How Could a Good God Allow Suffering and Evil?

Andy Naselli June 18, 2009

What is evil?
There are two kinds of evil: moral and natural. Moral evil is sin, such as murder, rape, abuse, terrorism, or genocide. Natural evil is what causes suffering and unpleasantness; it is the result of moral evil. For example, every human dies, animals suffer, natural disasters like tsunamis and earthquakes wreak havoc, vehicles crash, diseases kill millions, and horrific freak accidents occur. Like everyone else, I have tasted this evil more than once, including when my parents separated when I was four and later when my youngest brother died of Neuroblastoma cancer when he was just six years old. It is ugly and painful.

What are the logical and emotional problems of evil?
The logical problem of evil is the logical tension in the following three statements: (1) God is all-powerful and all-wise, (2) God is all-good, and (3) evil exists. Some claim that if (1) and (2) were true, then evil would not exist. The emotional problem of evil is the emotional and religious tension people experience when they or those close to them suffer. People wrestling with the emotional problem of evil may ask God in desperation, "Why?!"

What are some unbiblical/inadequate solutions to the logical problem of evil?
John M. Frame presents and refutes several (*Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* [Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994], 155-70):

1. Evil is not real. But to insist that evil is merely an illusion is to play a word game.
2. God is not all-powerful. But Scripture clearly teaches the opposite.
3. This is the best possible world, and evil is necessary for its perfection. While a form of this view is certainly possible, it is not clear enough in Scripture to warrant dogmatism.
4. Evil is a result of peoples' free will, so God is not accountable for evil. But even though humans want to think that they are autonomously in charge of everything they choose, their will is free only in the sense that they are free to act according to their nature (i.e., their complex of attributes). Humans are not absolutely free; otherwise God would be absolutely contingent.
5. Evil is necessary for people to mature. But all suffering does not build character.
6. God is the indirect (not direct) cause of evil, so He is not accountable for evil. But this would make God a cosmic Mafia boss who hires hit men to carry out his dirty work.
7. God is above the law, so He can do what seems evil to other people. But God's law reflects His character.
8. Non-Christians have no right to question whether God is both all-powerful and all good. But this solution attacks non-Christians instead of answering their legitimate question about how Christianity coheres in light of the logical problem of evil.

What does a biblical approach to the logical problem of evil include?
Rather than exhaustively solve the logical problem of evil, the Bible leaves some questions unanswered. It does, however, provide a sufficient framework that is not illogical.

1. Bad things do not happen to good people; good and bad things happen to bad people. Most people ask, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" The question that makes the most biblical sense is, "Why do good things happen to bad people?" We are all bad people! (Jesus, of course, is the exception since he was completely good and still experienced the cross.)
2. The problem of evil is an argument for God, not against Him. Christians must account for the problem of evil, but atheists must account for the problems of both good and evil. On what basis can atheists say that anything is inherently good or evil? If they do (and humans are universally outraged at moral and natural evils), they are borrowing from the Christian worldview.
3. God is not obligated to explain the problem of evil to anyone. Job, for example, repeatedly asks God, "Why?!" God finally thunders back with a couple of rounds of intimidating questions that Job cannot answer. Rather than answering Job's question, God reverses the charge and puts Job in his place. Humans

have neither the ability nor the right to understand everything because they are not God. Faith by definition requires trust when one does not have all the answers.

4. God (not our sense of justice) is the standard for what He does. When God deals with people, He is always fair (justice), and He does favors (grace). God is fair even when He does favors for some and not others (cf. Matthew 20:1-16). Often when people demand justice, they want it immediately and only in a particular circumstance, and they assume that they have assessed the situation rightly. Such people should cry out for anything but swift justice because what we all deserve is God's wrath! The universal need of humans is for God's grace, mercy, love, and forgiveness. (See D. A. Carson, How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil [2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006], 160.)

5. 5. God ordains and causes evil, but He cannot be blamed for it. Scripture teaches both, so we must hold them in tension (see the next point). Words like "ordain" and "cause" must be qualified: God is not guilty of committing moral evil. Although this is a difficult teaching, Christians should not want it any other way; it would be terrifying if God did not control evil because that would imply that evil forces can resist and overpower God. When a terrible calamity occurs such as the terrorist attacks on 9/11, it is not enough to say merely that God allowed it. Even though people who say that are typically trying to protect God, they are actually domesticating Him: "Does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it?" (Amos 3:6). "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things" (Isaiah 45:7; cf. Psalm 135:6).

6. The logical problem of evil (including providence) involves mystery, requiring that Christians maintain doctrinal tensions in biblical proportion. Some Bible teachings like the Trinity and the nature of Christ's person involve tensions. It seems incomprehensible that all three propositions could be true at the same time, so people tend to accept two and deny or explain away the third. "Compatibilism" is the belief that statements (a) and (b) describing "Providence" are true. They are mutually compatible, not contradictory. Both the life of Joseph and the death of Jesus illustrate this mysterious tension (see Genesis 50:19-20; Acts 4:23-31). It is not illogical, but humans cannot exhaustively understand it.

7. God uses evil for a greater good. His ultimate design is to glorify Himself, and all things work towards that end. The Bible does not give an exhaustive list of ways that God uses evil for His good purposes, but some of the ways include displaying His grace and justice, judging evil, saving sinners, shocking sinners so that they will repent, disciplining Christians, and vindicating Himself. (See Frame, Apologetics, 188-89.) The experience of Christians is that God often uses suffering as a catalyst for remarkable spiritual growth.

8. There was no problem of evil before the fall, nor will there be one in the eternal state. Christians longingly anticipate and confidently expect the day when God will completely vindicate Himself and give His people resurrected glorified bodies. This is why Christian funerals are unique; Christians do not weep as those who have no hope. God will reverse all suffering, and the result will be an even greater joy.

9. God uses natural evil to illustrate how horrendous moral evil really is, and the right response is repentance. What is a person's emotional reaction when they are diagnosed with cancer or their child dies? Is their reaction as intense as when they sin against God's holiness? Natural evil wakes people up to their need to repent of their moral evil (see Luke 13:1-5).

10. The most significant problem of evil is the cross. The most outrageous evil in human history is the murder of Jesus. How can these three statements all be true? (1) God is holy and just; (2) humans are sinners who offend God's holiness and deserve His just wrath; and (3) God forgives and justifies sinners through faith in Jesus. God vindicated Himself in the cross of Christ (see Romans 3:25-26).

What does a biblical approach to the emotional problem of evil include?
In addition to my own limited experience, the suggestions that follow are based primarily on the testimony of a couple of theologians who have suffered significantly: D. A. Carson (How Long, O Lord?) and John Feinberg (Where Is God? A Personal Story of Finding God in Grief and Suffering [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004]).

First, understand that people who are suffering are typically wrestling primarily with the emotional problem of evil (not the logical one). It is naive to think that having "all the answers" to the logical problem of evil is sufficient for people who are suffering. When a little girl falls down, bloodies her knee, and runs screaming to her mom, the last thing she wants from her mom is a physics lesson on falling or a lesson on what God may be teaching her about

falling. She wants a hug! She wants comfort from her caring mom! The emotional problem of evil is not primarily an intellectual issue.

Second, understand how people initially react to suffering. Feinberg's initial reactions to severe suffering included hopelessness, helplessness, abandonment, anger, and confusion. Serving someone at this stage requires sensitivity to such natural reactions.

Third, don't say and do certain things to people who are suffering. These statements and actions are insensitive and not helpful. Some are explicitly unbiblical.

1. "This must be happening to you because you committed some great sin."
2. Don't focus on the loss of things instead of people (e.g., a house that burned down instead of a person who died in the fire).
3. Don't speculate about what unforeseen problems this suffering may be sparing them (e.g., "Your boy might have grown up to be a rebel").
4. If they have a fatal disease: "Well, everyone has to die from something. You just know in advance what it is."
5. "I know how you feel." What is important is that you care.
6. "You aren't spiritually mature until you're happy about this."
7. "Well, Romans 8:28 says that God works all things together for good."
8. Don't assume that they are seeking an answer to the question "Why?"
9. When people ask "Why?," don't assume that they are looking for a long, sophisticated answer.
10. "You are continuing to suffer because you are lacking faith in God."

Fourth, say and do certain things to people who are suffering.

1. "You must learn to live with this, but that doesn't mean you have to like it!"
2. "God never promised to give you tomorrow's grace for today. He promised only today's grace for today, and that's all you need!"
3. Show them that you really do care by spending time with them, listening to them, and tangibly demonstrating love over the long haul.
4. Share specific reasons for hope (e.g., share a news article on technological advances to curing their disease).
5. "God is good."
6. "This is a fallen world, and suffering makes us realize sin's enormity and hate sin even more."
7. Help them focus on someone else's needs. This has therapeutic value in confirming that they can help others, and it gets their eyes off themselves.
8. "There is no necessary connection between your suffering and a specific sin you committed."
9. "God is with Christians and genuinely sympathizes with them in their suffering."
10. "False guilt often accompanies suffering, but Jesus died to take our guilt."
11. Help them know God better.
12. Pray for them because only God can provide sufficient comfort.

Conclusion

Christians must learn to live with mystery, tension, irony, and paradox because it is part of the gospel itself (see Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; Isaiah 53:4,10). The gospel applies to the intellectual and emotional problems of evil because Jesus is the only source of ultimate comfort; these problems will continue until Jesus consummates His redemption of His people. The right response is to affirm what God says in the Bible and trust Him--even if we cannot exhaustively explain every facet of it. Like an airplane pilot experiencing "spatial disorientation," those who are suffering must "trust the instruments" (the Bible) to weather the storm.