 3:36 says, "*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.*" Notice that God's wrath does not come upon us when we reject Christ; it was already upon us. Why is God's wrath already upon us? The answer is that we are guilty, rebellious, law-breaking sinners.¹⁶ Hence, because we are all guilty sinners, all evil could be explained (quite easily) in terms of God's justice dispensed to guilty law-breakers.

¹⁶This verse, I think, effectively answers the Oprah's question, "What happens to those who never hear of Jesus Christ? Do they go to hell simply because they have never heard the name of Jesus?" The answer is that no persons go to hell because they did not hear of Jesus. Those who go to hell go because they are guilty, criminals. They have broken God's laws. But, what about those who do not have God's written laws? How can they be held accountable? Those who do not have God's written laws have still broken the laws that he has written on their hearts. For instance, all believe it is wrong to be selfish, yet all have acted selfishly despite this knowledge.

Many Americans have difficulty accepting a God who dispenses justice. They say things like, “My God would not do that—he would never send anyone to hell. He is a God of love and mercy.” I respond, “You are right, your god wouldn’t send anyone to hell because he couldn’t. The reason is that he is a figment of your imagination. He is the product of your mind, a god made in your image—an idol.” In short, those who think that God would not dispense justice have created *a* god by selectively choosing parts of the Bible that they like, and ignoring the parts that they do not like. In short, they have created a god of their liking—a god in their image. This behavior is idolatry—one of the oldest sins in The Book.

Interestingly, people living in various parts of the world find opposite aspects of God's nature repulsive and offensive. For instance, in America, many people admire the God who commands, “turn the other cheek” but reject a God of justice. However, in other parts of the world, the concept of turning the other cheek is highly offensive, and a God of vengeance and justice is praiseworthy.

Nevertheless, even I struggle with the question, “How could an all-loving, all-merciful God send people to hell for all eternity for a mere seventy or eighty years of sinning?” If God is just, why is his punishment so severe? Even if a person sinned every day, all day long, for ninety-nine years, an eternity of punishment seems to be a little harsh. Why is not one-thousand, or one-million years in hell sufficient? Why does perfect justice demand an everlasting punishment?

The answer to this question, I think, requires a full understanding of the nature of a sin committed against an infinitely holy God. Moral crimes vary in their severity depending on the

kind of being upon which we commit these crimes.¹⁷ For instance, it is morally wrong to torture an animal, such as a cockroach, for no good reason.¹⁸ However, pulling the legs off a cockroach is not nearly as wrong as doing the same thing to a greater being, such as a cute puppy. The reason is that a dog is a greater being than a cockroach. Likewise, torturing a human baby is a greater crime than torturing a dog.¹⁹ The *same* crime, therefore, committed against a greater being is a greater crime.²⁰ There are, however, degrees of offense among humans of various status or office. For example, suppose this article offends you—inciting you to slap me in the face and spit on me. Such a crime would invoke, at best, an insignificant fine. However, if you committed the *same* offense against the President of the United States of America, then your penalty would be significantly higher. Correspondingly, if you performed the *same* offense against a king—say the King of Saudi Arabia—while sitting on his royal throne, the consequence would

¹⁷I derived the following argument from the ideas presented by Jonathan Edward in his sermon titled “The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners.” Although this sermon makes “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” seem seeker sensitive, its case is compelling and reasonable.

¹⁸Interestingly, compared to the greatness of God, man is a maggot. Job wrote of God, “*If even the moon is not bright and the stars are not pure in his eyes, how much less man, who is but a maggot—a son of man, who is only a worm*” (Job 25:5-6).

¹⁹Unfortunately, many Americans now feel that hurting a dog is a greater offense than killing a partially-born human baby, or a recently born baby that survived an attempted abortion. Although this is an abomination, I don’t think it counters my argument. Most sensible Americans agree that harming a little girl is more wrong than harming a fly.

²⁰I’m not sure where a cat fits into the spectrum of greater and lesser beings, but I think most would agree that a cat is a greater being than an amoeba, or a maggot, and that harming a kitten is a greater moral crime than killing a virus or bacteria. Of course, this argument presumes the idea that morality exists. For more information concerning the basis and idea of morality, see the first few pages of my article titled “Does God Exist: A Moral Argument”

be even greater. Even though your crime is the same crime that you did to me, his officials would (most likely) execute you without a trial.

Here is the catch. When we sin, we are committing a crime against God. All sin, even murder, is ultimately a sin against God. For instance, when Nathan confronted King David's adultery and murder, David rightly confessed to God, "*Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight*" (Psalm 51:4). Likewise, the prodigal son confessed, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you" (Luke 15:21). Ultimately, all sin is rebellion against God. When we sin, it's like slapping him in the face. The difference, though, between slapping an earthly king in the face, and the infinitely righteous, the infinitely holy king of kings, the king of all creation, is *infinite*. Assaulting the infinitely holy king of the universe is so wrong that it is an *infinitely* vile offense. Consequently, Jonathan Edwards argued, "If there be any such thing as a fault infinitely heinous, it will follow that it is just to inflict a punishment for it that is infinitely dreadful."²¹ According to Edwards, "Nothing is more agreeable to the common sense of mankind, than that sins committed against anyone, must be proportionally heinous to the dignity of the being offended and abused."²² In other words, a crime committed against God is *infinitely* wrong, making the offender *infinitely* guilty.

Unfortunately, for rebellious sinners, God is *infinitely* just. That means he cannot simply forgive us infinitely guilty rebels. Instead, he is obligated (by his nature) to dispense perfect justice. Unfortunately, perfect justice for an *infinitely* wrong offense is an *infinite* punishment—all eternity. That's why God must punish guilty sinners for all eternity—it will take all eternity (an infinite

²¹Jonathan Edward in "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners."

²²Ibid.

amount of time) for us finite beings to atone (or pay for) for an infinitely vile offense. Hence, those who make the objection that God is unjust in sending sinners to Hell for all eternity do not seem to understand the *infinitely* vile nature of sins committed against an *infinitely* holy God.²³

Some people feel that belief in a God of justice will make followers into vengeful, hateful people. I think the opposite is more likely. For instance, if a person does not believe in life after death, and does not believe that God will ultimately dispense perfect justice, then he is more likely to become a vigilante and attempt to take justice into his own hands. Those who believe in a God who will avenge and dispense justice are free to love and forgive their enemies with the way the Bible commands in Romans 12:19-2, which says,

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

When we believe that justice will prevail, then we are free to love and forgive those who have committed wrongs.

²³Incidentally, this line of reasoning also demonstrates—without the Bible—that Jesus is the only possible way to heaven. The rationale is that only an infinite, uncreated being (only God) could suffer for a *finite* amount of time for an *infinite* amount of sin. If Jesus is a created (finite) being, then he would have had to suffer for an infinite amount of time to pay penalty for even one sin of on sinner. However, because Jesus is God (an infinitely holy, uncreated being), he could suffer for a finite amount of time (several hours on the cross) and pay an infinite penalty. Therefore, the created (finite) Jesus of Islam, of Mormonism, of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and of Deism, is unable to pay for even one sin of one sinner—he is completely impotent as a substitute for humankind.

Seven: God's Favor

Some of what we call evil happens to us because God favors us, or is impressed with our goodness or holiness. For instance, consider the account in Job 1:6-7 which says,

One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them. The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it."²⁴

Then God said to Satan, "*Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil*" (Job 1:8). In short, God offered Job to Satan because of Job's extreme godliness. Perhaps some of the evil in your life is the result of God being very pleased with you—so pleased that he hands you over to Satan in an attempt to prove something to Satan. Perhaps God wants to prove that some created beings love him despite their material blessings or lack of them.

Eight: God's Discipline

Some of what we call evil is the result of God's disciplinary activity. For instance, Exodus 32:35 says "*The Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.*" Also, Numbers 1:6 says, "*Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.*" Likewise, Hebrews 12:6-8 says, "*The Lord disciplines those he loves...and everyone he accepts as a son...If you are not disciplined...then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.*" In other words, God, like any loving father, disciplines

²⁴Remember that Satan "*prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*" (1 Peter 5:8).

his children. If God does not disciple you when you fall into willful, deliberate sin, then there is a high probability that you are not his child.

Regarding those taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner, 1 Corinthians 11:30 explains, "*That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.*" In other words, God, like all good fathers, disciplines his children with various degrees of severity. When my four-year-old daughter misbehaves, she received an appropriate amount of discipline—the greater the offense, the greater the consequences. Fortunately, unlike myself, God is a perfect father.²⁵ He will discipline us perfectly.

The primary question I have concerning God's discipline, though, is not why he disciplines his children. Instead, my question is why he doesn't discipline us more often and more severely. For instance, when Jonah did not obey, the Lord severely and immediately disciplined him. God would be justified in punishing our sin the way he punished Jonah. I don't know why he does not do so more often. Perhaps God wants to see who will willingly obey so that he can reward them eternally.²⁶

Please understand what I am saying and what I am not saying. I am not saying that all of our problems are the result of God's discipline. Our problems might have come about for similar reasons that Job's came about—his goodness and spiritual maturity. Whenever something unpleasant happens to me, however, I have never concluded that my difficulties, like Job's, were the result of any extraordinary holiness on my behalf.

²⁵For instance, one the time I accidentally used Clorox-wipes instead of wet-wipes while changing a baby's diapers.

²⁶For an interesting illustration of what it might be like if God disciplined us for failing to obey him, see the video clip "The Evangelism Linebacker."

Nine: God's Redemptive Plan

Some of what we call evil is part of God's plan of salvation. God allows this kind of evil as the means to "save" the lost. An example of this kind of evil involves a former Satanist who I will call Sam. I heard of Sam's story while I was serving as the college pastor at Valley Baptist Church in Bakersfield, California. Sam was part of a Satanist coven in Tehachapi, California. His conversion to Christianity began appallingly. Sam's coven kidnapped a Christian to offer as a human sacrifice. As a Satanic priest performed the ritual, the Christian cried out in forgiveness toward them and that Jesus would forgive them too if they would turn from their sins and turn to Christ. At that instant, God also pierced Sam's heart. According to Sam, he had observed many powerful and miraculous events in Satanism. However, he had never seen anything as powerful as the capacity to forgive one's murders. Consequently, he left the coven and sought out Christ's forgiveness.

The death of this Christian at the hands of evil men is only one example of God permitting suffering for a greater good. In another example, God caused (albeit indirectly) the torture and ultimate death of a completely innocent man. Some people refuse to believe in a God that would allow such evil—let alone cause it to occur. The example I'm thinking of is that of Jesus. The evil and suffering involved in the crucifixion of Jesus did not surprise God. Rather—he planned it. Hundreds of years earlier, Isaiah prophesied of Jesus, "*It was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer.*"²⁷ This truth is why John the Baptist described Jesus as "*The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*"²⁸ and the apostle John described him as "*The Lamb*

²⁷Isaiah 53:10

²⁸John 1:29-30

slain from the foundation of the world.”²⁹ The death of Jesus did not take God by surprise—he planned it before the foundation of the world. But, why would God do this? He did it for a greater good—the salvation of human souls.

Some evils, such as the death of a friend or loved one, often cause us to reevaluate our lives. For instance, when men reach the midpoint of their life and some of their friends begin to die, these middle-aged men start questioning their priorities. Some commit the remainder of their lives to worldly pleasures. Others pursue heavenly goals. Either way, the thought of death (and the reality of suffering) causes humans to reevaluate their lives. Jonathan Edwards learned this truth in his early twenties. Consequently, he resolved to think about his death as often as possible. His ninth resolution reads, “Resolved, to think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death.”³⁰ In short, some evils can help us prioritize our lives in a more godly fashion.

Ten: God’s Glory

Some of what we call evil occurs for God’s glory. For example, John 9:1-2 says of Jesus, “*As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’*” Jesus answered, “*Neither this man nor his parents sinned . . . this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.*” In other words, some of what we consider evil exists so that we will glorify God. But, if we glorify God as a result of his miraculous healings, why do so many godly people die of disease? Wouldn’t God be glorified by healing them? Couldn’t they have

²⁹Revelation 13:8 KJV

³⁰<http://edwards.yale.edu/research/major-works/resolutions>

glorified God more by doing his will on earth? The eleventh answer addresses this question.

Eleven: God's Rescue

Some of what we call evil might occur because we don't deserve to have extremely good people living among us. God removes these people so that they don't have to endure life apart from his immediate presence. I think that's the point of Hebrews 11:36-38 which says of the greatest and godliest men and women to have ever walked on earth,

Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated--the world was not worthy of them.

I think persons like some martyred missionaries may fall into this category—God is relieving those persons of the misery of living apart from his immediate glory. Their death is a reward, an honor. God seems to have a predetermined number of such martyrs. For instance, Revelation 6:9-11 says,

I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

In my opinion, Christians should rejoice for our brothers and sisters who God blesses with the privilege of early admission into Heaven. At the very least, we should be torn between living for Christ and dying. That's how Paul described his desires. In Philippians 1:21-23 he wrote,

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.

God did not design us to live apart from his full presence. Instead, he intended us to live in communion with him. Therefore, even born-again Christians experience emptiness and longing for something that does not exist on this side of heaven. Recently, my five-year-old daughter asked me, “Daddy, are you afraid to die?” “No,” I confidently answered. She responded, “I’m not either—because dying is better because you get to be with Jesus.” I just smiled and thought to myself, “She has a better view of reality than most of the pastors I know.”³¹

Twelve: God’s Perspective

Some of what we call evil cannot be understood from our limited perspective. One day, perhaps, we will be able to see how such evils ultimately occurred for our good. Regarding the return of Christ, 1 Corinthians 13:12 says, “*Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*” Consequently, we may never, this side of heaven, be able to understand why God allows so much suffering. Most likely, he has good reasons for allowing evil that we cannot yet see. In other words, just because we cannot imagine any reason why God might allow suffering, does not mean there cannot be one. For instance, Joseph did not initially see any reason why God allowed his

³¹My daughter’s question resulted from watching a set of videos produced by “The Voice of the Martyrs” which chronicles the persecuted church. I think the most influential video on her was one about Perpetua. The videos can be seen at www.torchlighters.org

brothers to sell him into slavery and why God allowed him to spend so much of his life in prison. But, with time and perspective, he eventually was able to say to his brothers, “*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives*” (Genesis 50:20). Likewise, given enough time and perspective, most of us can see, from our limited perspective, good reasons for the evil and suffering that has occurred in our lives. Therefore, it seems reasonable that God, from his omniscient viewpoint, has perfectly good reasons for allowing evil and suffering. Perhaps, with time and perspective, we too will be able to see some of these good reasons.

To illustrate the value of perspective, consider the following scenario.³² Suppose a masked man, wielding a razor-sharp bloodstained knife, wearing a blood-stained overcoat, was standing over a hysterically screaming woman. Moreover, imagine that some of the man’s companions were physically restraining the woman. What do you, with your limited perspective of the situation, presume is happening? From your limited point of view, and with your limited knowledge of the facts, you probably think something unspeakable is occurring. Likely, you see the man as a villain. However, if I provided you with more details, and I let you see things from a wider perspective, then your evaluation of the situation may change. For instance, suppose I told you that the setting is a hospital emergency room, the man is a surgeon, his companions are nurses, and the woman is experiencing an emergency C-section. Would your assessment of the man’s character change? Yes, with a better view of the situation, we can see that the knife-bearing man is not a villain, but a

³²The following illustration was adapted from Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).

hero. Similarly, I think much of what we call evil will become clear when we see the “big picture” through the lens of additional information. Although there may come a day when we understand why certain evils had to happen, that day may not occur during our stint on earth.

For another example of our limited perspective, consider the following illustration adapted from John Piper: Suppose you are a blacksmith making horseshoes. As you hammer on a white-hot shoe, a slab of molten steel ricochets off and scorches your leg. While you tended your wound, you begin to question why God allowed this to happen. You began your day with significant prayer, and a lengthy quiet-time reading his Word. You have been attending church with greater regularity and studying God’s Word with increasing fervor. In fact, when the tragedy occurred, you were singing a hymn. In your haste, you left the shoe alone unfinished. In the meantime, your apprentice, not knowing it was unfinished, put the horseshoe with the others. A few months later, a hostile army with a powerful cavalry, invades your homeland. When they entered your town, they demanded that you supply them with food and with shoes for their horses. You comply. Their commander has his horse shod (by his personal blacksmith) using the stolen horseshoes. The enemy blacksmith installs the unfinished shoe (which has a thin, weak spot) on the commander’s horse. Later, during a decisive battle, the enemy commander leads a final charge that will route your army. Suddenly, the weak horseshoe snaps and catches on a root causing the horse to fall. The commander crashes to the ground, and his soldiers (galloping at full speed) trample him to death. The ensuing confusion allows the defenders to regroup and rout the invading enemy—saving your homeland from years of tyrannical oppression.

The point of this story is not to justify why God allows evil. He could have caused the commander's horse to fall without burning the blacksmith's leg. The point is that that much of what we call evil may seem completely justifiable if we view it through the wider lens of time and perspective. Although there may come a day when we understand why God allowed certain evils, it may not necessarily come during our life on earth. From heaven's perspective, much of what we call evil may seem completely justifiable.

Thirteen: God's Desire For Voluntary Love

My final contention claims that most of what we call evil is the result of human free will. Although human free will (freedom) seems incompatible with God's sovereignty, the Bible implies that humans have freedom. For instance, Jesus lamented, "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing*" (Matthew 23:37). In short, God seems to allow things to occur that are against his will. But, why would a loving God allow such evils? Perhaps he wants humans to be capable of acting freely—not as mindless, pre-programmed robots. Although God would like to have a world free of evil, he seems to value a world where humans can choose to do right or wrong. Perhaps humans could not truly love without a real possibility of hating. I believe this truth is why God created the "tree of knowledge of good and evil." Although an omnipotent being could create a world where evil was not possible, if he did, then we would not have the ability to choose right. Therefore, he must value the ability to love more than he values an evil-free world.

We humans, in general, feel the same way. For instance, suppose that scientists invented a robotic dog that was impossible to distinguish from a real dog. Imagine one could program it to do all the things that the most intelligent real dogs can do—and more. Suppose you could program it to wag its tail when you pull into your driveway and act as though it loves you. Would you feel as much joy and connection with this dog as you would with one that willfully chooses to love and obey you? Most people would probably receive more joy from a real dog (with fleas, smelly food, and yard staining defecations) over a pre-programmed machine. Perhaps God feels the same way.

Put another way, think of an automobile that has a maximum speed of 54 miles per hour. Suppose the speed limit on a given road is 55 miles per hour. Should the parents of a teenager driving such a vehicle praise their child for not receiving any speeding tickets in that vehicle on that road? Of course not. There is nothing praiseworthy in not doing what one cannot do. Therefore, maybe God had to give us the ability to do evil so that we could have the possibility of doing good.

How can God be sovereign if humans are free? If God controls all things, as sovereignty requires, how can humans control anything? I believe that there are several ways to reconcile this apparent contradiction.³³ All answers to this enigma must maintain God's omniscience, including his knowledge of the future, without dismissing our responsibility or freedom.

³³One solution to this paradox includes the concept of middle knowledge and possible worlds. For a detailed explanation, see my booklet, "Is God Sovereign or Am I Free?"

Conclusion

In conclusion, the problem of evil need not compel Christians “abandon ship.” On the contrary, our ship is the only seaworthy vessel, the only secure worldview. Moreover, I can’t think of any single example of suffering or evil that is not answerable by at least one of these thirteen reasons.

There is, however, a danger that could result from the application of these thirteen reasons. In a sense, these thirteen reasons are like ammunition. But, as with all ammunition, we must use these arguments wisely. We should use it for defense, but not on wounded soldiers. In other words, if someone you know is dealing with pain and loss, and they are questioning God’s goodness and sense of justice, they may not *necessarily* need thirteen reasons why God allows a particular evil to occur. Instead, they probably need counseling and comfort. If this person is not a born-again Christian, you could respond in the following way: We may never (fully) comprehend why God allowed this particular event to occur. But, we do know that God did not create the world with evil in it. We humans brought evil into the world. One day, however, God will eliminate evil and suffering from the world. *Unfortunately*, God will not allow any guilty sinner entrance into this new, evil-free world. *Fortunately*, the Bible teaches that God will erase the guilt and sin-debt of those who receive his grace through faith. There is a condition, though. We must admit our guilt, confess our sins, turn from our sin, and turn to Jesus. Christians call this “receiving” Christ. John 1:12 says, “*To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*” If you have not

received Jesus, then, for the sake of your eternal soul, call on him today.³⁴

³⁴For more information concerning God's grace and personal salvation, see my booklet titled "What Must I Do to Get to Heaven?"