

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Genesis 2 v7-9, 15-18; 3v1-6.

Events in Oslo over the past 48 hours have thrown up once again the issue that many find a barrier to faith, the problem of evil. This is how the dictionary defines evil. Adjective: *morally bad, wicked; harmful, especially intentionally or characteristically*. Moral evil! We are faced with this every day in one form or another; we don't have to wait for mass slaughter. Every day the national and international news is full of it.

Of course "evil" is a problem for everyone, but in a philosophical sense it is a particular "problem" for those who believe in the God of the Bible. The argument goes like this: If there is a God why does he allow such things to happen? The classic statement of the problem is: If God is perfectly good He must want to abolish all evil. If He is all powerful, He must be able to do so. Yet evil exists.

The dictionary has a special word for the vindication of God's providence in the light of evil - "*Theodicy*". Philosophers have debated this through the centuries. It is the issue that prevents some from coming to faith and which can cause *believers* great personal heartache.

But biblical Christianity has a different starting point. Terrible acts of evil make us ask the basic worldview questions again: *Who am I and where do I come from – what's gone wrong with the world, and how do we fix it?* Once again it is the second question we need to be asking especially today. What's gone wrong with the world?

But first, if the God of the Bible is given a hard time over evil, we should be able to ask what explanations other worldviews come up with.

Other Worldviews

Dualism: This is an ancient worldview, but it persists today. It maintains that there is a mighty cosmic struggle going on between two equal powers, one good and the other evil. We must put our efforts behind good triumphing over the "Dark Side".

Monism: This is the very opposite. It denies any duality and says there is only One Ultimate Reality and everything else is a part of it. There is no such thing as evil, only ignorance. Humanity has no need of redemption only enlightenment. This is the perspective of *Hinduism* and it lies behind New Age thinking and much of the self-help industry.

Theism: In the late 17th and early 18th century a philosopher called Leibniz argued that there must be a sufficient reason why the world is the way it is. God could have created any world He chose to; therefore He must have created "*the best of all possible worlds*". It must be that we need dark clouds as a background. Good cannot be seen without evil.

Existentialism: is a 20th century philosophy popularized by writers like Sartre, Camus and Kafka through the novels. They said: life has no meaning; there are no answers to anything; we are victims of evil but don't know who to blame.

Determinism: Natural causes are sufficient to explain everything. Men and women are programmed to act in certain ways. In the 1960's B.F. Skinner introduced this to the world of Psychotherapy through Behaviorism. This asserts that our choices are not free. Our behavior is determined by the influences on us. e.g. genetic make-up, environment, childhood. There is no such thing as moral corruption. We cannot be blamed for our behavior, it is not our fault.

Which of these answers satisfies you? Now let's take a look at the way the Bible faces up to the problem of evil in the world. I believe a Biblical Worldview is the only one that offers real answers. As ever, we need to go back to Genesis chapters 1-3.

A Biblical Worldview

God is good

God only creates what is good and perfect. Seven times in Genesis ch.1 God is pictured admiring His handiwork. "*God saw that it was good*". He took pleasure in His creation. But the reason for the pleasure was *creation's goodness*. God *is* good, and His goodness is reflected in His works. He looked at the creation and saw that it was good. It reflected His own nature. God is good! His goodness sets the standard for all goodness. Evil is the very opposite of His nature.

Even though God *is* all powerful there *is* something He is incapable of making. He cannot create evil. Everything He made was "good", and that included humanity. The first man and woman were created morally perfect; made in the image of God. Evil is an intrusion into God's perfect Creation. This is important. If somehow evil originated in God, then there is no hope of any triumph over evil.

So what happened to God's perfect world? Where did evil come from?

God created us as free moral beings

God created us to enjoy relationship with Himself. But there's no satisfaction in a relationship with a puppet or a dummy. So God created men and women as free moral beings. But this very freedom carried with it a choice, the ability to turn away from God. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden provided the man and woman with an opportunity, every day, to affirm their trust and obedience. Every time they looked at it the tree was a reminder that they were free moral beings. There was nothing magical about the fruit like in a fairy story. The fruit was real but it was symbolic. Eating from it would mean something (just as taking bread and wine means something). Eating from this fruit in disobedience to God's instruction would mean that the man and the woman were choosing another way than God's way.

It presented them with a choice: God's way or their own way.

- Live in obedience to God and you will experience only what is good; disobey and you will also experience the opposite.
- Live in obedience to God and you pursue knowledge by the route of revelation, i.e. what He judges is good for you to know; disobey and you pursue wisdom by the route of self-sufficient knowledge and you will discover things you wished you had never known.
- Live in obedience to God and you allow Him to decide what is right and wrong; disobey and you become the arbiter of what is right and wrong.

The first man and woman were not puppets. Their decisions were not made for them. They were free to make willing choices, choices that had real *effects*.

We have an enemy of our soul

In the Bible he is called 'The Evil One', the adversary, the devil, Satan. He works to ruin everything associated with God. This is not introducing Dualism. The Devil is not another god or an equal power. He is a created being, a fallen angel. His opposite would be the angel Gabriel, not God.

Before Adam and Eve ever turned away from God (we call this *The Fall*) there had already been a turning away from God. Evil can be traced back to *The Fall before The Fall*. The tree in the Garden is testimony to this prior *Fall* by its name, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The man and woman were led into rebellion by this enemy, in the form of a serpent.

The Norwegian Prime Minister said yesterday that the terrible events on Friday had "*turned our island Paradise into a Hell!*" That's also a good description of what happened in the Garden of Eden.

So where did evil come from? If God didn't create evil did the devil create it? And what is it anyway?

The root of evil is rejecting God

Charles Colson writes "*To turn away from God, the source of all goodness, is to create evil. Evil does not have an independent existence, nor was it created by God. Evil is created by sin.*" The root of evil is rejecting God to replace Him with self. This is what the devil did. They fell for the false promise, "*you will be like God*".

Colson again: "*Adam & Eve's sin was not eating a piece of fruit. Their sin was coveting godlike power, craving something that was not rightfully theirs. They rejected*

their nature as created, limited, finite beings and they tried to be what they could never be - divine. They wanted to be their own god. This single choice to disobey a divine command introduced the moral battle of the heavens into the earthly arena, with consequences that will reach to the end of history. The original sin in the Garden has affected all of humanity, so that every human being is born into a state of alienation from God." (Charles Colson: 'How Now |Shall We Live?' Marshall Pickering. 1999)

What has gone wrong with the world? The Bible's answer is that humanity mutinied and became separated from God. It uses the word "sin". This isn't just talking about things we do wrong; it describes a disease of the soul. Now every man and woman is born with a serious malignant spiritual disease.

Biblical theology speaks of *total depravity*. This is *not* saying that there is no good at all in us, but that every part of our being - intellect, will, emotions and body, has been affected by sin. Every evil act comes from man's inward sinful nature. It spawns all manner of terrible things. **Mark 7v20-23**. We may not all end up as terrorists but the Bible says we have the same disease of the soul which has alienated us from God.

What can we do about it? Nothing! When it comes to getting rid of evil all man's best efforts fail. And when it comes to getting back into sync with God, we constantly fall short. This is bad news.

Good News

But here is the good news. Jesus died on the cross to deal with the source of all evil – sin. Here we touch the heart of a Christian Worldview. Jesus carried the evil of the world, the flesh and the devil in Himself. On the cross He drank the cup of God's wrath on sin, so that we might drink the cup of salvation. He took our punishment. He died in our place. He dealt a death blow to sin – removing its power to enslave us. He removed the barrier between a Holy God and sinful humanity. The image of God in us begins to be restored. We desire to obey God. We begin to agree with God's verdict on what is right and wrong. He makes us into new creations – "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven".

In the early hours of Saturday morning I listened as the horrific news from Norway filtered through on my bedside radio. It interrupted a discussion on World Football on *5 Live*. One of the pundits commented that this news put everything into perspective, and that talk of football belonged to the "Toy Shop". The other contributor disagreed; he said he believed that football had an important part to play in breaking down barriers between peoples of the world. I thought, if that is so, how much more do we, as the church of Jesus Christ, have to offer! We believe we have the answers this chaotic world needs. So Christian, don't be embarrassed about what you believe; the gospel of Jesus Christ is this fallen world's only hope.

John Wilthew. July 2011

