**Problem of Evil Resource Paper**

**Lightbearers resource papers are designed as a resource to Lightbearers staff as they interact with students and partners and are asked to provide wisdom on a variety of topics. These papers should not be considered a doctrinal stance in competition with your local church but an internal resource providing clarity on a sound evangelical stance on particular issues. Please seek out the counsel of the church under whose authority you have placed yourself as needed in responding to specific situations.**

**Foundational to each paper is the perspective that the Gospel is primary. No topic competes with the message of the Gospel for primacy in the church. At the same time, the Gospel impacts every corner of life (1 Corinthians 6:20); therefore, we aim to provide staff with direction that is Biblically sound and points them to view any issue through the lens of the Gospel—the good news that we are far more sinful and God is far more holy than we thought but the life and grace that God offers through Christ’s death and resurrection is far greater than we dare to hope.**

The “problem of evil” has been an objection to Christianity as long as there has been Christianity. If God is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving, why does evil exist? God wouldn’t want it and could stop it or design a way around it, so why does it exist?

We begin by saying that these three truths must work together, for all those things are true. God is:

* All-powerful—“Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me?” (Jeremiah 32:27)
* All-knowing—“Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Romans 11:33)
* All-loving—“The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works…The Lord is righteous in all His ways and kind in *all* His deeds.” (Psalm 145:8-9, 17)

And yet evil exists. We know this from human experience, when evil hits home with us, and from the news, as we see the evil around the globe. Evil is not an illusion and it is not relative; there is a stark and definable difference between good and evil (Isaiah 5:20).

Evil exists because God allowed it. He allowed both moral evil and natural evil to exist as a consequence of sin. Adam’s sin began a snowball effect in which individual men and women continued to sin in more and more dramatic ways. What started as a seed in Adam grew into an enormous crop of sin in coming generations. Adam sins in Genesis 3; the first murder is at the beginning of Genesis 4 and the second is at the end of the chapter. Genesis 6:5 says, “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great…and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” That pattern of growing sin continues to this day as we deal with the effects of hatred, selfishness, jealousy, discontent, pride and lust as they play out in strife, abuse and war. In addition, Romans 8:20-22 explains that sin also corrupted nature itself. The brokenness of our world—disease, natural disasters, etc.—is a result of man’s obeying the serpent rather than the King.

What does this mean? It means that God is not the source of evil. Man, in cooperation with Satan, brought evil into the world. At the same time, however, Scripture tells us that all things occur “according to the council of His will” (Ephesians 1:11), so we must say that God, at least in some sense, ordained for evil to exist. He did no evil and is not to blame for it and yet allowed it as part of His divine ordering.

**INTELLECTUAL OBJECTIONS—4 OPTIONS**

But why? Four primary options exist for how God could deal with evil: 1) fatalism, 2) devaluation, 3) elimination, and 4) reality.

**Option One: Fatalism**—*“Why didn’t God just stop Adam from sinning?”* Yes, God could have determined that Adam not sin and not have given him the capability to do so. However, as noted above, it was part of God’s divine (and thus perfect) ordering that evil would enter the world. The sin of man brings God glory, allowing Him to display His eternal nature of justice (in punishing sin) and mercy (in forgiving sin). Romans 9 declares that God acts towards men to display both His wrath and His mercy to make known “His power” and “His glory.” That is not to say that sin is good[[1]](#footnote-1) but simply that it was part of God’s plan to create man with the ability to make willing choices, that is, choices with real consequences, all of which brings Him glory. It brings Him glory to ordain evil for a time in order to defeat it in the end.

**Option Two: Devaluation**—“*Why doesn’t God just lighten up? Why not just a slap on the wrist? And why hold us accountable for actions when God controls all things?”* Habakkuk 1:13 reads “Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness with favor.” God must deal with sin as it deserves. James 1:14-15 says that temptation and lust gives birth to sin, which bring forth death. In other words, sin grows, and once it exists, it plays out in worse and worse ways. If God didn’t punish sin He would not be good. We would have a crime-allowing judge removed from office. God is certainly not an unjust judge (how terrifying an omnipotent unjust judge would be!)

But why are we responsible if He is in control? Consider 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 as a case study. 2 Samuel 24:1 says that the Lord “incited” David to sin by taking a census of Israel. In 2 Samuel 24:10, however, David confesses it was his own sin. Then, in 1 Chronicles 21:1, we read that Satan incited David to take the census. In other words, Satan tempted David to sin but since God is sovereign, 2 Samuel can say that God incited David (without tempting him[[2]](#footnote-2)). Through it all, however, David is the one guilty of sin.[[3]](#footnote-3) John Piper calls this “layered causality.” Think of God as a Divine Author, the world as His story and mankind as His characters. We do not call an author evil when he causes his characters to do evil. We know the acts are his doing, but they are also entirely the doing of the characters and the characters are the ones held responsible for those actions. God brings about and controls evil for His purposes without ever doing any evil Himself.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Option Three: Elimination**—“*Why doesn’t God just destroy all the evil and restore the good that He started with?”* There are two relevant replies to this question. First, the true answer to this question is “He will!” We have the promise that God will defeat Satan and destroy evil[[5]](#footnote-5), and 2 Peter 3:8-9 says He is not slow in keeping His promises. Therefore, from an eternal perspective, the evil He allows is the blink of an eye before He destroys it forever. Second, when we ask this question, we do not take into account that in destroying evil He would be bound to destroy humans. Humans are born inheriting both the legal guilt of Adam and his sin nature. It is His mercy that delays the destruction of evil. That is why 2 Peter 3:9 concludes by stating that He delays judgment out of patience, waiting for more to come to repentance.

**Option Four: Reality**—*“Why is the manner in which God allowed evil a good thing?”* God made man in His image and, as part of that image, He gave him the ability to make willing choices. God creates us fully intact, with our desires, intentions and will inside of us. With that will, man chose sin over a perfect relationship with God and thereby ushered evil into the world. As Wayne Grudem says, we are “free in the greatest sense any creature of God could be free — we make willing choices, choices that have *real effects*.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

The remarkably good news is that God is present. He is present when the sparrow dies, when disaster overtakes a city, and when His people cry out in suffering.[[7]](#footnote-7) God allowed us to create a world that is broken and corrupted, but He did not abandon us to it. He joins us in it! Imagine a world in which God is not present when tragedy strikes, a world where God does not set the bounds of evil and Satan roams completely at will. Instead, God sovereignly ordained that sin should enter the world, but He also ordained that He would defeat it in the end. The whole earth suffers the consequences of sin, but Christ has defeated sin and death and has provided freedom for His people, and He will one day return in glory to ultimately judge the world and defeat evil. Just as Job’s suffering (marked sometimes by faith and sometimes by doubt) concludes with the appearance of the Almighty so will ours. May we wait with hope and humble faith in the Almighty.

**INDIVIDUAL OBJECTIONS**

When we seek to answer questions about the problem of evil we must begin by understanding the motivation behind the question. There are those who ask out of curiosity or confusion with the desire to more fully understand the gospel (believer and non-believer alike). There are those whose question is the frontrunner to an attack upon Christianity…they seek to “prove” Christianity’s inability to solve the problem of evil. These are the objections we have considered above. Encourage honest questions and lay out truth with confidence and humility[[8]](#footnote-8), showing the love and spirit of Christ and declaring the Gospel. Know your stuff, but remember that you cannot “convince” anyone to Christ; the best you can do is plant a seed and pray the Spirit reveals Himself in your answers and manner.

But what about those who ask out of genuine pain and hurt? What about those who are crying out in desperation for an answer of how God could be good in an awful situation?

Job 6:14 says, “For the despairing man, there should be kindness from his friend so that He does not forsake the fear of the Almighty.” When answering those who ask out of confusion and pain, begin with simply your presence. When it is time to speak, don’t overwhelm with heavy theology or simply try to convert non-believers in pain. Sympathize with them, cry with them, pray with them. Focus on the goodness, sovereignty, comfort and grace of God and then display the love of Christ in your genuine concern and sympathy.

**CONCLUSION—JESUS**

“From a Biblical worldview, the ultimate apologetic for the problem of evil is God’s action (through Christ) in becoming the victim of maximum evil…Although components of the problem of evil may remain a present mystery, a more amazing mystery is that God allowed sin to occur at all, knowing He would become its ultimate victim.”[[9]](#footnote-9) In other words, we must recall that God did not consider the problem of evil in theory. He knew that He would pay the price for sin Himself. When it came time to complete that redemption, he made right what Satan had corrupted in the garden, and while man committed the evil act of crucifying Jesus, God was in control all along.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Evil exists. And yet God is good. Can we trust this without completely understanding? We should seek to understand theological principles, but we first trust our Creator with our lives. We trust His goodness and cling to Him when evil comes. For it will come. And we must cling.

**Resources for further reading:**

Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (pp. 322-331)

http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/confronting-the-problem-s-of-evil

http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm\_send/636

<http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2012/10/the-five-responses-to-the-problem-of-evil/>

1. Cf. Paul’s words in Romans 6:1—“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace my increase? May it never be!” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James 1:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Romans 9:19, where Paul asks the same question, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Consider the story of Job, where it is only because God allows Satan to act that evil comes upon Job. Satan commits the evil, but God allows it. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Revelation 11:17-18, 18:8, 20:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. By comparison, as Grudem notes, completely “free” will is neither possible nor desirable. Impossible because of our slavery to sin without Christ and not desirable because such a universe would not have Jesus “continually carrying along all things by his word of power. ” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Matthew 10:29, Amos 3:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cf. 2 Timothy 2:25, 1 Peter 3:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gary Phillips, William Brown and John Stonestreet, *Making Sense of Your World*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Acts 2:23, 36; 4:27-28; Colossians 2:14-15 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)