



Since Evil Exists, How can I Believe in a Loving God?

Peter May

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Readings: Acts 14:8-22; Luke 13:1-5

The events of this past week leave us all numbed and confused as the appalling pictures from Haiti are beamed into our homes. This poor nation, humiliated by the ludicrous pomposity of Papa Doc and ill-served by incompetent and corrupt administrations since, rates among the outstanding examples of failed states. Gang warfare ruled the streets, crime was unchecked, the infrastructure was allowed to rot, the poor were left in utter degradation, the land was deforested, the economy depended on overseas aid, unemployment was at 75%, voodooism passed responsibility to the spirit world, and the people were left utterly ill-equipped to face a natural disaster.

What Christian sense can we make of it all? I want to speak under four headings – philosophical, theological, practical and pastoral.

1) Philosophical

The philosophical point might seem coldly intellectual but the idea that we should not believe in a God of Love because of the existence of evil is actually a non-sequitur. Both love and evil speak of ultimate moral values. If God does not exist, then evil does not exist either. The worldview of the atheist fundamentally undermines the concept that there is any ultimate good, or justice, or evil. There is just natural reality – what we can see and experience – and

nature itself is red in tooth and claw.

Violence is a major part of the natural world, while atheism sees love as merely a chemical process in our brains, while justice, evil and ultimate moral goodness are delusions. The atheist can talk about suffering, but he has sawn off the branch that enabled him to talk about evil as an objective reality. Many atheists, including Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, say that religion itself is evil, without understanding that they are using a religious term to make their point. Religion may be invalid or unpleasant, but they cannot meaningfully say it is evil.

Most people, however, need little persuading that evil is an objective reality. Torturing children for pleasure is not just an unusual example of suffering; it is intentional wickedness. Crashing passenger jets into the Twin Towers, was not just a wasteful way to fly aircraft: it was a deliberate and appalling act of evil.

If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist. If evil does exist, then objective moral values do exist. If objective moral values exist then God exists.

2) Theological

To move on to theological matters, in Paul's address to the farmers at Lystra, he spoke of bringing them good news in contrast to what has happened in the past. In the past (Acts 14:16) God let the nations go their own way. In other words, God has not directly intervened to restrain evil.

The problem for the atheist is that this does not amount to an argument against the existence of God. It merely challenges our understanding of what God must be like. Is he a loving God who is powerless or a powerful God who does not care? Is he a remote deist God, who having created the universe has withdrawn from active interest in it? None of this implies that God does not exist.

We might well ask what it would look like if God did intervene. If we had our way, would we want God to intervene to stop *some* evil or *all* evil? The popular press regularly speaks of evil people and innocent people. Christians know that this is an absurd caricature of reality. Even the most evil

people are capable of goodness, while the very best people wrestle with their demons.

"No-one is good, not even one," wrote the apostle Paul (Romans 3:12), while Christ questioned by a ruler of the synagogue replied, "Why do you call me good? No-one is good but God alone." (Luke 18:19) Everyone of us sits uncomfortably with his own conscience. We all fail to live up to our own standards and we fall far short of God's revealed standards.

So if God were to intervene to eradicate evil people, he could hardly stop at Hitler, Stalin or Papa Doc. Paul said to the Athenian philosophers that God has fixed a day when he will judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31). But he wrote to Timothy that God desires everyone to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). Elsewhere we read that God delays judgement out of mercy, wanting everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

Paul told the farmers about 'Good news'. This is not unpacked in the brief extract Luke recorded but most surely concerns the gospel that God has come among us. He has entered our suffering world. He has taken on frail flesh. As Tim Keller puts it in *The Reason for God, Jesus 'knows first hand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, bereavement, torture and imprisonment'*. And that was just in his life. In his death he suffered the deepest alienation and abandonment possible, as he cried out to his Father in heaven, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The New Testament does not have rose-tinted spectacles in its view of the human situation. Paul brings good news to the farmers and finds that in response his audience stone him, drag him outside the city and leave him for dead. When he returns to Lystra, he tells them that "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (14:22). Jesus himself warned of earthquakes and famines in various places, as well as violence and persecutions, as he set his own face towards Jerusalem and his betrayal and crucifixion.

Why does God allow evil and suffering to go unchecked? Keller makes the telling point that if we believe that God is unjustified to allow such a state of affairs, we seem to have enormous faith

in our own cognitive faculties. "If our minds can't plumb the depths of the universe for good answers to suffering, well, then, there can't be any!" This he says is blind faith of a high order.

A more humble and reasonable approach would be to conclude that God just might have morally sufficient reason to allow evil to persist.

A little thought gives us some insight, such as the consideration I have given of the consequences for all of us if evil, including our evil, is eradicated. We would be bringing forward the day of Judgement, when God actually would delay that judgement out of mercy.

Others have made the point that the morally holy God has made us in his image as moral agents, who are responsible for our behaviour. To overrule our behaviour and restrain our thoughts, desires, words and deeds would reduce us to mere automatons and rob us of moral choice. If we are to grow in godliness, that has to involve our making moral choices and living with the consequences, as we learn to love the good and shun the evil. Parents long to protect their children from dangerous choices, but the time comes when they have to be allowed to cross the road without us, and stay away overnight without our supervision and to make their own career choices if they are to grow to maturity.

Natural disasters call for a different kind of theodicy. We are horrified at the thought of 100,000 people being killed within a very short time. But before we get too anxious about tectonic plates and earthquakes, we need to realise that gravity causes people to fall to their deaths every day. Far larger numbers than 100,000 die every day around the world from accidents, viruses, disease and neglect. Measles, malaria and AIDS are appalling killers. One of our joys in a cold long winter is to sit around a fire, yet fire kills many people every day. One of the purest joys is a glass of cold water, but people choke or drown in large yet scattered numbers on a daily basis.

There are serious risks involved in living on Planet Earth. Could God have made such a bio-friendly world without gravity, fire, water, tectonic plates or microorganisms? If he could, we could not possibly imagine it.

C.S. Lewis saw suffering as God's megaphone to arouse us from moral stupor. This seems to be the point that Christ made in our abrupt and arresting Gospel reading (Luke 13:1-5). Christ was asked about two events. The one suggests great wickedness under Pilate; the fall of the Tower of Siloam sounds more like a natural accident. But whether due to wickedness or nature, Christ said that this had nothing to do with the guilt or innocence of the victims and the lesson we should all learn from their plight is to look to our own behaviour and repent of our sins, lest we too come unprepared before the judgement seat of God. For our own death is coming sooner or later.

We do not need to know why God allows evil to persist. We may or may not have some true insights, but it is not our place to try to justify God. We are not well placed to understand the mind of God in this matter but we might reasonably conclude from reading the New Testament that he could have morally justifiable reasons to have made the world the way he did and allow evil to continue.

3) Practical

Which brings me to the practical point. I am grateful to my grand-daughter Sophie Grace for the way she set up our toy farm this week. She lined up all the cows beside each other in front of a wall by a road, such that they were all resting their chins on the wall as they watched the world go by. Now that is all very well for cows but human life and suffering is not a spectator sport for us to cheer, boo, groan and discuss from positions of security and comfort. We are not placed here to watch the world go by. When Christ calls us to repent, he calls us to roll up our sleeves and get involved. *"Take up your cross,"* he said, *"and follow me."* The role of Christians in a suffering world is to get stuck in.

In our stable, wealthy, law-abiding, militarily defended, NHS cosseted, democratic society we can become all too protected from the ravages of tyranny, corruption, poverty and suffering. When evil and suffering strike on our door, we might well reflect on our own complacency and apply ourselves more vigorously to be salt and light in the world around us. I don't know how you read the current times but our security seems to me to

be much less stable than it was. Wickedness could come upon us like a flood.

So when we see a state like Haiti fail, we might wonder what happens if our country goes bankrupt and cannot pay the police, the educators or the NHS, when our security systems fail and violent men have their way on our streets and corrupt politicians milk the money out of all of us.

What is it that lifts a society from degradation to decency, from chaos to order, from neglect to loving care, if it is not the power of the gospel calling people to take moral responsibility for their actions and care for the poor, the weak and the vulnerable?

God has intervened in human affairs through the gospel, and calls us to lives of compassion, integrity, faithfulness, honesty, hard work and godly courage. Where else are we to look for light to shine in human misery, if it is not in the face of Jesus Christ and his transforming love.

The challenging and uncomfortable message of the existence of evil, is that we are called at every level of society to work for its overthrow. Our agenda is simple. We are to love God with all our heart mind soul and strength and love our neighbours in the way we love ourselves.

Our calling as Christians is to be a central part of God's answer to the problem of evil.

4) Pastoral

Finally, pastorally, where else are we to find words of comfort for those who suffer. Surely it is only in the death and resurrection of Christ that we have grounds to believe that suffering and evil will not win the day. God promises a new heaven and a new earth, albeit beyond our comprehension, and for that he asks us to believe him and trust him.

The story of Joseph tells of his suffering, rejection and being sold into slavery. Yet at the end of the story, when he is able to provide for his brothers, he says to them, *"You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."* (Genesis 50:20)

The death of Christ, similarly, resulted from gross human wickedness, but God turned that tragedy

into the good news of salvation.

We have the message of God coming alongside us in our suffering in order to redeem our wickedness and transform our living. He not only gives us patience in our afflictions but hope in our despair. We have in Christ the words of eternal life, which come from the creator and giver of life itself, as he holds out to us the forgiveness of our sins and the hope of Heaven.

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This talk was originally given at Highfield Church, Southampton in January 2010, just after the earthquake in Haiti. It is used by the kind permission of Dr May.