

What Can We Say about Evil in Light of America's Tragedy?

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 left Americans grieving—fearful, angry, and confused. Sleepless commentators delivered the news to a stunned nation trying to comprehend. How could this happen? Why would anybody do such a thing? *How* did they do it? Could it happen again?

Some of the most difficult questions were theological. What should we think about God in the presence of horrific evil? A Doonesbury cartoon published three weeks after the attacks presented the “#1 FAQ about God lately” as, “What kind of God allows such terrible suffering and death?” Can we still believe in a God of love? If so, should we have second thoughts about His abilities? One minister apparently thought so, telling reporters that God was just as surprised by the attacks as we were.

A few prominent preachers described the attacks as judgment against an immoral nation. Some believers, confident it was an apocalyptic sign, grew excited at the prospect of Christ's imminent return. Some even began calculating whether the name Osama bin Laden might number 666.

It is understandable that so many different questions would be asked and so many alternative explanations offered as individuals simply tried to make sense of what was happening around them. While it is not wrong to ask questions, it is not always right to answer them. In particular, queries about the hidden purposes of God in specific acts of suffering are almost always unanswerable.

However, we are not left without comfort. When devastating circumstances drive us back to the foundations of our faith, we find genuine hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Early Christians, often writing in the midst of their own trials, articulated that gospel in the careful language of the creeds. Those creeds, though shelved by many Protestants in recent years, give structure and content to our faith. When words fail us on the day of trouble, the familiar drumbeat of the creed reminds us that we do indeed have something to say. It is what we as Christians have always said, and it enables us to find comfort within the boundaries.

We believe in one God, the Father All Governing, creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.*

The undeniable reality of evil presents a serious challenge to those who believe in an Almighty God. If He truly governs all things, why is there so much injustice? We try to resolve the question, either by redefining God to accommodate our experience or by redefining our experience to accommodate our understanding of God. We should do neither.

Some redefine God by denying His existence, saying, “How can you say there is a God when this happens?” Others deny His goodness, thinking only someone evil would allow this kind of evil. But, believing in God, we affirm by faith “that he exists and that

* The creedal affirmations in this article are from the Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 (*Creeds of the Churches*, ed. John H. Leith, 3rd edition [Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982], 33), one of the most universally accepted of all Christian creeds.

he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6, NRSV). We cannot deny, “Good and upright is the Lord” (Ps. 25:8).

Celestin Musekura, a Rwandan pastor completing his Ph.D. at Dallas Theological Seminary, has seen far more than his share of tragedy. Approximately one million of his countrymen were killed in genocide in the last decade. He has also seen the way Christians all too often respond. “It is as if they keep a god of their own making in their pockets,” he told me. “They reach in and pull him out whenever it suits their ends. They scold him when things go badly; they praise him when things go well. Either way, they see him as a god for their own purposes.”

We often develop a similar mentality. Trying to maintain continual prosperity—subject, of course, to our own control—we pursue God through various techniques designed to win His favor. Someone struggling with infertility once asked me, “What sort of prayer do I need to pray to get God to answer?” Another friend once said, “I have done all that I’m supposed to do—I’ve gone to church, I’ve read my Bible, and I’ve really tried to do what’s right. Why am I still single?” God is not a vending machine, and His actions are not always predictable. They are certainly not subject to our control.

The problem of evil is essentially a problem of the apparent absence of God in the midst of failed expectations. We think we can anticipate the actions of a loving and powerful God. When He does not do what we expect, when He does not behave like a vending machine, we question His presence. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21). In the same way, the enslaved

Israelite labored each day to the taunt of his captors—“Where is your God now?” (Psalm 42:3, 10; 115:2).

The psalmist’s answer to that question is direct and unwavering. “Our God is in the heavens, and He does whatever He pleases” (Ps. 115:3). That He is in the heavens means He is not in our pockets. That He does whatever He pleases means He does not always do what pleases us. We must not forget that He is our God, and we are simply the sheep of His hand (Ps. 95:7).

Further, we must not redefine God as one who does not foresee evil or suffering, for He “declares the end from the beginning” (Isa. 46:10). Long before the video cameras recorded their assault, God could see the planes coming. We do not know why He did not send angels to intercept them, but we dare not say they caught Him by surprise.

We must not redefine God as one who cannot or will not intervene in our world. When God’s hands are apparently still, we must not conclude that His hands are tied. Some say He permits evil because He has determined not to overturn human free choices or their consequences, but that answer is inadequate for several reasons. First, it wrongly assumes that one has true freedom only when capable of doing both good and evil. If that were true, then we would not be free in heaven and God Himself would never be truly free! No, freedom is also possible when choosing only that which is good. Second, the argument that God does not intervene because He wishes to preserve human freedom, when applied to individual cases, seems to say that the freedom of the perpetrator is more worthy of protection than the life of victim. Third, this approach neglects a considerable

number of biblical examples. God often delivered His people from the consequences of evil human decisions—think of the Exodus, Daniel in the lion’s den, or Peter’s release from prison. Think of the 185,000 Assyrians cut down in one night by the angel of the Lord (1 Kings 19:35)! On the other hand, God did not always intervene. “Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground” (Heb. 11:36-38).

Like the saints before us, we may wonder why God does not intervene more often, but we dare not say He cannot or does not intervene. A God who cannot prevent our tragedies, whose hands are tied, who wishes He could but cannot answer our prayers, is resoundingly not the God of the Bible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, . . . through Whom all things came into being, Who for us men and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became human. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate.

We have a Savior who can sympathize with our infirmities (Heb. 4:15), who knows what it is to live, suffer, and die as an innocent victim at the hands of sinful men

(Acts 2:23). That this One, the One through whom all things came into being, was *crucified* demonstrates that God's presence is not always obvious in our experiences.

Remember the taunt from the Psalms? "Where is your God now?" Skeptics raised similar questions at the foot of the cross. "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son' " (Matt. 27:42-43). From where they stood, based on what they saw, the argument made sense.

Surely God would not allow this to happen to His own Son!

(Ah, but He did.)

Surely He would have intervened with powerful signs!

(Alas, He did not.)

Now the cross disproves forever the notion that appearances are reliable measures of God's blessing, for His hand does not always move so predictably. Those who witnessed the crucifixion utterly misunderstood God's purposes.

The events of September 11 reminded us what the Bible had already taught us—that we do not know what will happen in the future.

"For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them" (Eccl. 9:12, NRSV).

“No one knows what is to happen, and who can tell anyone what the future holds?” (10:14).

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.’ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.’” (James 4:13-15).

The cross reminds us that we do not know what God is doing in the present. In the words of Alister McGrath, “Experience cannot be allowed to have the final word—it must be judged and shown up as deceptive and misleading. The theology of the cross draws our attention to the sheer unreliability of experience as a guide to the presence and activity of God. God is active and present in his world, quite independently of whether we experience him as being so. Experience declared that God was absent from Calvary, only to have its verdict humiliatingly overturned on the third day.”

This lesson from the cross is one reason it was unfortunate that several Christian leaders spoke of September 11 as a day of judgment upon America. God does judge nations and individuals, but events in themselves provide no reliable insight into His purposes. When God does not reveal those purposes, it is presumptuous of us to break His silence with explanations of our own. God reprimanded Job’s friends for that very mistake. When they pronounced Job’s suffering to be an expression of judgment, God said, “You have not spoken rightly concerning Me” (Job 42:7). In the words of

Ecclesiastes 5:2, “God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few.”

The cross, however, also tells us what we *can* say. Though we should avoid identifying God’s purposes in the midst of His silence, we can affirm that suffering is not pointless, for nothing occurs outside of God’s providence. After all, in the most heinous act of human evil imaginable, the Son of God was “delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23).

Some Christians have appealed to the doctrine of divine providence by attempting to identify God’s hidden purposes behind specific acts in history. While the example of the cross should caution us against such presumption, knowing that God remains in control provides significant comfort in troubling times.

The day I learned that our newborn, firstborn son, had Down Syndrome, the doctor kindly said to us, “I don’t know about you, but I don’t have room in my theology for the idea that God *caused* this, but I do think that He can help you *in* it.”

I thanked him for his words of intended consolation. But after he left, I turned to my wife and said, “I’m not going to get hung up on that word ‘cause,’ but if God is not behind this, then I have no hope in it.” If He is not somehow in charge of life’s seemingly random events so that I can perceive them as coming to me by His hand, then those events have no meaning and suffering is devoid of hope. But if I can look at this experience and say, “God knew, God knows, and God is good,” I am able to move forward.

“Where is your God now?” The startling image of a cross in the rubble of the World Trade Center reminds us that God is to be found precisely where He was on Good Friday: identifying with us in our suffering, acting to resolve that suffering in ways we may not see or imagine, and yet sovereign in the heavens, accomplishing his eternal, though mysterious, purposes.



. . . and rose on the third day, according to the Scriptures, and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead.

The exalted Christ, though present with us through the agency of the Spirit, has gone to prepare a place for us in the presence of the Father (John 14:2). As for us—we

remain in the world in which He was crucified. We know all too well that it is a world filled with suffering. Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). It is a world in which injustice reigns. In the words of Ecclesiastes 8:14, "There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous." This is a world in which we experience mourning, crying, and pain. Abiding in it, we persevere in hope. We look forward to Heaven while we abide in the world. We look forward to the kingdom that worships Christ rather than crucifies Him. We look forward to the place where His witnesses receive crowns rather than martyrdom. We look forward to justice while we endure tribulation.

We wait for Him who will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead.

"This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed" (2 Thess. 1:7-10). "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

Justice and comfort will come. Until then, every tear reminds us that that day is yet future.

It was ironic that, in the midst of so many tears, some believers viewed the events of September 11 as signs of Christ's return. Evil and suffering are more appropriately regarded as reminders of His absence. In the absence of the landowner, unrighteous stewards abuse his servants and even murder his son (Matt. 21:33-41). But the absentee will return—when, we do not know (Acts 1:7)—and justice is with him.

Though we confess that the day of justice is yet future, many Christians seem compelled to think of it as already present. Clinging to a biblical view of God, they try desperately to resolve the inconsistency between His character and the presence of evil even if it means treating the evil as something good. They justify God's allowance of particular evil events by identifying the good, but previously unexpected, results. They point to individuals learning valuable lessons, receiving needed "wake-up calls," or turning to Christ.

In all such pursuits we risk concluding that the event first regarded as evil was actually good. We risk justifying it, declaring it to be right. We must never justify evil, for even when God uses evil for good, the evil remains evil. We must never make evil seem reasonable. If we tried to describe the temptation and fall of Genesis 3 in such a way that it made sense, we would do precisely what Adam and Eve did when they tried to explain their sin by blaming it on others. We must not make acts of sin and evil seem

reasonable by attempting to explain why they occurred. Sin is always inexplicable. It is never sensible, never rational, never right.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, the Yale philosopher who lost an adult son in a mountain climbing accident, wrote that someone said to his wife, “I hope you're learning to live at peace with Eric's death.” Wolterstorff responded,

Peace, shalom, salaam. Shalom is the fullness of life in all dimensions. Shalom is dwelling in justice and delight with God, with neighbor, with oneself, in nature. Death is shalom's mortal enemy. Death is demonic. We cannot live at peace with death. When the writer of *Revelation* spoke of the coming of the day of shalom, he did not say that on that day we would live at peace with death. He said that on that day “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” I shall try to keep the wound from healing, in recognition of our living still in the old order of things. I shall try to keep it from healing, in solidarity with those who sit beside me on humanity's mourning bench (*Lament for a Son* [Eerdmans, 1987], 63).

Some good has resulted from these evil events. Some people have taken the gospel more seriously. Others have rebuilt relationships. Yet we must never focus so much on the “good results” that, through them, the evil begins to look like good and we find ourselves making peace with death. When anecdotes about happy outcomes make us think we understand why it happened, we have sacrificed both grief and hope. Our hope is for a day in which there will be no mourning, crying, or pain. Our grief is that this is

not that day. When, by rationalizing or justifying evil, we call this the day of justice, we render hope irrelevant and grief unnecessary.

In the end we must not claim to know more than we really do. We believe that God exists and that He is good, just, and sovereign. We believe that He oversees all things by His providence and that His purposes are good. But we do not pretend to know those purposes, and we dare not offer explanations where God has chosen to remain silent.

... We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.