

Email from a Skeptic: Why Does God Allow Evil?  
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In my experience, it is the most commonly asked question by honest skeptics: "If God is real, if God is personal, if God loves us, why does God allow evil?" A proper understanding of this issue not only provides great insight into the nature of God, it ties together a comprehensive understanding to some of life's ultimate questions: the answers to my origin, meaning, morality and destiny!

**Email from A Skeptic**

The question of evil was brought into clearer focus in an email I recently received from a skeptic:

The Christian worldview is an impractical, even phony, view of the Cosmos because it embraces a God who is either incapable of stopping evil and suffering, and he is therefore not omnipotent, or is unwilling to do so and therefore a devil!

The skeptic's point is well taken because the Bible states that one of God's attributes is love. "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love." (1 John 4:8) In the book of Romans, Paul the Apostle stated that the invisible attributes of God "are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead."<sup>1</sup> However, what the skeptic is saying, in effect, is this: "If your God is love, I see no evidence of that attribute in creation. All the death, disease, pain and suffering seems to be out of place if this God of yours is love. Surely an all-powerful God could, and a loving God would, eliminate all evil. Since evil exists, then no such God exists."

To answer this objection we need to examine some principles of logic, the nature of God, the nature of man, the nature of love and the nature of evil.

**Evil and Moral Law**

When someone states that they do not believe in God because a good God would not allow evil, they make a fatal error in logic. But how do we determine what actions are morally right and morally wrong? First, the recognition of evil is the recognition that certain actions are "right" and certain actions are "wrong." We discern this on the basis of a moral law: a universal sense that certain states of affairs are right and others are wrong. Even most atheists will admit that certain actions are universally wrong and, conversely, universally right.

For example, no one could seriously argue with the statement that it is better to love a child than to torture it. The point is that there is an innate, universal sense of right and wrong within all of us. What is the basis of this moral sense? Some would argue that it is based on cultural customs or traditions. But can this be so?

The famous atheist Bertrand Russell once debated a Christian who asked him if he believed in right and wrong. Russell replied "of course." Then he asked him how he determined what is right and wrong. Russell replied that he determined right and wrong on the basis of his feelings. His opponent replied, "Well, in some cultures they feel it is okay to eat you, and in others they don't. Which do you prefer." The point is that social customs, attitudes, traditions or feelings cannot determine a universal sense of right and wrong.

A universal sense of moral right and wrong can only come from a source outside of ourselves: a transcendent source, a moral Lawgiver. So the recognition of moral

law is by default the recognition of a moral Lawgiver. To argue that the existence of evil proves that there is no God is equivalent to stating that the existence of moral law proves that there is no Lawgiver! It's like declaring that the Chrysler automobile that I drive proves without a doubt that there is no Chrysler Motor Company!

Atheists often present the problem of evil to theists as if it is a fatal argument for the existence of God. Nothing could be further from the truth.

If there is no moral Lawgiver, then there is no way to explain the sense of moral wrong and moral right we all possess.

In reality, it is an absolutely unsolvable problem for the atheist. How does the atheist explain evil-the sense of moral right and wrong-in the absence of a moral Lawgiver? They can't! If there is no moral Lawgiver, then there is no way to explain the sense of moral wrong and moral right we all possess.

C.S. Lewis said that evil is God's megaphone to a non-believing world. Evil speaks of moral law. Moral law demands a moral Lawgiver, and it is He that we call God!

### **Evil Often Begets Good**

A second principle of logic we need to consider is the fact that an apparently evil state of affairs will often bring about an even better state of affairs. The problem is that we often do not recognize this fact until we have the advantage of hindsight. In my own field of medicine I see this on a daily basis: the process of childbirth, surgical intervention, and many medical therapies often present physical pain (an evil state of affairs according to non-theists), and yet they bring about an even better state of affairs: improved health. Physical pain is often highly beneficial as well. When a child touches a hot stove, the nervous system sends a neurological signal to the brain which is perceived as pain (a form of evil). Yet without that sense of pain, an even worse state of affairs would arise: the destruction of the limb.

The skeptic might object that while this provides a partial answer to the problem of evil, it does not address some of the most disturbing forms of evil: war, murder, rape, incest and the senseless death of the innocent.

### **God, Freedom, and Evil**

The problem of human evil is rooted in the nature of God and the nature of love and the nature of mankind. I argued in last month's Personal UPDATE that God is a personal being because an impersonal force is an insufficient agent to create personal beings. <sup>2</sup> What is the greatest passion of personal beings? I would argue that, above all else, personal beings desire personal relationships with other personal beings. So it makes sense that God, as a personal being, would desire to create us in such a way that He could have a meaningful, personal, and loving relationship with us.

### **But this has a severe price.**

Let us consider the nature of love and its consequences. I cannot experience love from you unless you have the capacity to do otherwise. If you have the capacity to not love me, and you choose instead to love me, then that choice has validity. It has meaning. You cannot have a love relationship with a computer. It is pre-programmed to serve you. Love requires choice: unencumbered choice. And that's where the problem lies.

When God created mankind, He too had a choice. If He created us as beings that were pre-programmed to follow and serve Him, there could be no love. But, if He

created us with the capacity of choice, the capacity to love and serve Him, and the capacity not to do so, then there is the possibility of relationship: the possibility of real love.

If He created us as beings that were pre-programmed to follow and serve Him, there could be no love

As a personal being with the capability of creating us in the first place, it makes sense that He would want to create us as personal beings with the capability of choice (free will) and, thus, the capability of love.

But where there is choice and the capability of love, there is also the capability to choose wrong and to do great evil.

But the skeptic says, "why did God do this when he knew in advance that the result of free will would be so disastrous? Did this God of love not care that war, murder, rape and so much senseless violence would be the result of his choice to give us free will?" A real life illustration will help us to understand.

### **The Love of a Mother**

During my 15 years as a physician I have seen an enormous amount of physical suffering. During that time I have had five children in my practice die by disease and injury. All of these children came from Christian families. Several months after the death of one of these children, the child's mother was in my office and was very distraught over her loss. She asked me, "Why did God allow this? I love God. Why did this happen?"

What could I say in this situation? Rather than providing an answer I asked her this question. "You have three children. One of them has died. If you could go back to the time before you had any children, with the knowledge that one of them would die this horrible death, would you have children again?"

After a long pause, with many tears in her eyes and a broken heart she said, "Oh yes. Oh yes. yes I would. Because, you see, the love and the joy and the happiness I have received from my children far outweighs the pain, suffering and misery I experienced from the loss of that one child. Oh yes. Oh yes. I would have children again."

In this tragic story we see an incredible insight as to why God allows evil to exist. As discussed earlier, a loving God can allow an evil state of affairs to exist if, in allowing it to occur, it brings about an even better state of affairs. For this woman, the loss of her child was an unequalled and tragic evil. But, with the advantage of hindsight, she said she would do it all again because the love she received as a result of being a mother outweighed the evil state of affairs in the death of her child.

In the hypothetical scenario I presented to this woman, with the advantage of hindsight (foreknowledge in this case) she was in a position comparable to God's before He created humankind. Because He is outside time and knows all things, He knew that there would be tremendous pain and suffering as a result of His decision to create a people with the capacity of choice and, consequently, the capacity to sin (moral evil).

But God, like this mother, knew that the love He and his human creatures would experience would outweigh the pain and suffering that would result from His decision to create us as He did. But the consequences of God's decision were not unforeseen. They were foreknown!

### **The Incredible Answer**

The skeptic that emailed me stated, in effect, that if an all-powerful God did not eliminate evil, then He was a devil! The implication is that the removal of all evil would permit a better, more loving world. A truly loving God, the skeptics assert, would have desired and created such a world because it is clearly superior to the one we have. Any God that did not follow this logic was not a God of love, but an evil tyrant.

As we have seen, this logic crumbles under its own weight. The existence of evil is the "side effect" of creating a world with love. But as we have seen, there are compelling arguments that a world possessing both evil and love is superior to a world where neither is possible. For God to eliminate evil, He would have to eliminate our capacity of choice and thus our capacity to do both evil and good. And such a world is inferior to the one we have: one where love is possible, despite its inherent evil. What kind of God would do this? Only one kind. A God of love.

Why does a God of love allow evil? Because He is a God of LOVE

### **So Great a Salvation**

So, how practical is Christianity? The Bible presents an infinite Creator with the very attributes we would expect when we examine the things that are made. And God, as a personal Being, in order that He might have a love relationship with us, gave us the capacity of choice. In order that we might have a practical revelation of His love, His wisdom, His power, His glory, He became one of us in the person of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

In order that we might not suffer the penalty of our evil choices (sin), He, like a loving father, paid the penalty for our sins. He allowed his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to be murdered on a Roman cross (arguably the most evil act in the history of the universe, if He is indeed God's Son).

But this act of great evil gave rise to an even better state of affairs, and the greatest act of love in the universe: paying the penalty for the wrong choices we make, which were the result of the way He created us in the first place!

In the cross of Jesus Christ He has provided a full pardon from the consequences of the evil in our lives.

In the cross of Christ He has provided a full pardon from the consequences of the evil in our lives. Consequently, we cannot look to God and declare that He is unfair. Far from being a devil, in this examination of the problem of evil, God becomes the hero of the plot and the solution to the problem of evil. And it all hinges on LOVE. Indeed, God is love. <sup>3</sup> What must we do to receive this pardon?

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. John 3:16

If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God

has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9

Notes:

1. Romans 1:18-20. 2. Personal UPDATE, May 1999. 3. For those that would like an in-depth treatment of the problem of evil and a God of love, I highly recommend Alvin Plantinga's book, God, Freedom and Evil.

