

9 Points for Preaching on the Problem of Evil

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The topic of evil offers many onramps to preaching powerful sermons and proclaiming the gospel. The opportunity is perpetually ripe because people constantly have questions they would like answered. As we articulate answers to a specific audience, our speech should “always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Col. 4:6). As preachers, we face audiences asking questions such as:

- If God created only good things, then where did evil come from?
- What caused Lucifer to commit the first sin when there was no sinful tendency in him or anyone tempting him to sin?
- If God knew Lucifer, and later Adam, would sin, then why did He create them?
- If God is the author of everything real, and sin is real, how can we avoid concluding that God is the author of evil?
- Why does God allow innocent suffering?
- If God is the Creator of the natural world, then why does He allow natural disasters like tornadoes, earthquakes, and hurricanes?
- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- If God is all-powerful, why doesn't He intervene and stop the evil in this world?
- If God is all-loving, why is there a hell?

More Questions Than Answers?

Frankly, there seem to be more questions than answers. But the Bible commands us to be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). To be honest, there was a time when I was not prepared to answer these questions, either. However, after 50 years of pondering them, I have discovered some things that satisfy me. In the hope that others may be helped, too, I have compiled a great many insights and answers in my recent book, [*If God, Why Evil?*](#) It attempts to respond to all of these questions and more in a

simple, biblical, and reasonable way. Below is an abbreviated compilation that I hope preachers will find of great benefit and use in their sermons.

The Atheist's Dilemma

Let me begin with the first public debate I ever had with an atheist. He brought the question up, as they usually do: "If there is a good God, then why does He allow all the evil and injustice in this world?" Having read C. S. Lewis, I was prepared to respond: "If you are claiming there is injustice in the world, where do you get your moral standard of justice? If there is an absolute moral law, then there must be an absolute moral Law-Giver." His reply was so frank and to the point that I hardly knew what to say. He confessed, "I don't have any absolute moral law by which I know there is evil in the world. My judgment is simply based on my own benign moral feeling."

C. S. Lewis's response to this idea is worth pondering: "My argument [as an atheist] 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. . . . **Of course, I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too ...**" The fact is that either the atheist's argument presupposes God as the moral Law-Giver, or else the argument that God "allows" evil and injustice collapses.

Evil Cries Out for God

Rather than cry out against God, evil actually cries out for God in at least three ways. *First*, as just observed, we have no way of knowing something is really evil unless there is a God who established the moral law by which we can judge it to be evil. *Second*, as every pastor knows, the only real help when someone is suffering comes from God. To whom else shall we turn—He has the words of eternal life (John 6:68). When this life is fading, the only real comfort is the hope of eternal life. As the apostle put it, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

Third, the only realistic expectation that there will be an end of evil someday is that Christ has already defeated it. Hebrews declares of Christ that “he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14). The apostle John saw the completion of this process when he wrote, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

If God Created Only Good Things, Then Where Did Evil Come From?

If God is all-good and if He created only good things, then where did evil come from? How can evil come from what is perfectly good? Long ago, St. Augustine answered this by noting that one of the good things God made was free choice. It is good to be free. We all enjoy it. No one marches against freedom. Even if someone did, he would be enjoying the good of his freedom to do so. But if it is good to be free, then evil is possible. We cannot be free to love God unless we are also free not to love Him. We cannot be free to praise God unless we are also free to curse Him. So evil began when a free creature (Lucifer) used his good freedom to will the good of the creature over the good of the Creator.

What Caused Lucifer to Sin?

What caused Lucifer to use his freedom to sin against God? It certainly was not God, since He tempts no one (James 1:13). Further, there was no other sinful being in existence, tempting him to sin. Neither was his nature imperfect, for God made every creature good. What then was the cause of Lucifer’s sin? Very simply put, it was Lucifer himself. A free action is one that is self-caused; that is, caused by oneself. It can’t be caused by another, for in that case they would be responsible for the sin. Nor can it be uncaused, for every action has a cause. *Nothing* cannot be the cause of *something*. This is a fundamental law of all thought: “Nothing comes from nothing; nothing ever could.” But if Lucifer’s prideful act of rebellion against God (1 Tim. 3:6) was not caused by another or uncaused, then it had to be caused by himself.

But If God Is All-Good and All-Powerful, Why Is Evil Not Defeated?

This raises another problem, one that has not passed the notice of unbelievers. When Lucifer sinned, why didn't God nip it in the bud? Why didn't He stomp it out? In short, if the God of the Bible is all-powerful, He could defeat it. If He is all-good, He would defeat it. But it is obvious to all that evil is not defeated. (Just watch the evening news or look around your neighborhood. Evil is everywhere. This is a painful dilemma for a Christian since, unlike Rabbi Kushner, we cannot say as he did: "If we can bring ourselves to acknowledge that there are some things God does not control, many good things become possible." And, "Are you capable of forgiving God even when you have found out that He is not perfect...?")

In short, we cannot agree with Rabbi Kushner that God is not all-powerful or that He is not all-good. For how would we know God was not perfect unless we had some ultimate standard beyond God by which we could measure Him and know that He falls short? And if there were, then by its very nature this Ultimate Good would be God, and the one falling short would be some sinful creature. Further, the Bible declares emphatically that God is "the Almighty One" (Job 11:7) and the "Lord God Omnipotent" (Rev. 19:6). Further, He is all-loving; indeed, "God is love" itself (1 John. 4:16).

Rather than evil defeating an all-good, all-powerful God, such a God guarantees the ultimate triumph over evil. For if He is all-good, then we know He *wants* to defeat evil. And if He is all-powerful, we know He *can* defeat evil. And if evil is not yet defeated, then we know for sure that it *will* one day be defeated. Its defeat is guaranteed by the nature of an all-good and all-powerful God.

What About the Holocaust?

Even with the expectation that evil will eventually be defeated, we still cry out with the prophet: "How long, O Lord?" Few events have stirred hearts more than the Jewish holocaust. Yet as horrible as it was, it does not cry out against God's goodness or existence. As one holocaust survivor declared, "It never occurred to me to question God's doing or lack [of doing] while I was an inmate of Auschwitz. ...I believe my faith was not undermined in the least. It never occurred to me to associate the calamity we were experiencing with God, to blame Him at all because He didn't come to our aid. Why? Because we owe our lives to Him. If someone believes God is responsible for the death of six million...he's got his thinking reversed. We owe God our lives for the few or the many years we live, and we have the duty to worship Him and do as He

commands us.” Job said after severe calamity had struck him, “The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!” (Job 1:21; Deut. 32:39).

A few years ago, when forest fires ravaged homes on the East Coast, I saw a man standing in the rubble of his home being interviewed on a network TV news program. When asked for his reaction to the loss of virtually everything he owned, he replied: “I have my life, I have my wife, and I have eternal life. What more could I ask for?” The poet put it, “God is good when He gives supremely good, nor less when He denies [it]. Even crosses from His gracious hand are blessings in disguise.”

As for why God has permitted so much evil for so long, we can only ask: Who would know better than an all-knowing Being? As for us finite creatures, we must be content to know: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God” (Deut. 29:29). But we do know that the all-loving and all-powerful God is also all-knowing and that He sees “the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10). In our waiting, God is “longsuffering, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Why Earthquakes, Tornados, and Tsunamis?

Why does God permit such horrible disasters? My response is this: “There were no earthquakes, tornados, or hurricanes in the Garden of Eden, and there will be none in the new heaven and new earth. The reason there are such things in between Paradise Lost and Paradise to Come is that “sin entered the world by one man [Adam] and death by sin” (Rom. 5:12), and as a result “the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20-21).

God Never Wastes a Tragedy

Joseph said to his brothers who had sold him to Egypt as a slave, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive” (Gen. 50:21). C. S. Lewis said, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Although God does not cause the evil, nonetheless, He is working in the evil to bring about a greater good.

This is not the best of all possible worlds (Voltaire's *Candide*), but it is the best of all possible ways to reach the best of all possible worlds. The truth is that we can't get to the Promised Land without going through the wilderness. God permits evil in order to defeat evil. He allows lower evil to produce the higher good.

No Pain, No Gain

We can't achieve patience without tribulation or forgiveness without sin. Hebrews informs us: "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11). James wrote, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness" (James. 1:2-3). Even if our suffering is lifelong, Paul reminds us that "this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

I am well aware that in this feeling-oriented culture, where many go to church because it makes them feel better, that these words may seem harsh. But the stark truth is that God is more interested in our holiness than in our happiness. There is no verse in the Bible that says, "Be happy, as I am happy." There *are* verses that declare, "Be holy, as I am holy" (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2). Yes, God is more interested in our character than our comfort, and He has been known to sacrifice the latter in order to achieve the former.

Not only does God's justice demand that sin against the Eternal One has eternal consequences, but His love demands that He respect the freedom in the free creatures He has made. Surely, an all-powerful God could guarantee that all will be saved. Then perhaps it would make it all worthwhile

Unfortunately, being all-powerful does not solve the problem, since God is also all-loving. God cannot force people to believe in Him contrary to their will. C. S. Lewis captured the essence of the problem when he wrote: "When one says, 'All will be saved,' my reason retorts, 'Without their will, or with it?' If I say, 'Without their will,' I at once perceive a contradiction; how can the supreme voluntary act of self-surrender be involuntary? If I say, 'With their will,' my reason replies, 'How, if they will not give in?'"

So God is patient and offers plenty of time for all to repent, but no amount of time will convince the recalcitrant. As Lewis said elsewhere, "There are only two kinds of people in the end; those

who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘*Thy* will be done.’ All that are in hell chose it. Without that self-choice there could be no hell.”

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