

Evil in the World

“But what about evil in the world?” With these half dozen or so words, unbelievers – especially educated ones – justify not having to think deeply about God. “If God is loving and good, and if God is all-powerful, how come he allows evil in his world? There must not really be any God.” This is a cop-out, an excuse to continue ignoring their Creator. There are answers to this problem, which is called theodicy. But most unbelieving people don’t want answers because the existence of evil is too convenient; it intellectually justifies continuing to live without God. So. . . here are some thoughts. They may not fully satisfy the atheist, I admit. That’s because without specific revelation, we’re unable to comprehend or explain that which is transcendent. But from the Scriptures we have, we can understand something about evil.

First of all, with logic on our side, we can simply dismiss the question. Almost all unbelievers in the Western world hold to Darwinian evolution and the belief that the world is just matter acted on by time and chance, by natural laws, and there’s nothing supernatural. God doesn’t exist, in other words. This is called naturalism. So then there’s no such thing as evil! After all, if we’re just atoms and chemicals interacting, nothing can be evil. What difference does it make to the electrons and protons of matter, which is all we essentially are according to their naturalism, if a tsunami wipes out thousands of lives, or some other horrible event occurs. There exists no basis in naturalism for moral sentiments or for any kind of moral analysis. There can’t be anything “bad” about rape of a child, and there can’t be anything “wrong” about a Holocaust, because these just atoms in motion. Nature is mindless and amoral. It’s only by believing in the holy God who gave us a moral nature when He created us that we can discuss the presence of evil in the world. By the way, I find it interesting that atheists love to raise the question about evil, but they never think to ask, Why is there good in the world? To the one who holds to naturalism, there should be no such thing as good either. To them, good and evil are just arbitrary social constructs, preferences. Whereas unbelievers have no basis for being concerned about evil, the presence of evil in a world created by a holy God is an important matter for believers to wrestle with. So let’s discuss it.

There are basically two kinds of “evil” in the world: that due to natural events, disasters such as diseases, floods, tornados, earthquakes, droughts, etc. And that due to sin (called moral evil). Most of the evil that we encounter in the news is the first kind, natural evil. But in reality the very worst evil, and the most extensive, is due to the human sin nature expressing itself. Thus genocides, slavery, massacres, abortions, pogroms, mass shootings, poverty, etc. We were made with (a measure of) free will, which means that we have the freedom to rebel against God, to ignore His laws, to do as we please without regard to the harm we cause others. Of course, God will hold us accountable for all that sinful activity on a future day of judgment. But for now, in this life, the sin nature we all possess explains much evil in the world. Unbelievers reject this, because they don’t want to acknowledge sin, their sins, or their propensity to sin. But Christians should be able to understand why there’s evil. We sin!

But, why does God allow sin to occur or to be expressed? He has great purposes in all that He does, and we don’t have to know them. We’re limited to what He has chosen to reveal in the Scriptures. But we can infer that in His wisdom and exhaustive knowledge of all possibilities and their consequences, He has determined that this present world is the very best of all possible worlds. He allowed sin to enter His very good creation, for a very good reason.

What about all the evils due to nature gone amuck? For that too God is responsible. As a judgment, when the first couple disobeyed God and transferred their loyalty to the wicked serpent, God had to “curse the ground,” that is, rework His creation so that these evil events occur. We should assume there were no venomous scorpions or mambas in God’s original creation, but were put into the world because of human sin, and that when creation is restored during the Millennium, such will be removed. Often, both types of sin, natural sin and human sin, work together as we’ve just witnessed in the Covid-19 pandemic, in which God sent a virus into the world, and innumerable persons expressed the totalitarian impulse within them to augment the misery.

Satan brought sin and evil into God’s creation, and he and a host of demons continue to exploit our sin nature to work evil. In the Book of Job, we read that Satan was the cause of much evil, but that was only by God’s permission and with limitations that God imposed. That lesson probably can be generalized. It’s impossible to think about evil without bringing Satan into it. We need to acknowledge his existence, his character, and his purposes. He’s the personal embodiment of evil and responsible for moral evil. During the Millennium, Satan and all those other wicked beings will be bound in a special prison so that the inhabitants of that future era can’t be tempted or influenced to sin.

Defeating evil accomplishes a much greater good than if evil were simply taken away. God is good and goodness suffuses His creation. Evil doesn’t just distort good, it negates it. So God must deal with it thoroughly. He is certainly not

indifferent to evil. (We are, but He isn't. Indifference to evil is itself evil.) God created a beautiful world, something He loves. Satan's challenge seems to be, How does God react to His perfect creation being corrupted by the entrance of sin and evil, by his usurping the authority God gave to the humans? Will God exercise His great power to force defeat upon Satan? That would be using Satan's own methodology and lust, and Satan would win. That was probably what Satan expected. Instead, the Incarnation! God himself entered His creation to deal with sin and evil. And the resurrection anticipates a new creation devoid of evil. God experienced humiliation, suffering and death, in full solidarity with fallen humanity, to redeem us – and to redeem His creation.

So, Christians can't get around it: God is ultimately responsible for the evil in our world. (This is not to say that God has ordained sin and evil. That would deny human freedom! And this doesn't mean that God is using evil to accomplish some greater good. That would diminish God's infinitely perfect attributes.) God is holy and good. If He hadn't created, there'd be no sin and evil. One of the reasons for the cross is, that's how God dealt with evil. The full outworking of what Christ accomplished will occur in the future. But God is at work using His creation to do great things. One future day, we'll understand it all. In the meantime, to think deeply about God and the world we live in is to trust Him with such mysteries as why He has allowed evil. God allowed evil to fulfill His intent to display the richness of His glory.

Whereas unbelievers actually participate in evil by rejecting God's rule, even as they proudly question the existence of evil, believers need to humbly trust God that He is accomplishing His purposes. The resurrection of Christ testifies that God is doing something really stupendous in the world, and we can rest in that and hope to see its fulfillment.

What most Christians don't realize is, we are called to join God in defeating evil. By taking on God's characteristics of selflessness, humility, and serving others without receiving any benefit in return, we are doing something about evil. We defeat evil by refusing to yield to temptation, by refusing to respond to circumstances with bitterness or hatred or an unforgiving spirit, by extending grace when it's needed. In other words, by being Christ-like. Overcoming sinful lusts and worldly pursuits defeats evil. The "spiritual warfare" chapter at the end of Ephesians is carrying out the Great Commission; we snatch souls from Satan and bring them to God for blessing. That too is defeating evil. We need to deliberately put ourselves in situations where we can engage evil so as to defeat it. It's why the Son was sent, as we are.

Unbelievers, by the way, cannot have what they foolishly demand. They naively suppose that God should have created a world in which there would be no evil. But to do that would itself be evil, because deliberately forcing God's holiness onto His creation would deny the freedom to choose the good. More important to God, it seems, are creatures who, endowed with moral awareness, freely choose the good. Trusting the Son, Christ Jesus, is the one great good God seeks in us. Although of course freedom can be used for evil, the freedom to choose to love Christ and be loyal to Him is more valuable; it glorifies God's goodness.

I suggest that this question that unbelievers pose, Why is there evil in the world? is insincere. They ask it to excuse their own moral depravity. They suppose they are virtuous people, but it's only when we are confronted by the Gospel that we become aware of the sin that dwells within. Unbelievers may act civilly, but they are actually capable of horrendous cruelty and violence. Their "morality" is but a thin veneer that exists only because circumstances in our society allow it. The natural disasters that occur should be understood as God's "wake-up call" to think deeply about life and thus lead to repentance, not to question God's goodness or His existence. Natural evil teaches us that we're not in control, as we like to think; God is, and we're to submit to His authority. We're creatures, finite, mortal creatures; we're not gods. When atheists ask this question about evil, they *never* care to hear about the cross. It's at the cross that the greatest evil in all human history occurred, the deliberate attempt to do away forever with our God and Creator. Yet God brought the greatest good conceivable out of it, the forgiveness of sin and the reconciliation to their Creator of a fallen and condemned race.

Let's return to the Book of Job. With this taunt, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan accuses Job of serving God and living righteously only for the benefits that God returns to him. As if the relationship were a deal for mutual benefit, as if there's an arrangement, a negotiation, a business contract between two parties. In other words, Satan argues, Job is selfish. He wants the blessings, the wealth and the health that God puts on offer, and to get that, he'll serve God and live obediently. Satan knows *nothing* of love for God. He's in love with himself and supposes everyone else must be too. And at the end, although Job lost everything, in spite of the ghastly evil done to him, he still fears God! God loves Job. And Job loves God, not for the blessings but *for who God is*. May it be so with us! Yes, there's evil in our world, massive evil, but God is lovely. By committing to Christ and to a life of loyalty, obedience to His Word, and service, we express our love to God. The first thing we learn about God in the Bible is, He is good. We trust in that, despite circumstances.