

The problem of the existence of evil and a good God

Trouble, hardship, difficulty, pain, suffering, conflict, tragedy, evil - they're all part of the [Christian] Story. Indeed, the problem of evil is the reason there's any Story at all. – Greg Koukl

Let us remember that every worldview-not just Christianity's-must give an explanation or an answer for evil and suffering...this is not just a problem distinctive to Christianity. It will not do for the challenger just to raise the question. This problem of evil is one to which we all must offer an answer, regardless of the belief system to which we subscribe. ~ Ravi Zacharias

"I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the Lord, who does all these things." Isaiah 45:7

The problem of evil is one of the most important arguments that a Christian will face in his defense of God and the Bible. The problem is not new – it dates back at least as far as 200 BC when it was stated as follows:

"Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.
Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.
Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?
Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?" - Epicurus

The bible clearly states that God is good – all good (Ps 34:8, James 1:17, Ps 119:68, Mk 10:18) and that He is all powerful (Jer. 32:27) and that He is ruling all (Ps. 103:19, Acts 17:24). How can we reconcile the character of God with the presence of evil?

1. Origin of evil - The bible does not discuss where evil comes from, so anything we say here is speculation. When the creation took place God pronounced everything "very good" (Gen. 1:31) but early in the book of Genesis we read about Satan bringing evil into the world. It is likely that Satan is one of the fallen angels who "left their principality" the bible discusses in Jude 1:6 who decided to disobey God. God has allowed Satan a certain level of authority as "prince of this world" (John 14:30) but God limits what he can do (Job 1).

2. Consequences from the way the world is -

God made man with free will, and that has consequences. If we are not allowed to choose to do "evil" (to ourselves and/or to others) then there is no right to choose. The bible discusses God's purpose for man in a number of passages and several are discussed below:

- a. Called to be holy and blameless (Eph 1:4)
- b. Glorify God (I Cor 6:19)
- c. Proclaim the excellencies of God (I Peter 2:9)
- d. Good works (Eph. 2:10)

All these activities involve choices on our part. For a reason God did not reveal, He wants a people who will love Him and demonstrate that love in obedience. He wants everyone to conform their character to that of Jesus Christ, which is something that does not occur naturally. If I choose not to do the above activities then God will not stop me. I can also choose to do everything that is in opposition to the above activities and much of the evil in the world is the result of that particular choice. The right to choose shows how much confidence God has placed in man. A comparison might be in teaching a teenager to drive. The teen has been to Drivers Ed, driven with mom and dad, and has listened to dad lecture on car safety but at some point the teen will be allowed to drive the car by himself. The teen has a choice on whether to listen to all they learned or to go their own way. The responsibility a parent gives to the teen for that car and the lives of everyone in that car can be compared in a small way with the trust and responsibility God gives to us.

God will not interfere with the ability of people to make choices. It is appropriate that we pray that people will make good choices in their lives, and God hears those prayers and may arrange circumstances so that people are in the best position to make good choices, but He will not force anyone to make any choice. Thus, if I choose to do evil to others, I can do so, and God will not stop me.

Another important consideration is the fact of natural law. Much of the evil which takes place in the world is the result of the action of man using a physical method. I may curse you, and to do so I make use of my vocal cords and the laws of physics to make a specific sound. I can shoot you and you will be hit by a bullet because of the laws of physics and chemistry. God gives us natural laws for a number of reasons, but one is that we can express our will. God will not typically overrule his natural laws – thus, if I decide to use a natural law to do evil (push someone off a roof for example) then God will allow me.

3. Time – Just because evil has not yet been judged does not mean that it will not be judged. Sometimes the consequences of actions are not seen for a long time. The bible teaches that time is not an important consideration as God carries out His purposes. He left His people in Egyptian captivity for 400 years before He brought them out. He waited thousands of years to bring His son into the world – God decides when the time is right.

Discussion questions:

1. What is "evil"? Does this definition help define the problem?
2. How would an atheist explain evil? Does any other view of reality have the same problem with evil as does a God centered view?
3. How does the differences in time between an action and the consequences of that action affect behavior? Does the length of the delay affect behavior? Does it change the consequence of the behavior?
4. Describe the difference between understanding why there is evil in the world and experiencing that evil in your own life? Does understanding something always lead to the proper response?
5. As we face the trials of life and comfort others facing trials, what approach might we take?