

The Truth About Evil

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by John MacArthur

How can a good and powerful God tolerate all the evil in the world?

That question—frequently posed by skeptics and liberal theologians—is a not-so-veiled attack on the God of the Bible, and an easy excuse for those looking to undercut or ignore the authority of His Word.

[Last time](#) we considered some of the most popular answers to the problem of evil (theodicy), and considered the fatal, man-centered errors they commit. In short, they attempt to make God submit to man's standards and preferences. Worse still, they attempt to reconcile the truth about God to the satisfaction of an unbelieving world, and accommodate its philosophies and worldviews.

That is no way to solve the problem of evil.

Instead, I want to pursue a different pattern of logic—one centered on explaining the existence of evil, not accommodating it. That means we must deal with what we *know* to be true.

Evil Pervades the World

First of all, we know evil exists. Most people, including those who say they believe in the inherent goodness of man, affirm the presence of evil. Evil is an incontrovertible fact. And there are different kinds of evil. First, there is *natural* evil. It is impersonal, external, physical, and temporal. It includes diseases, disaster, catastrophes, weeds, bad weather, tiny bacteria, and everything in between. The whole natural world is cursed and blighted, and we live at the mercy of a fallen creation. No aspect of life is untouched by physical corruption—even the process of aging is evidence that natural evil exists.

A second category of evil is *moral* evil. Moral evil is personal, inside of us, and spiritual. It is wickedness, sin—transgression of God's law (1 John 3:4). Scripture is clear that moral evil dominates human life. "There is none righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). "The intent of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21). "Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death" (James 1:14–15). Just as all of creation bears the scars of natural evil, society is overrun with internal evil and corruption. It affects every person and every relationship in every dimension. Human relationships can be very hard to maintain because they are essentially just collisions of immoral people. Moral evil alone would be enough to engulf us, but there is even more evil.

There is also *supernatural* evil. This is demonic evil. It was our Lord who said to the Jewish leaders, “You are of your father the devil” (John 8:44). The apostle John says, “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). This is a supernatural expression of evil against which we wrestle. The apostle Paul says, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). These vile fallen angels are as old as creation. They propagate unmitigated wickedness, and they have plied their supernatural evil on every generation since the creation. They have a temporary, delegated authority in this world system, but it’s still formidable. They use their powers to seduce and deceive. And they create a kind of cosmos that exploits the corruption that is already in us so that it is fiercely exacerbated.

God Is Sovereign

In addition to acknowledging the existence of evil, we also know that the God of the Bible exists. There is no other God but the God of the Bible. He is the true and only living God. Because He created the universe, He knows how it operates. He understands reality perfectly. Scripture is His own self-disclosure, and it reveals Him as all powerful. He is all knowing. He is good. He is loving. He is holy. He is sovereign and controls absolutely everything. There is nothing that exists or occurs or ever will that is not in His control. Over and over, Scripture testifies to this:

Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O Lord, and You exalt Yourself as head over all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might; and it lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone. (1 Chronicles 29:11–12)

Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. (Psalm 115:3)

All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, “What have You done?” (Daniel 4:35)

Thus Scripture clearly affirms the sovereignty of God. He has the right to govern the universe that He has made and He does so. He has the right of the potter over the clay. He may mold that clay into whatever form He chooses, fashioning out of the same lump whatever it is that He desires to fashion. He is under no law outside of Himself.

For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast. The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation. (Psalm 33:9–11)

For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back? (Isaiah 14:27)

God speaks for Himself in unmistakable terms. He is sovereign over everything that exists, including evil. In Revelation 4:11, those in the throne room of heaven worship God: “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your

will they existed, and were created.”

That is the God of the Bible. The God who is in absolute control of everything, and nothing—not even sin and evil—can disrupt or derail His plan. The rebellion of Satan and his followers didn’t surprise God, nor did the fall of Adam and Eve force Him to resort to Plan B. He makes it clear in Isaiah 46:9–10 that His plans will always come to pass. “For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’” That *is* the God who exists.

God Is Holy and Righteous

In addition to God’s sovereignty and the existence of evil, we also know that God is completely perfect, untouched by sin altogether. In Psalm 5:4, David writes “For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; no evil dwells with You.” God is not susceptible to the temptations of sin (James 1:13). He is light “and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

Taken together, those three facts—that evil does exist, that God is sovereign, and that He is utterly holy and righteous—lead us to an inevitable conclusion: that God, in His sovereign wisdom, allows evil to exist without Himself being evil. As the final authority over all creation, God permits evil to exist—not merely with an unwilling acceptance. Evil was part of His plan and eternal decree. He has a purpose in it, and it’s a *good* purpose.

Jumping to the Wrong Conclusions

The notion that God has a purpose in evil strikes panic in the hearts of people who have not thought carefully about God’s sovereign omnipotence. They can’t envision how God might derive glory or fulfill His good purposes by letting evil exist in His universe. They imagine (wrongly) that if God sovereignly ordained a universe that could be cursed with evil, He must be the efficient cause of the evil. They wrongly assume that if God saves some sinners but not all, He must bear the moral responsibility for the fact that some are not saved. They want to rescue God from blame for all the bad things that happen. And having not thought carefully about God’s sovereignty and what it means, they wrongly assume that the only way to vindicate God is to reinvent Him.

They don’t want to imply, of course, that He is not good, loving, holy, or omniscient. Therefore their own faulty logic forces them to conclude that there must be some limitation to His sovereignty. Some (as we have seen) go so far as to conclude that He doesn’t have the power to stop evil. Others believe that He has the power, but some self-imposed limitation keeps Him from using it. They are operating with the assumption that the only way to save God from bad press is by believing that human will reigns supreme.

But Scripture clearly teaches that while God is not the author or efficient cause of evil, He *does* exercise control over it. He doesn’t in any sense approve of evil, ratify it, look on it with favor, give it His blessing, or delight in it. But nothing happens outside of His sovereignty.

Consider the case of Job—God turned Satan loose for horrendous evil in the life of Job. All the suffering Job endured at the hands of Satan happened under the Lord’s authority; none of it occurred

outside the plan and power of God. None of it could have occurred if God had not willingly permitted it.

We see the same thing in the New Testament, when Jesus said to Peter, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32). If I had been Peter I would have said, “Well, you told him ‘No,’ right?” But Jesus granted Satan permission, knowing that Peter would be strengthened, not destroyed, by the ordeal—and that after enduring the trial, Peter would use his immense leadership skills to strengthen the other disciples.

The apostle Paul likewise endured Satan’s assaults. In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul says, “There was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!” It is evident from the text that the “messenger” in question is a demon. Paul was not possessed by a demon—instead, the demon was leading the false teachers who were pillaging the Corinthian church. Paul prayed three times that it might be removed, and the Lord did not remove it. Paul says twice that God didn’t answer his prayer because it was His purpose “to keep me from exalting myself” (v. 7).

If God so designs, He will use a demonized false teacher to inflict trouble on a complacent church or to humble a pastor. In His sovereign control, He can use anything to bring about His desired ends. When we look at it from the perspective of the biblical facts, we see that the problem of evil is no problem at all for God, because He is totally sovereign over evil and neither His power nor His glory is in any way threatened by it.

We must conclude then that God does have some sovereign purpose in mind for the evil we experience daily in this world. Next time we’ll consider what that purpose is, and why the existence of evil should not be a problem for us, either.

(Adapted from [None Other](#).)

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