The Problem of Evil (March 2020)

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 books on this question discussing God's existence and His nature. Many who write about this problem treat it purely as of academic interest. This isn't helpful to the person on the street who may be in real pain.

There are many people for whom the problem of evil is anything but an academic issue. Life may be going on smoothly now but we all know that none of us is personally immune to suffering. We are also exposed to devastating suffering continuously through the media. Watching examples of intense suffering around the world on the media is overwhelming.

This isn't a new problem! Ever since the Fall in the Garden of Eden men and women have been aware of cruelty, suffering, injustice and the sheer capriciousness of nature – often man-made. There is no simple answer to the problem of evil. Yet the Bible does give us a framework and guidelines that will help us to think clearly and cope practically with this very relevant issue.

The Problem of Evil for us as Believers in The Lord Jesus

In the Old Testament Habakkuk expressed the problem very powerfully. How could the God he really believed in and knew as the God of Israel tolerate so much evil – firstly in his own nation (Israel) and then beyond that in the world as a whole? Habakkuk begins to complain to God about the injustice and wrong among God's own people, the Israelites, who were meant to be light in this dark world.

"How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? … 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. Therefore the law is paralysed and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous so that justice is perverted." (Hab. 1:2-4)

Later on God gives him the very uncomfortable answer that He is going to use an even more unrighteous nation than Israel. He is going to call on the Babylonians, 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 he cries out in perplexity, ***"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil. You cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do You tolerate the treacherous? Why are You silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?"*** (Hab. 1:13)

Habakkuk's problem and the problem for believers ever since, is the problem of faith – the challenge to trust God in the face of a situation we can't understand. It is intensified because in the Bible God has led us to expect consistency between His own actions and what He requires of us His people.

As Christians we 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 is trying to hold together three Biblical truths:

- the reality of evil
- the omnipotence of God
- the goodness of God

Eliminate one of these truths and you could get rid of any sort of logical problem. You could argue that God is good, but He is weak so He simply can't do anything about the suffering and evil in this world – some of it currently brought about by the coronavirus. Secondly, you could say that God is all-powerful but He is not good and He doesn't care about the evil or He may be the cause of it! Thirdly, you could say that God is good and all-powerful but evil is not real. What we think is evil is really not evil at all and if we could see the true picture into the future we would see that all is right with the world!

There have been times when we Christians, in our attempts to answer these questions have tended to soft pedal or compromise one of these three teachings. We must look briefly at some ways this has happened because this creates more problems than it solves.

Undercutting the reality of evil is probably the most common example. Some Christians seem to spiritualize sickness, suffering, tragedy and death implying that these things are not really as bad as they seem. There is a good hymn we sometimes sing that begins, "**All Creatures of our God and King**". There is a line that says, "**Thou most kind and gentle death, waiting to hush our latest breath**". But this is not Biblical at all! It is true that death may be a release from a terrible illness that has caused severe pain, but in the Bible we are never presented with the idea that death is kind and gentle. No! It 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. [NB the above verse is omitted from most hymn books today.]

Along with this, Christians are often taught it is wrong to grieve over the loss of a loved one. They are taught that the only appropriate response to the death of a loved one is to praise God that their loved one is with the Lord. This may be <u>part</u> of the response but the Bible is clear that it is not the only appropriate response. Grief, tears and even anger are appropriate responses in the face of death and all its ugliness.

When the Lord Jesus was at the tomb of Lazarus, He was <u>furious</u> at death. Apparently, in Greek, the word describes the anger of a warhorse charging into battle. The Lord Jesus mourned the death of His friend and all the separations that came with death. At the same time He was furious with death, the last enemy. If we try and spiritualise evil, suffering and death and say somehow that it is really okay, then we are actually blurring the very clear Biblical distinction between good and evil.

Is. 5:20 warns us, ***"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter"***. 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 that is sometimes compromised in order to find a logical, satisfying answer to the problem is that of God's power. Some people tackle this problem by saying that bad things happen because they are out of God's responsibility. This isn't the place for a full discussion of the issue, but let me simply say that <u>both</u> 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 <u>is</u> a mystery. The Bible clearly teaches that God is the Sovereign Lord and that nothing happens outside 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 it is chance, fate, chaos, or the devil/Satan himself in control and therefore greater than God.

A Jewish rabbi called Harold Kushner wrote a book entitled, **When bad things happen to good people**. He held strongly to this view. He faced the awful situation of having a child die of a terrible regenerative disease. In trying to make sense of God's goodness, he put forward a principle of <u>chance</u> or <u>chaos</u> behind a well-meaning God. At the end of the book he blames God for His weakness and inability to do anything.

If we say that God is not in control and something or somebody is behind God, then we can never gain hope and confidence from the wonderful promises in the Bible that tell us we are safe in the hands of God. Rom. 8:28 tells us, ***"We know that in <u>all things</u> God works for the <u>good</u> of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose"***. This is only true because God is in control and is Sovereign and <u>does</u> stand behind all of life in a way that we can't always understand. In Psalm 23, David affirms, ***"The Lord is <u>my</u> Shepherd, I shall not want. Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil."***

That would have been a vain hope unless God really is Sovereign and stands behind death, evil and everything else as a much greater and more powerful force who can protect us even through death. This is the confidence 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 anguish as he thinks of what is coming.

God has told him that the nation of Israel is sinful and will be judged. Habakkuk tries to return to confidence in God's sovereign goodness, yet speaks of his gut reaction of fear. He puts it this way, ***"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"***. (Hab. 3:16)

He speaks very honestly about the fact that he is still experiencing anguish and terror knowing this judgement is coming on Israel. Yet he reminds himself God really is in control and 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 a deer. He enables me to go on the heights"***. (Hab. 3:18-19)

He ends with the confidence that God is Sovereign and there is no chance, fate or anything that is behind God. We must never 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 complete control.

The third Biblical truth, sometimes compromised though perhaps not consciously, is that of God's goodness. I'm thinking of those who maintain that everything that happens is the direct result of God's will and so we have to thank God for whatever happens. But this is a major distortion of the Biblical picture. The Bible tells us that we should thank God at all times and <u>in</u> all circumstances even though the circumstances may be terrible. But we are <u>never</u> told we must thank God <u>for</u> terrible circumstances as if they were coming directly from Him. We are not told to thank God <u>for</u> the bad events themselves, but rather for His power 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 the actions of human beings and Satan's actions are real and have real effects. If we minimise this reality of human and demonic causes, we are close to blaming God for evil things in the world. Remember the petition in the Lord's Prayer that says, ***"May Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"*** (Mt. 6:10). This clearly implies that God's perfect will is not being done on earth now as it is in heaven. Clearly not everything that happens now is God's perfect will and so good. Not everything is to be embraced thankfully.

The question of evil is a real problem for a Christian believer, but we will only increase the problem if we attempt to resolve it by sidestepping clear Biblical teachings of God's goodness, His power and the reality of evil and suffering in the world.

The Problem of Evil for Non-believers

Every person who has ever lived in this world has had to make sense of good and evil, not just those of us who are believers in the Lord Jesus. Non-believers have an even more serious problem than Christian believers. Before he became a Christian, C.S. Lewis wrote, **"If you asked me to believe that this world is a work of a benevolent, omnipotent spirit, my reply would be that all the evidence points in the opposite direction; either there is no 'spirit' behind the universe or else there is a 'spirit' that is totally indifferent to good or evil or there is an evil spirit."**

Many Christians encountering this accusation become defensive and try to apologise for God with weak arguments saying things like, *"There are more good things happening in the world than bad things"* or that God always brings good out of evil. But these kinds of responses don't answer the challenge at all. What we need to do as believers in the Lord Jesus is to resist the pattern of getting on the defensive and realise that we have some very searching questions to put to non-Christians.

With sensitivity and love we must challenge the non-believer as to how he makes sense of good and evil in this world. How does he know what is good and what is bad? How are his moral standards, by which he judges God, 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 to bring God to trial for breaking some relative social norm. If all moral feelings are simply conditioned, why is it that all men and women in all times have had the need to invent moral standards? Is it just a question of our upbringing or our aesthetics – what pleases us and what doesn't?

You will find very few people consistent enough to say that in World War II Hitler was doing no more than flouting convention! Most people feel what he did was wrong in the absolute sense. So some people are in a contradictory position of saying there are no absolutes and yet responding as if certain things that go on in the world are fundamentally evil not merely contrary to their taste. We need to press people to be consistent in this area. To put it slightly differently, if there are no moral absolutes in this world, then why do we still consider the psychopath – the man or woman with no moral sense – to be sick? Why don't we admire him as the only one who lives out his life faithful to what he believes to be there?

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 – especially murder – hatred, tyranny and poverty are seen as bad. Love, toleration and freedom are seen as good. Mother Teresa received numerous rewards for her benevolence often from the very people who didn't believe there is such a thing as good or evil!

A long time ago while I was at school I had to read an English translation of a book by Dostoyevsky called **The Brothers Karamazov**. In the book, Ivan points out that if there is no God, everything is permitted. A professor at Berkeley University of California wrote a few years ago. "**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 quite apart from God by which to judge God. He is tacitly claiming to have a standard that is transcendently right and good in order to stand above God and judge God. Yet many such people claim there are no absolutes thus destroying any possibility of standing in judgement over God and saying where God has failed and where He has succeeded.

In fact, without a God who has spoken into the world and told us what is right and what is wrong, there is no basis for any moral distinctions. So 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 all men and women experience, whether they are Christians or not, are there because there 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 doesn't affirm some kind of morality. This moral sense is not 'strange' 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

In his book, **The Problem of Pain**, C.S. Lewis comments, "**To ask whether the universe as we see it, looks like the work of a wise and good creator or the work of pure chance or indifference or even an act of 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 event! It is not a system into which we had to fit the awkward fact of pain. It is a fact – an awkward fact that must 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 also received what we think of as a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving**".

C.S. Lewis points out that we can't think of Christianity simply as something into which we have to fit this awkward fact of pain. Rather Christianity presents us with some very awkward facts that happened in our real history and 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 this world was pain and suffering, then there would be no intellectual problem. It is a fact that throughout history there is evidence for a good God. This gives us a 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 wasn't 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 with its sorrowful history. The culmination of this revelation came in His Son Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death on the Cross.

This is what C.S. Lewis calls "***those aweful facts***" that must be taken into account if we really want to get to the truth. We must reckon with this singular historic event which, in spite of pain in the world, has given countless people over the centuries the assurance that ultimately reality is good and is created and governed by a good and trustworthy God.

Yet the Bible doesn't begin with redemption but with the Creation and the Fall. In Genesis 1 the Bible affirms that God created the world and that it was very good. That was its original and normal state. Later things went wrong. There was a historical Fall – a turning away from God by the choice of His first creatures Adam and Eve. God's world has been twisted and horridly 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 the rebellion of the angels and Satan.

The Bible has a very high view of the significance of human choice in history. Our good choices affect history for ever but the necessary corollary of this is that our bad choices also affect history for ever. We would like to live in a world in which it only went one way – in which our good choices had good effects on our children's lives and 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 can't have one without the other. The Fall is the prime example of a bad choice with effects causing ripples throughout history.

This view is very 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 thing as human greatness or heroism. Such things would be equally programmed.

At a socio-biology lecture at Harvard University a professor was discussing a famous plane crash in Washington DC several decades previously where a man who could have been rescued sacrificed his own life to help save others. It was argued that the 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 our choice, but was simply determined. According to a Biblical view, we are influenced by many things but yet finally accountable for our choices because those choices are true choices. This is especially clear with Adam and Eve. They were in a perfect world and they chose to distrust and disobey 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 and injustice are all 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 actually it is a strength. If we had to believe that the world, as it is now, is just the way God made it and wanted it to be, then it would be virtually impossible to believe that God is good.

For our integrity as Christians, 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 thistles' – sin and suffering, sickness and death.

Though all suffering ultimately goes back to human sin and especially to the Fall, there isn't 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. In fact it was Job's righteousness that made him the special target of Satan. Satan, the great cynic, had made the charge that Job only worshipped God for what he could get out of it. 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 so deserved it as his friends were telling him.

We find the same truth in Hebrews 11 where we have a long list of heroes of the faith. Some are described as being delivered from terrible situations, rescued, healed, and brought back to life. Others, who were equally heroes of faith, died horrible deaths – were sawn in two, lived in caves etc. We are told, "These were all commended for their faith".

In Luke 13 we are told of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifice. Jesus says, ***"Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent you too will all perish. All those 18 who died when the tower in Siloam and fell on them, do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent you too will all perish"***.

So the Lord 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 we are all sinners and one day we will all face death. No one can take life forgranted. 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 all that is necessary to redeem this broken world – individual men and women – from their own sin and from all 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, sent his disciples to ask Jesus, ***"Are you the One who was to come or should we expect someone else?"*** Jesus replied, ***"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor".*** (Lk. 7:18-23)

In other words, the Lord 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 the results of the Fall. The Cross of the Lord Jesus is our ultimate assurance of God's goodness and justice and love. How much does God love us? John gives us the answer, ***"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life."*** (Jn. 3:16)

A preacher was speaking to his 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 isn't all 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.

But death doesn't have the last word! As believers in the Lord Jesus, our Christian hope is not a vain hope. No! It is based on a real Resurrection in real history recorded by reliable eye-witnesses. On that basis 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 all about 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 confidence that God is both good and powerful to save us from the results of real evil.

Finally: dealing with doubts

Despite being able to ground evil in the Fall and God's goodness in the Cross and the Resurrection, many people continue to have occasional doubts about God's goodness. Almost every Biblical writer wrestled with this problem; Abraham, Moses, Job, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Malachi and the Lord Jesus Himself as He cried out on the Cross, ***"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"*** (Mt. 27:46).

They were struggling to come to terms with evil. They were all people of faith who, when 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. This psalm addresses one of the most disturbing problems for Old Testament believers: how is it that the wicked so often prosper while the godly suffer so much? The psalmist was tempted to cynicism and bitterness. The truths he knew in his head about God's faithfulness and goodness seemed implausible in the face of obvious injustice. Yet he was able to move in his thinking to the place where he could praise God again.

The answers came through him going into the sanctuary, meditating on what he knew was true and being reminded again of the larger picture – the eternal picture. He sees he had been a fool in his analysis of life before he remembered that there is a final destiny, that God is a just judge, that what we see in this life is not all that there is and that it really does matter what we believe and how we live. He realises 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 a very short time and that there is no promise in the Bible that we will see perfect justice in this world.

Don't 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 creatures. 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 when I laid the earth's foundations?"*** (Job 38:4) that Job was able to relinquish his supposed right to answer 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 who was worthy of worship and adoration.

As we read the Book of Job we know more about the significance of Job's struggle than he did at the time. We are given insight into what is going on behind the scenes – the unseen battle between Satan and God. By refusing to curse God, Job unwittingly won the battle against Satan, the cynic of all cynics, who had accused Job of not being a true servant but only serving God as a mercenary. Generations of believers have been able to benefit from this triumph in a spiritual battle.

At times we may 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 for ever. We need to remind ourselves that we stand before God Himself and the angels and demons and 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 that we perceive God. The writer of Proverbs points out, ***"A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the Lord"***. (Prov. 19:3)

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?"*** (Mal. 2:17) 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 then 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 His holiness and goodness in this world. We are to be involved in action against injustice and in doing good in this world. As we do so, 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.