

Sam Joeckel
Email: joeckel@earthlink.net

SPIRITUAL MATURATION THROUGH EXPERIENCES OF EVIL: ANSWERING THE QUESTION, 'WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?'

The problem: 1) If God is omnipotent, he can prevent all evil.
 2) If he is perfectly good, he must want to prevent all evil.
 3) But evil exists, so God is either not omnipotent, not perfectly good, or neither omnipotent nor perfectly good.

The contention (my fundamental answer to the problem): "If there were some greater good that could not possibly occur unless evil were permitted, it might well figure in God's reason to permit evil."

Daniel Howard-Snyder, in *Reason for the Hope Within*

I. MORAL EVIL: Evil inflicted on one person by another, e.g. murder, rape, war, etc.

Possible answer: the free-will defense. Free will is a gift from God but is misused in our fallen world.

C. S. Lewis: "And free will is what made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating" (*Mere Christianity*).

II. NATURAL EVIL: Evil resulting from natural events, e.g. disease, sickness, earthquakes, tornadoes, etc.

Possible answer:

- A. The paradox of evil: Evil can occasion human responses that allow God to radically transform people by strengthening faith, developing character, shifting perceptions, etc.
1. Paul: "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (1 Corinthians 12:7-10)
 2. John Donne: "...affliction is a treasure and scarce any man hath enough of it. No man hath affliction that is not matured and ripened by it, and made fit for God by that affliction" (*Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*).
 3. Nicholas Wolterstorff: "Standing on a hill in Galilee Jesus said to his disciples: 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.' Blessings to those who mourn, cheers to those who weep, hail to those whose eyes are filled with tears, hats off to those who suffer, bottoms up to the grieving. How strange, how incredibly strange! 'Blessed are those who mourn.' What can it mean? One can understand why Jesus hails those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, why he hails the merciful, why he hails the pure in heart. These are the qualities of character which belong to the life of the kingdom. But why does he hail the mourners of the world? Why cheer tears? It must be that mourning is also a quality of character that belongs to the life of his realm. Who

then are the mourners? The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God's new day, who ache with all their being for that day's coming, and who break out into tears when confronted with its absence. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm of peace there is neither death nor tears and who ache whenever they see someone crying tears over death. The mourners are aching visionaries" (*Lament for a Son*).

4. Wolterstorff: "Suffering may do us good—may be a blessing, something to be thankful for. This I have learned. Ordinarily we think of the powerful and wealthy as blessed; they enjoy the 'good things of life.' But maybe the little ones, the downtrodden peoples and assaulted persons, are blessed as well. I do not mean that they will be compensated for their sufferings. I mean that perhaps the treading down is itself a blessing, or can become a blessing, rich as any coming to those we call 'the lucky ones.' Suffering is the shout of 'No' by one's whole existence to that over which one suffers. And sometimes, when the cry is intense, there emerges a radiance which elsewhere seldom appears: a glow of courage, of love, of insight, of selflessness, of faith. In that radiance we see best what humanity was meant to be. In the valley of suffering, despair and bitterness are brewed. But there also character is made. The valley of suffering is the vale of soul-making" (*Lament for a Son*).
5. 2 Corinthians 1:1-11; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:1-12; 1 Peter 5:8-10
6. Practical application

B. Limited-perspective view/the presumption to question God: God's ways are not our ways. From our perspective, God's permission of evil may seem unjust or even cruel, but we can rest assured that God is in control and that evil serves a purpose that is beyond the scope of finite human perception.

1. Job 42:1-4: "Then Job replied to the Lord: 'I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, "Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?" Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.'"
2. Romans 8:18-39: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."
3. William Lane Craig: "What about God's having morally sufficient reasons for permitting the harm in the world... What I'm saying is that we're not in a good position to assess with confidence the probability of whether God could have a morally sufficient reason for permitting any specific evil. Let me give you an example from science: chaos theory. In chaos theory, it's been shown that even the flutter of a butterfly's wings could set in motion forces that would result in a hurricane over the Atlantic, and yet no one observing that butterfly would be able to predict that outcome. Similarly, when we see, say, the murder of an innocent man, we have no idea of what ripple effect that might send through history, how God's morally sufficient reason for permitting that might not emerge until later. We're simply not in a good position to assess that kind of probability" (The Craig-Washington Debate: Does God Exist?)
4. C. S. Lewis: "Can a mortal ask questions which God finds unanswerable? Quite easily, I should think. All nonsense questions are unanswerable. How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round? Probably half the questions we ask—half our great theological and metaphysical problems—are like that" (*A Grief Observed*)

C. Evil as a form of chastening/punishment/disciplining

1. Hebrews 12:7-10: "'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.' Endure hardship as discipline;

God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.”

2. John Donne: “And therefore, though I pretend to no other degree of wisdom, I am abundantly rich in this, that I lie here possessed with that fear which is thy fear, both that this sickness is thy immediate correction, and not merely natural accident...”
3. Practical application

D. Propositional versus relational answers to the problem of evil: In the absence of propositional answers to the problem of evil, God’s promise of his presence during our suffering can be sufficient.

1. Job 42:4-6: “[God] said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ My ears have heard you but now my eyes have seen you.”
2. 2 Corinthians 1:3-5
3. Practical application

E. New-order perspective will make old-order perspective appear relatively insignificant

1. Revelation 21:3-4: “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”

F. The pain and suffering of God: Jesus subjected to evil

1. John 11:35: “Jesus wept.”
2. Nicholas Wolterstorff: “How is faith to endure, O God, when you allow all this scraping and tearing on us? You have allowed rivers of blood to flow, mountains of suffering to pile up, sobs to become humanity’s song—all without lifting a finger that we could see. You have allowed bonds of love beyond number to be painfully snapped. If you have not abandoned us, explain yourself... We strive to hear. But instead of hearing an answer we catch sight of God himself scraped and torn. Through our tears we see the tears of God... A new and more disturbing question now arises: Why do you permit yourself to suffer, O God? If the death of the devout costs you dearly, why do you permit it? Why do you not grasp joy? Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it” (*Lament for a Son*)
3. Practical application