

# **The Bible On the Problem of Evil**

## Insights from Romans 3:1-8,21-26; 5:1-5; 8:28-39

by John M. Frame

For many today and throughout history, the problem of evil has represented the most serious objection to the Christian faith. Some very brilliant philosophers have thought that this problem conclusively refutes belief in the Christian God. But not only professors of philosophy — ordinary people, too, often feel this problem deeply. You don't have to be a sophisticated philosopher to doubt the reality of God when a loved one is going through terrible suffering. At such times the "problem of evil" is not so much a learned argument as it is a simple cry of the heart, "How could a loving God allow this?"

That's it, in a nutshell. The sophisticated philosophical version of the problem states the issue, usually, with a calmer spirit and a more precise vocabulary. But the philosopher doesn't state the question any better; and insofar as the philosopher dilutes the passion of that heart-cry, he misses something important. So we'll leave it at the simple level. To understand, to feel the problem of evil, think of some terrible tragedy that seems to have no positive value whatsoever: the genocide of Hitler, Stalin, or Pol Pot; a child suffering terrible pain as he slowly dies of cancer; an African baby dying of starvation. Think in such cases of how you too might cry out, almost involuntarily, "How could a loving God allow this?" You see, it's not only unbelievers who cry out that way. Believers do too. There is something universally human about that cry. It's almost a reflex. It's something that goes very deep.

Is there an answer to the problem of evil? Well, that depends on what you mean by "answer." What kind of "answer" are you willing to accept? If what you want is a total explanation of where evil came from, how it arose, how it achieves God's good purposes, well, I cannot supply that. I don't believe that this kind of answer is available to human beings, and I don't believe that God is under any obligation to give us such an answer.

But if what you want is encouragement, a motivation to go on trusting God *despite* unexplained evil, then I think I can help. If you are looking for some assurance that God is all-powerful, just, good and wise, despite many temptations to disbelieve in him, I believe such assurance is available, and I would like to share that assurance with you.

That assurance comes from the Bible, God's Word. You might be a bit surprised to hear that the Bible speaks about the problem of evil. Sometimes, I think, we act and speak as if the problem of evil were a discovery of modern man. To be sure, the Holocaust was forty years ago; indeed there are many recent evils that trouble our faith in God. Yet none of us, probably, has suffered as much as Job, or the apostle Paul, or the heroes of Hebrews 11. Certainly none of us can possibly imagine the enormity of the sufferings of Jesus Christ. And none of us, probably, has reflected on suffering as deeply as did Job, Paul, or the Lord Jesus. Yes, the Bible says a great deal about the problem of evil. Large sections of the Bible are devoted to it. In fact, one might say that the whole Bible is about the problem of evil: it is the story of how evil entered a good world, and how God gained the victory over evil in Jesus Christ.

Paul's letter to the Romans is a summary of that biblical story. It tells us about the sin of the human race against God, how none of us has kept God's law, and thus that we all deserve to die: "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). None of us can earn his way to heaven by good works. But though we were without hope, God sent his own son, Jesus Christ, to live a perfect life, and then to lay down that life as our sacrifice: "God commended his love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Christ's work sets us free from the dominion of sin (Rom. 6), enables us to walk in the Spirit (Rom. 8), and motivates us to live a godly life (Rom. 12-16).

Romans tells us how we can become right with God. But it also tells us how God demonstrates his *own* righteousness. Romans 3:25-26 tells us that God gave us his son, not only to justify us, but to justify himself, to demonstrate his own righteousness. In other words, Romans addresses the problem of evil. Over and over again, throughout the book, Paul answers people who claim that God's way of salvation is unjust. Paul's answers can become our answers to the problem of evil, if we will take them to heart.

## **God is the Lord**

Look first at Romans 3:3-8. Here Paul answers two objections. The first, in verse 3, deals with the unbelief of Israel, Paul's own nation and the people of God in the Old Testament. The problem is that God promised to save Israel, to deliver them from their enemies and to fill them with wonderful blessings. But Israel refused to believe the promise, and disobeyed God's law. Therefore, God rejected them; he said that Israel would no longer be his people. The objection is this, verse 3: Israel's unbelief nullifies God's promise. God judged Israel instead of blessing them — he was unfaithful.

The objection has some plausibility to it. After all, God did promise Israel some wonderful things, but it seems like all these promises went by the board. Now there is what we might call a “direct” answer to this question, and we’ll read about it later, in verses 21-26. But the interesting thing is that in this passage Paul does not give that direct answer. Rather, *he rebukes the question* in very sharp language: “God unfaithful? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written, ‘So that you may be proved right in your words and prevail in your judging’” (Rom. 3:4). Paul is saying, “Look, God simply *cannot* be unfaithful. If you say God is unfaithful, you lie — *you* are the unfaithful one. God always proves true. He always prevails when he judges someone. He is Lord. Who do you think you are, anyway?”

The next verses (Rom. 3:5-8) raise another objection, and handle it the same way: if Israel’s sin brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, then God ought to be pleased with sin, not angry. He shouldn’t judge sin, because sin brings him glory. Paul could respond more directly, but again, he does not give the direct answer. Instead, he rebukes the questioner again: “Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?” Then in verse 8 he says of the objectors that “their condemnation is deserved.” These are tough words against people who question God’s righteousness. Paul is saying that we have no right to raise doubts about God’s goodness and righteousness. Why? Because God is the judge, not we; he is the authority, not we. He is the *standard* of righteousness. Most of us use dictionaries as standards for the spelling of words. We would not criticize the spelling in our dictionaries. How much less do we dare to criticize the righteousness of our holy God?

This is not pleasant, but such tough talk is pretty common in Scripture. Very often, when people in Scripture raise doubts about God’s goodness, rather than explain himself, God rebukes the questioners. Think of Adam and Eve after the fall, blaming their sin on the serpent and on one another, and ultimately on God. Why did God let the serpent into the garden anyway? God doesn’t reply; rather he judges them for their unbelief and disobedience. Think of Abraham, after the angel rescued him from having to sacrifice his son Isaac on the altar. Does God explain this apparently unjust order? No. He merely commends Abraham’s obedience.

Think of poor Job, bereft of his family and wealth, his body full of sores. Job wanted an interview with God. He wanted God to explain why all these things had taken place. Well, Job got his interview, but it didn’t turn out the way he expected. God appeared to him (Job 38), and accused him of ignorant words. Then God announced that Job would not question God; God would question Job.

God asked Job questions about creation, the sea, the morning, light, snow, hail, stars, clouds, mountain goats, wild donkeys, ostriches, crocodiles. Job didn't know the answers, and he confessed his ignorance. He laid his hand upon his mouth in shame and subjection. Who do you think you are, Job? God is the Lord of justice. How dare you ask an accounting from him!

This is hard to take. Like Job, we usually expect something else when we ask for an explanation of the problem of evil. This doesn't even seem like an explanation. It is more like that old gag line, "'Shut up,' he explained." But in this case, this is bitter medicine that we need to take. When we are faced with the problem of evil, we need to remind ourselves who we are and who God is. We are in no position to judge him, we have no right to demand an explanation from him. He is *Lord*. That *is* our first answer to the problem of evil.

## God is the Savior

But there is more. God's first intention in the Bible is to silence our doubting questions as we stand before his holiness and majesty. But thank God, Scripture does more than shut our mouths. If God only rebuked us, then we would be most miserable indeed, doomed to eternal death. That's what Paul says about the law of God in Romans 3:19 — the law silences every mouth, making us conscious of our sin. But the law does not give us hope; it does not save us. Rebukes don't save. We need them sometimes, but they give us no hope.

But Paul has more to say. God answers the problem of evil by saving us:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished — he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies the man who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:21-26).

This is the good news, the wonderful story of Jesus. We could not be saved through keeping the law, so God sent his son as a sacrifice for our sin — a free gift. We receive the benefits of this salvation through faith, by trusting Jesus

as our personal savior and Lord. But what God is saying here is that this gospel, this good news, demonstrates his justice.

You see, if we may put this reverently, God in the Old Testament was faced with a problem. As we have seen, he promised Israel wonderful blessings. But Israel rebelled, disobeyed. What was God to do? If he punished Israel, he would have broken his promise — no more Promised Land, no more milk and honey. If he had fulfilled his promise, if he had simply overlooked their sin, he would have been unjust. It seems as though God could have been merciful, or God could have been just, but not both. Mercy would work against justice, and justice would work against mercy. Here the problem of evil comes up in a particularly difficult form. For even if you prove that God is just, you thereby prove that he is not merciful, and *vice versa*. So the problem can never be resolved.

So it seems in the wisdom of men. Men never could have dreamed of a way for God to solve this problem. But God found a way. The answer is in the cross of Jesus. At the Cross there is punishment for sin, a punishment God takes on himself. And therefore, at the Cross there is also an ocean of mercy that flows over God's people. The Cross shows that God *is* just, and that he is merciful.

That is Paul's — and God's — second answer to the problem of evil. We know that God is just, because he has demonstrated his justice in history, far beyond any possible human expectations, in the cross of Christ. Now that doesn't answer *all* our questions. Every day things happen that we still question. What about the Holocaust? What about children starving? How can these come from a just God? But when such questions arise, think back to the cross of Christ. For in the cross, God displayed his mercy in a way so wonderful that none of us could have anticipated it. When you think about that, you can understand how it will be a small matter for God to demonstrate his justice in all these areas that bother us. God doesn't answer us by satisfying our curiosity. Instead, he answers us by giving us a powerful motivation to believe, even when our curiosity is not satisfied. Thus we walk by faith, not by sight.

## **God is the Spirit**

But now you may say, "Well, that may be all well and good, but I just can't bring myself to believe it. That all sounds reasonable, and I can accept it with my reason, but not with my heart." Scripture understands that need as well. God wants to respond, not only to your reason, but also to your heart.

How does he do this? By giving us a new heart. Look at chapter five, the opening verses:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into the grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us (Rom. 5:1-5).

When we come to know Jesus as our savior and Lord, we become new persons. Instead of hating God, we come to love him. Instead of hating other people, we come to love them. And God also puts into our hearts a new attitude toward suffering: we become able to *rejoice* in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces patience, character, hope. Suffering doesn't destroy the Christian. Rather, it helps him to mature, to grow more godly. And I think the word "hope" is also important here. The Christian looks forward to God's promises of something better. We trust God that the sufferings of this present world are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18).

How do we get these new attitudes? By the Holy Spirit, Paul says, which God has poured into our heart. How do we grow in these attitudes, in patience, character, hope through suffering? By asking God for a richer portion of the Spirit, and then by trusting him. Reckon yourself dead to sin (Rom. 6:11) — that includes unbelief, doubt, distrust, hopelessness.

The Spirit does wonderful things for our spirits. Listen to Paul in Romans 8:28-39 — listen to his complete confidence in God's goodness, justice and love. This is the fullest answer to the problem of evil: a Spirit-filled confidence that God's way is right and best:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give

us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? As it is written: For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.