

# *If God . . . Why Evil?*

*By Peter Bocchino*

One of the toughest questions for Christians to address is, “If a loving God exists, why is there evil in this world?” Of course the questioner makes one major assumption: In order to ask this question, the inquirer must already have some idea of what is meant by evil. Hence we must correctly define evil (the law of identity in logic) before we can respond. Does the questioner truly know what is being asked and which worldview is capable of offering an intelligent answer?

To begin with, the worldview of hard agnosticism cannot answer this query because according to that view, the answer cannot be known. Pantheism cannot help us; it essentially defines evil an illusion. Consequently, pantheism has no question to ask because the problem of evil doesn’t really exist. Atheism also has a critical problem with both sides of this question. As we have demonstrated in our former articles, if atheists object to either part of the question--God or evil--it will logically lead to the acknowledgment of both. Without the existence of God, evil would be a meaningless term. Among the three dominant worldviews, atheism, pantheism and theism, only theism is able to deal with this question in a logically consistent manner. We must always keep this truth in the foreground as we attempt to account for the presence of evil in a theistic universe.

On a superficial level, it seems to make sense to believe that if God created everything, and if evil is something real, then God created evil. Yet, we know that God cannot be the author of evil! However, if God exists, and we believe He is a loving God, why is there evil? How could a loving God allow evil to exist knowing that humanity would turn on itself and incite the kinds of carnage that would forever scar the face of the world?

When God created, did He create evil things? Are there evil molecules or atoms in the world? No, everything He created was good or pleasing, but morally neutral. God did not create evil things; things in themselves are not evil. So, what is evil? First, evil can be real without being a substance. It can be real in the sense that it is an actual privation or loss of something. Blindness is not a substance: however, it is a lack of sight. A person lacks physical wholeness. We look upon this loss of wholeness as a bad or negative thing because people are suppose to be able to see. Similarly, evil a privation of what ought to be. Nevertheless, we would not conclude that blind people are morally evil because they lack sight. In order for someone to be morally evil that person would have to lack moral wholeness or goodness.

Second, what is it that bothers us about a parent abusing a child or a person shooting someone over something as petty as a parking space? What thought immediately comes to mind in the case of the wholesale murder of innocent lives at Auschwitz or Treblinka? Most of us immediately think that people *ought not* to behave toward others in such a manner deep within us a sense of injustice and loss. Hence, moral evil can also be thought of as a contaminated relationship: a relationship that is not what it ought to be.

Jesus said that the greatest good we can know is a relationship with God (Matthew 22:36-37), for God Himself is the greatest good, who offers us wholeness and holiness. Conversely, the greatest evil we must be capable of experiencing is being separated from a loving relationship with God. However, in order for us to know God intimately, we necessarily have to be free to reject Him. True love is persuasive, not coercive. Therefore, the essential component of a loving relationship with God is freedom.

That freedom, however, inherently enables us to reject God's love and to abuse and reject other people as well. Thus God is not the one who actualizes the potential for evil, but people freely choose or reject God's love. The maximum latent power of evil resides in our capacity to refuse the love of God.

Philosophers have wrestled with the idea of there being a better world than the theistic world. However, once the idea of better is raised, it necessarily implies a standard by which that world must be measured. Once the standard is put back into the equation, so is theism. God revealed in creation that this world, with free creatures who accept or reject God's love, is the best means to the best possible world--heaven. There is no logical way to create a world where people are free to love God, but not free to reject His love. If there were some other way to do it, God would have thought of it first, not us!

C. S. Lewis aptly addresses the issue of free will and the utter futility of anyone trying to out-reason God by thinking that He could have created a better world:

Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong; I cannot. The happiness which God designs for His creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other . . . And for that they must be free.

Of course God knew what would happen if they used their freedom the wrong way: apparently He thought it worth the risk. Perhaps we feel inclined to disagree with Him. But there is a difficulty in disagreeing with God. He is the source from which all reasoning power comes: you could not be right and He wrong any more than a stream can rise higher than its own source. When you are arguing against Him you are arguing against the very power that makes you able to argue at all: it is like cutting off the branch you are sitting on. If God thinks this state of war in the universe a price worth paying for free will--that is, for making a live world in which creatures can do real good or harm and something of real importance can happen, instead of a toy world which only moves when He pulls the strings--then we may take it is worth paying. (*Mere Christianity*, pp. 52-53).

Why did God create us knowing we could turn out as evil beings? The cost of love is great, but greater is the cost of the One who initiated that love. We love because He first loved us and the cost of His love, the death of His only Son, is a high price to pay. God knew the cost of love and the kind of world that would result from creating free beings. God also knew that the end result, an eternal life of love, would justify the cost of creating free beings.

Now that we know what evil is and the root cause of it, why does God allow it to persist? Or, is He truly sovereign over all things? In the best-selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Kushner asks some very caustic questions. Regarding Nazi Germany, Kushner asks:

Where was God while all this was going on? Why did he not intervene to stop it? Why didn't He strike Hitler dead in 1939 and spare millions of lives and untold suffering, or why didn't He send an earthquake to demolish the gas chambers? Where was God? (p. 84)

Rabbi Kushner ultimately reached the conclusion that God is not perfect and is in need of our forgiveness:

Are you capable of forgiving and loving God even when you have found out *that He is not perfect?* . . . Can you learn to love and forgive Him despite *His limitations?* (p.148, emphasis added)

Is God still in control? Can He and does He Sovereignly overrule or redeem bad choices, or is Rabbi Kushner right? I believe Rabbi Kushner is wrong. God has the final word on all matters!

Before responding to the charge that God is not in control and must be forgiven, I must make one major qualification concerning my reply. Let me state it by way of a quote from Warren Wiersbe's book, *Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God's People*:

Nobody can fully answer all the questions; but, even if we could, the answers are not guaranteed to make life easier or suffering more bearable. God is not standing at the end of a syllogism, nor is peace of mind found at the conclusion of an argument. In every area of life there must always be an element of faith (p. 13).

Although reason has its place, so does faith. . Faith and reason both properly understood are not mutually exclusive. As we examine this issue, let us never forget that ultimately it is our faith that carries us through the most difficult times.

Rabbi Kushner rejects his own Scriptures because they don't square with his theology. He believes that if God could stop suffering, He would. Indeed, he does not accept the last chapters in the book of Job because he doesn't believe that God would allow a good man to suffer. The implication is that God doesn't want us to suffer. But, does Kushner really know all of God's purposes? Is he saying that God has no good purpose for innocent suffering, or does he mean that he doesn't know of any? For Kushner to say that God has no good purpose for suffering, he would have to know all of God's purposes (in essence be God). If Kushner is saying he does not know of any good purpose for suffering, then his conclusion does not follow. If Kushner doesn't know all of God's purposes, it just might be that God has some good purpose for suffering. What Kushner fails to prove is that suffering is ultimately unjustifiable. He must demonstrate that God never has and never will be able to redeem suffering. What logically follows is that we are limited, imperfect and in need of God's forgiveness!

However, we must still face Kushner's questions head on. Does God really lack the power to strike down a Hitler? Does He not have the wherewithal to demolish gas chambers? Does not the creator of the universe have the power to stop an army? He certainly does, but in the case of Nazi Germany He chose not to do so. Yet, what about all the innocent suffering? When we consider the truth that God is all-good and all-powerful, where does that leave us?

The only person who can help us understand the mind of God is Jesus, the sinless Son of God, who knows God infinitely better than we do. When I consider his words, his life and his sufferings, he forces me to think differently about the purposes of God. Technically speaking, Jesus is the only person who truly experienced innocent suffering at the hands of evil men. *Where was God* when Jesus was betrayed? He was right there with His Son, Jesus said,

*Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?* (Matthew 26:52-54, emphasis added)

Twelve legions of angels is somewhere between 36,000 and 72,000 angels--that would have been more than enough fighting power to rescue Jesus from the hands of evil men! Yet, Jesus chose not to call

upon his Father, but to trust his Father's plan, for Jesus knew his Father was sovereign over all things. Whereas Pilate thought he was in control and had power over Jesus' life--"Don't you realize I have the power either to free you or to crucify you?"--Jesus answered, "You have no power over me that was not given to you from above" (John 19:10-11).

Jesus teaches me that God has ultimate control, even when evil men commit cruel and unjust acts. Their freedom to do evil never interferes with God's plans. As C. S. Lewis said,

The crucifixion itself is the best, as well as the worst, of all historical events, but the *role* of Judas remains simply evil. We may apply this first to the problem of other people's suffering. A merciful man aims at his neighbour's good and so does "God's will," consciously co-operating with "the simple good." A cruel man oppresses his neighbour, and so does simple evil. But in doing such evil, he is used by God, without his own knowledge or consent, to produce the complex good--so that the first man serves God as a son, and the second as a tool. For you will certainly carry out God's purpose, however you act, but it makes a difference to you whether you serve like Judas or like John (C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 111).

It will make a difference to us whether or not we trust God and submit ourselves to His purposes, no matter how difficult we find the situation. One day all of us will face the most painful of all circumstances, death. The cross of Christ teaches me that God's purposes do not end with death. It was in the resurrection of His Son that God demonstrated His sovereignty and gave us hope:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Hebrews 5:7-9).

God's plan was not to rescue Jesus from the hands of evil men; moreover, God's plan was to rescue Jesus from the hands of death itself! Jesus knew that his sufferings would bring about the greater purposes of his Father.

The choice is simple, we will either allow our experience to interpret our theology, or we will use our theology to interpret our experience. If the former, we will most likely conclude, as Rabbi Kushner did, that the God of our experience is not the God we read about in the Bible. If the latter, we will need help to reconcile our experience with the God of the Bible. Only Jesus can give us that kind of help:

Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:2-3).

Rabbi Kushner asks us to forgive God, but Jesus asks us to consider his life, sufferings, death and resurrection, and to trust God. The resurrection tells me that death is not the end of our existence, nor is it the end of God's purposes. If we trust in God, and in His word, He has promised to use our sufferings for His greater purposes.

If God seems silent, it could be that we are not ready to hear what He has to say. Rabbi Kushner's son died in his early teens. After four brief years of marriage, C. S. Lewis lost his wife. Both men

experienced the pain of watching a loved one die. Both men experienced the silence of God. Yet, Lewis reached a different conclusion:

The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can't give it: you are like a drowning man who can't be helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps your reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear. . . . After all, you must have a capacity to receive, or even omnipotence can't give (Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, p.54).

What I ultimately learn from Jesus is that God always has the final word and that I can trust His plan for my life and future: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

*Where is God* when the innocent suffer? If you are truly seeking Him, you will find Him at the cross!