



L'Abri Papers #MK01



# The Problem of Evil

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How can there be a God who is both good and all powerful in a world like this where there is so much evil, suffering, and injustice. Philosophers and theologians throughout the centuries have written volumes on this question, the question of theodicy. Many of these writings treat this problem as though it were purely academic, which is unhelpful for real people with real pain: There are many for whom the problem of evil is anything but an academic issue. We may be going along smoothly now but we all know that none of us is personally immune to devastating suffering. We are also exposed continually by the media to examples of suffering that are absolutely overwhelming. This is not a new problem. Ever since the fall, men and women have been aware of cruelty, suffering, injustice, and the sheer capriciousness of nature. There is no simple answer to the problem of evil. It is presumptuous even to try to cover it meaningfully in one article. Yet the Bible does give us a framework, guide lines that will help us to think clearly and cope practically with this very relevant issue.

### **The Problem of Evil for the Believer.**

The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk expresses the problem very powerfully. How could the God whom he did believe in and whom he knew as the God of Israel tolerate so much evil, first of all in his nation and then even further beyond that in the world as a whole? He begins by complaining to God about the injustice and wrong that are among God's own people the Israelites, who were meant to be a light in this dark world. "How long O Lord, must I call for help but you do not listen; or cry out to you "violence" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me, there is strife and conflict abounds, for the law is paralysed and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous so that justice is perverted". (Habakkuk 1:2-4) Later on God gives him the uncomfortable answer that He is going to use an even more unrighteous nation than Israel to judge Israel. He is going to call on the Babylonians, who were renowned for their idolatry, their arrogance and their cruelty to judge God's people. So Habakkuk's dilemma increases as he wonders what is going on in the mind of God. He reminds himself that God is eternal and good and holy, and then cries out in perplexity "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil, you can not tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?"

Habakkuk's problem then, and the problem for believers ever since, is a problem for faith, a challenge to trust God in the face of a situation which we just cannot understand. It is intensified by the fact that in the Bible God has led us to expect a consistency between his own actions, and what he requires of us his people. We as Christians are commanded to do good and to fight evil and injustice, and yet so often God seems silent and inactive in the

face of evil and injustice. To put it another way, the believer's problem is that he seeks to hold together three Biblical truths, the goodness of God, the omnipotence of God, and the reality of evil. Eliminate one of those truths and you get rid of any sort of logical problem. You can say that God is good, but he is weak, so he simply cannot do anything about the suffering and evil in the world. Or you can say that God is all powerful but he is not good, so he does not care about the evil or maybe he even causes it. Or, thirdly, you can say that God is good and all powerful but the evil is not real; what we think as evil really is not evil, if we could see the picture truly we would see that all is right in the world. There are times when Christians attempting to answer this problem have soft-pedaled or compromised one of these three teachings. We must look briefly at some of the ways this has happened because in the end they create more problems than they solve.

Undercutting the reality of evil is probably the most common example. Christians will often spiritualise sickness, suffering, tragedy, and death, implying that these things are not as bad as they seem. In the fine hymn "All creatures of our God and King" there is a line which says "Thou most kind and gentle death waiting to hush our latest breath". That is simply not a biblical formulation. Death can be a release at the end of a terrible illness for a believer, but we are never presented in the Bible with the idea that death is kind and gentle. Death is an enemy to be conquered. It took the Son of God himself to come into this fallen world and die to conquer this enemy. Part of this teaching is often the idea that it is wrong for a Christian to grieve over the loss of a loved one. Some Christians have maintained that the only appropriate response to the death of a Christian loved one is to praise God that the loved one is with the Lord. That is part of our response, but the Bible is clear that it is not the only appropriate response. Grief, tears, even anger, are appropriate responses before death and all of its ugliness.

When Jesus was at the tomb of Lazarus he was furious at death. The word in Greek describes the anger of a warhorse charging into battle. Jesus mourned the death of his friend and all the separations that came with death. At the same time Jesus was furious with death, the last enemy. If we spiritualise evil, suffering and death, and say somehow it is really fine, then we are actually blurring the very clear biblical distinction between good and evil in a way that is more like Eastern Monism than Christianity. Isaiah warns us in Isaiah 5:20, "Woe to those who call evil, good, and good, evil". Good and evil are real, they are distinct enemies for ever, and there will be a final separation of the two.

The second biblical truth which is sometimes compromised in order to find a logically satisfying answer to the problem is that of God's power. Some tackle the problem by saying that things happen that are out of God's control. This raises the issue of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. This is not the place for a full discussion of that issue, so let me simply say that both are taught clearly and held together in scripture despite the fact that we may not be able to hold them together in our minds. The nature of God and his working in this world is a mystery. The Bible clearly teaches that God is the sovereign Lord and that nothing happens that is out of his control, and yet he is not responsible for evil. If we say that God is not ultimately in control then there must be something standing behind God, whether chance, fate, chaos, or the Devil himself, which is in control and is therefore greater than God. Rabbi Harold Kushner's well known book, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" basically takes this point of view. Kushner faced the awful situation of having a child die of a terrible degenerative disease. Trying to make sense of God's goodness he puts forward a principle of chance or chaos behind a well meaning God. In the very end of the book he virtually blames God for his weakness and inability to do anything.

If we say that God is not in control and something else behind God is in control, then we cannot ever gain hope and confidence from the wonderful promises in the Bible that tell us that we are safe in the hands of God. Romans 8:28 tells us, "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose". That is only true because God is in control and is sovereign and does stand behind all of life in a way that we can not always understand. In Psalm 23 David affirms, "'The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want. Yea though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death I will fear no evil". That is a vain hope unless God is really sovereign and stands behind death, evil and everything else as a more powerful force and one who can protect us even through death. This is the confidence that Habakkuk came to at the end of his book where he reminds himself of God's faithfulness in the past and at the same time is very honest about his fear and his anguish as he thinks of what is coming. God has told him that the nation of Israel is sinful and is going to be judged. Habakkuk tries to return to confidence in God's sovereign goodness, yet speaks of his gut reaction of fear. "I heard and my heart pounded my lips quivered at the sound, decay crept into my bones and my legs trembled, yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us". He speaks very honestly about the fact that he is still experiencing anguish and terror, knowing that this judgment is coming on Israel, and yet he reminds himself that God really is in control, and that God can be trusted. "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my Saviour, the Sovereign Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the feet of the deer, he enables me to go on the heights". He ends with the confidence that God is sovereign and there is no chance, fate or any thing that is behind God. We must not undermine God's sovereignty in an attempt to reassure ourselves of God's goodness. The promises of God can only be true if God is in control.

The third biblical truth which is sometimes compromised, though not consciously so, is that of God's goodness. I am thinking of those who would maintain that everything that happens is the result of the direct working and will of God and thus that we must thank God for whatever happens. This is a distortion of the biblical picture. The Bible says we should thank God at all times and in all circumstances even though the circumstances may be terrible, but we are never told we must thank God for the terrible circumstances, as if they were directly coming from him. We are not told to thank God for the bad events themselves, but rather for his power and his love and his goodness in spite of them and in the midst of them. Things that happen in this world may be the work of the devil or may be the direct work of sinful human beings. God is not the only significant actor in this world. Both human actions and the devil's actions are real and have real effects. If we minimize the reality of human (and demonic) causes, we are very close to blaming God for the evil things in the world. The petition in the Lord's Prayer which says, "'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven", very clearly implies that God's perfect will is not being done on earth now, as it is in heaven. Not everything that happens now is God's perfect will, and good, and thus is not to be embraced thankfully.

The question of evil is a real problem for the believer, but we will only increase the problem if we attempt to resolve it by side-stepping any of the clear biblical teachings on God's goodness, his power and the reality of evil and suffering in the world.

### **The Problem of Evil for the Non-Believer.**

Every person who has ever lived in this world has to make sense of good and evil, not just the believer. In fact, we will see that the non-believer has the more serious problem than the Christian believer. C. S. Lewis described his feeling before he became a Christian in these words, "If you ask me to believe that this world is a work of a benevolent and omnipotent

spirit, I reply that all the evidence points in the opposite direction; either there is no spirit behind the universe or else a spirit indifferent to good and evil, or else an evil spirit". Many Christians encountering this accusation have become defensive, trying to apologise for God with weak arguments, saying that there are more good things that happen in the world than bad things, or that God always brings good out of evil. These kinds of responses do not answer the challenge at all. What we as Christians have to do is to resist the pattern of getting on the defensive and realise that we have some very searching questions to put to the non-Christian.

In sensitivity and love we must challenge the non-believer to show how he make sense of good and evil in this world. How does he know what is good and what is bad? How does he know that his moral standards by which he judges God are anything more than social convention or personal opinion? If, as many people believe, morals are no more than social conventions then the non-Christian is in no position to make any moral judgements much less bring God to trial for breaking some relative social norms. If all moral feelings are simply conditioned, why is it then that all men and women at all times have had the need to invent moral standards? Many people today say that there are no absolute rights and wrongs; it is just a question of our upbringing or our aesthetics, what pleases us and what does not. Yet you will find very few people consistent enough to say that Hitler was doing no more than flouting convention. Most people feel that what he did' was wrong in an absolute sense. People are in the contradictory position of saying that there are no absolutes, and yet responding as if certain things that go on in the world really are evil and not just contrary to my taste. We need to press people to be consistent in this area. To put it a slightly different way, if there are no moral absolutes in the world, then why do we still consider the psychopath, the man or woman with no moral sense, to be sick? Why do we not exalt him as the only one who faithfully lives out what is true?

Most fundamentally, if there is no God, how can we make moral distinctions at all? Even most relativists still behave as if certain things are self-evidently good and other things are self-evidently bad. Killing, hatred, tyranny, and poverty are seen as bad. Love, toleration, freedom, justice are seen as good. Mother Teresa has received numerous rewards for benevolence, often from the very people who do not believe that there is such a thing as good or evil. In Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamasov" Ivan points out that "If there is no God then everything is permitted". A professor at Berkeley in the sixties wrote, "we can no longer define evil. It is simply an ancient heavily fated word we haul out of the closet when we are shocked, horrified, nauseated or outraged".

In summary, the non-Christian who challenges the goodness of God, only does so because he thinks he has a clear knowledge of good and evil apart from God by which to judge God. He is tacitly claiming to have a standard that is transcendentally right and good in order to stand above God and judge God. Yet many of these very people claim that there are no absolutes, thus destroying any possibility of standing in judgment over God and saying where he fails and where he succeeds. In fact without a God who has spoken into the world and who has told us what is right and what is wrong, there is no solid basis for any moral distinctions, nor is there any knowledge of what those moral distinctions are. All we have is human finite opinions, and we are in no position to say that one is better than another.

In contrast, the Bible tells us that the strong ethical feelings which all men and women experience whether they are Christians or not are there because there is a God who is a moral God and all men and women are made in his image. Different cultures may have different moral codes, but there is no culture that does not affirm some morality. This moral

sense is not absurd but corresponds with the character of the creator who defined good and evil in the first place and who made us in his image.

### **Towards a Biblical Resolution**

C. S. Lewis, in "The Problem of Pain" remarks, "To ask whether the universe as we see it, looks more like the work of a wise and good creator, or the work of chance, indifference or malevolence, is to omit from the outset all the relevant factors in the religious problem. Christianity is not the conclusion of a philosophical debate on the origins of the universe; it is a catastrophic historical event. It is not a system into which we had to fit the awkward fact of pain. It is itself one of the awkward facts which has to be fitted into any system we make. In a sense, Christianity creates rather than solves, the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving". He is pointing out that we cannot think of Christianity simply as something into which we have to fit this awkward fact of pain, but rather that Christianity presents us with some very awkward facts that happen in our real history which have to be dealt with if we really want to get at the truth about anything, including the problem of evil.

If all we had in the world was pain and suffering, then there would be no intellectual problem. It is the fact that throughout history there is evidence for a good God that gives us this seeming paradox. Why is it that people have attributed this sort of world to a kind and good creator? It is clear that the affirmation of a good god was not made up solely by observing nature and history without any outside information. That confidence came because God revealed himself as a good and loving God into this broken world and sorrowful history. The culmination of this revelation came in his son Jesus Christ and his sacrificial death. This is what Lewis means by those "awful facts" which must be taken into account if we really want to get at the truth. We must reckon with that singular historical event which, in spite of pain in the world, has given countless people over the centuries the assurance that ultimate reality is good, created and governed by a good and trustworthy God.

Yet the Bible does not begin with redemption but with the creation and the fall. In its opening chapter the bible affirms that God created the world and that it was very good. That was its original, normal state. Later things went wrong. There was an historical fall, a turning away from God by the choice of his first creatures Adam and Eve. God's world has been twisted and horribly marred as a result of that choice. The responsibility for evil, pain, sin, disease, and death, all go back to man's rebellion, and before that to the rebellion of the angels and Satan. The Bible has an extremely high view of the significance of human choice into history. Our good choices affect history forever, but the necessary corollary of this is that our bad choices also affect history forever. We would like to live in a world in which it went only one way, in which our good choices had good effects in our children's lives and in their children's lives but our bad choices caused no ripples. Yet if God has made us as responsible human beings whose choices matter, we cannot have one without the other. The fall is the prime example of a bad choice whose effects have caused ripples throughout all of history.

This view is difficult for many people to accept, partially because of the determinism which pervades our whole culture. Deterministic psychology sees all human behaviour as the result of influences over which we have no choice. We are told that our environment, our upbringing and our genetic make-up determine who we are and what we do. If we accept this view, we seem to avoid any responsibility for evil, but it would also imply that there is no such things as human greatness or heroism. Such things would be equally programmed.

At a socio-biology lecture at Harvard University, the professor was discussing the famous plane crash in Washington DC a few winters ago, where a man who could have been rescued sacrificed his own life to help save others. It was argued that that man did nothing great. It was simply in his genetic make-up to do what he did. If we negate human responsibility on the side of evil by saying that all the bad things we do are our parents' fault, or the fault of our genes or our environment, then we must agree that every good thing we have ever done was not chosen but was simply determined. According to the Biblical view we are influenced by many things but yet finally accountable for our choices because those choices were true choices. This is especially clear with Adam and Eve. They were in a perfect world, and yet chose to disobey and distrust God against all the evidence, a truly significant choice with catastrophic consequences.

If there is a true historic fall as the bible claims, then it means that death, suffering, evil, injustice, all these things, are abnormalities in God's world rather than a part of God's original intention for his creation. The fall is sometimes seen as an embarrassment for Christians, but it is actually a crucial strength. If we had to believe that the world, as it is now, is just the way that God made it and wanted it to be, then it would be virtually impossible to believe that God is good. For our integrity as a Christian it is very important that we know that the biblical view of the fall is true. It means that God is not the author of evil. The source of evil is rebellious human choice. Because God is not the author of evil we can fight evil without fighting God. We need not resign ourselves to any of the results of the fall but we are to fight against the thorns and the thistles, sin and suffering, sickness and death.

Though all suffering ultimately goes back to human sin and especially the fall, there is not always a one to one relationship between a particular sin and a particular affliction. Job's "comforters" were wrong to connect Job's suffering with unrepented sin. God rebuked them at the end of the book. It was, in fact, Job's righteousness that made him the special target of Satan. Satan, the great cynic, had charged that Job only worshipped God for what he could get out of it, and to prove Satan wrong. God allowed Job to be caught up in a heavenly battle of which Job was unaware. Job's suffering actually came because of his righteousness, not because he had sinned and therefore deserved it as his friends were telling him. We find the same truth in Hebrews 11 where we have a long list of the heroes of the faith. Some are described as being delivered from terrible situations, rescued, healed, brought back to life. Others, equally heroes of faith, died horrible deaths, were sawn in two, lived in caves. Of them "the world was not worthy." In Luke 13 we are told of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifice. Jesus asks, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no. But unless you repent you too will all perish. Are those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you too will all perish". Jesus is rejecting the idea that suffering is deserved, that it is always the consequence of some personal sin. He goes on to use this disaster to remind people that we are all mortal and that we are all sinners, and that one day we will all face death. No one can take life for granted. We all need to repent before we face the judgement of God.

Having found the origin of evil in the fall and human disobedience, it is to the cross that we must look for the assurance that God is both loving and just. The good news is that God in his mercy has done what is necessary to redeem this broken world, individual men and women, from their own sin and from all of the results of the fall. Immediately after the fall, God promised that he would send the Messiah, and that promise increased in clarity right

through the Old Testament. When John the Baptist, suffering in prison for righteousness sake asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we looking for someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you see and hear. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, and those who have leprosy are cured. The dead are raised and good news is preached to the poor". In other words Jesus pointed to his own life lived out in real dusty history as the evidence that God is both good and powerful to redeem people from all of the results of the fall. The cross of Christ is our ultimate assurance of God's goodness and justice and love. How much does God love us? We are told by John he loves us so much that he sent his only begotten Son into the world that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.

When my husband was at seminary, he heard a friend preaching after the death of his brother. The brother had died at the age of 27, leaving a wife and three children. The preacher addressed the congregation and asked "How can I look at what has happened to my brother and his family and say that God is good? I can't. But that is not all that God has given me to look at. I look to the cross for the ultimate assurance that God is both just and loving, and I look to the resurrection for the assurance that God's power is great enough to conquer all the results of the fall- evil, sin and suffering. Death does not have the last word. The Christian hope is not a vain hope but rather it is based on a real resurrection in real history recorded by reliable eye-witnesses. On that basis alone we have confidence in God's goodness and power."

Evil and suffering are real, but they are not the whole picture. We are fools if we ignore those awkward historical facts of Jesus' death and resurrection. Christianity is not religious platitudes. It is based on things that happened in real history. If we want to know truth we will have to look at these facts, and it is here that we look for the confidence that God is both good and powerful to save us from the results of real evil.

### **Dealing with Doubts.**

Despite being able to ground evil in the fall and the goodness of God in the cross and resurrection, many people will continue to have occasional doubts about God's goodness. Almost every biblical writer wrestled with this problem. Abraham, Moses, Job, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Malachi, and Jesus himself, as he cried out on the cross "Why O God have you forsaken me?" were struggling to come to terms with evil. These were all people of faith who when they were hit with doubts, took them to God and wrestled through them in prayer, reminding themselves of what they knew to be true. Psalm 73 is a very good example of a believer struggling through doubts about God's goodness. The psalmist is agonising over the fact that the righteous are suffering while the unrighteous are rich and happy and do not seem to have any problems. He was tempted to cynicism and bitterness. The truths that he knew in his head about God's faithfulness and goodness seemed implausible in the face of all the evident injustice. Yet he was able to move in his thinking to the place where he was able to praise God again. The answers came through his going into the sanctuary, meditating on what he knew was true and being reminded again of the large picture, the eternal picture. He sees that he had been a fool in his analysis of life before he remembered again that there is a final destiny, that God is a just judge, that what we see in this life is not all there is, that it really does matter what we believe and how we live. He had been too caught up in the visible and the immediate, but he was finally able to see the overall picture of eternity. We too often need to be reminded that we are here for really a very short time and there is no promise in the Bible that we will see perfect justice in this world.

Do not expect an answer that will eliminate the need for humility and trust in God. There are unanswered questions, and the Bible reminds us that God is the creator and we are the creature, that he is the potter and we are the clay. Job never found out why he suffered the way he did. It was only after God challenged Job saying, "Where were you, Job, when I laid the foundations of the earth?" that Job was able to relinquish his supposed right to an answer to the question "Why?" Then and only then was he able to worship God for nothing, without the answer to his question, but simply because God was God, the great Creator and worthy of worship and adoration. As we read the book of Job we know a lot more about the significance of Job's struggle than he did at the time. We are given insight into what was going on behind the scenes, the unseen battle that was going on between Satan and God. By refusing to curse God Job unwittingly won a battle against Satan, the cynic of cynics, who had accused Job of not being a true servant but only serving God as a mercenary, a spiritual battle from which generations of believers have been able to benefit. We may at times stand in the place of Job, living in an unseen world, not seeing the whole picture, and yet unwittingly gaining victories in battles that will have significance forever. We need to remind ourselves consciously that we stand before God himself and the angels and demons and that that is where we may be fighting the most important battles in all of life.

Our own sin, the problem of evil in us, affects the way we perceive God. The writer of Proverbs points out, "when a man's own folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the Lord". Malachi charges the people with wearying God when they say "all who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord and he is pleased with them" or "where is the God of justice?" The Israelites were in a very weak moral position to be crying out for justice when they themselves were guilty of gross injustice. Their own sin was distorting their perceptions. If God had come to them with justice alone, they would have been wiped out.

In the end we are called to action, not just to argument, in the face of evil. God calls his people to demonstrate his love and holiness and goodness in this world, to be involved in action against injustice and doing good in this world. As we do that, people will have the question of evil answered for them as they see the Lord himself through his people and are assured that God truly is both good and just.