

The Problem of Evil



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Job 30:26; Matt. 27:46; Job 38:1–12; Psalm 73; Gen. 2:16, 17; Rev. 21:3, 4.*

Memory Text: “‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.’ ” (*Revelation 21:4, NKJV*).

Perhaps the greatest problem facing Christianity is the problem of evil—how to reconcile the fact that God is perfectly good and loving, with the fact of evil in this world. In brief terms, if God is all-good and all-powerful, why is there evil, and so much of it, too?

This is not merely an academic problem but something that deeply troubles many people and that keeps some from coming to know and love God.

“To many minds the origin of sin and the reason for its existence are a source of great perplexity. They see the work of evil, with its terrible results of woe and desolation, and they question how all this can exist under the sovereignty of One who is infinite in wisdom, in power, and in love. Here is a mystery of which they find no explanation.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 492.

Many atheists identify the problem of evil as the reason that they are atheists. But as we will see in this week and in coming weeks, the God of the Bible is entirely good, and we can trust Him—even despite the evil that so infects our fallen world.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 15.

“How Long, O Lord?”

The problem of evil is voiced not only in contemporary contexts but also in Scripture itself.

Read Job 30:26, Jeremiah 12:1, Jeremiah 13:22, Malachi 2:17, and Psalm 10:1. How do these texts bring the problem of evil to the forefront of human experience?

These texts raise many questions that are still with us today. Why does it seem as though the wicked prosper and those who do evil benefit from their evil, perhaps not always but still often enough? Why do the righteous suffer so much? Where is God when evil occurs? Why does God sometimes appear to be far from us, even hidden?

Whatever we say about these questions and the problem of evil more generally, we should be sure *not to trivialize evil*. We should not try to resolve the problem by downplaying the kind, or amount, of evil in the world. Evil is very bad—and God hates it even more than we do. Thus, we might join in the cry that rings throughout Scripture in response to the many evils and injustices in the world: “How long, O Lord?”

Read Matthew 27:46. How do you understand these words of Jesus? What do they convey about how evil touched God in the most striking of ways?

On the cross, Jesus Himself voiced the question: “ ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’ ” (*Matt. 27:46, NKJV*). Here especially we see that God Himself is touched by evil, an amazing truth powerfully highlighted in the suffering and death of Christ on the cross, where all the evil of the world fell upon Him.

But even here there is hope. What Christ did on the cross defeated the source of evil, Satan, and will eventually undo evil entirely. Jesus quoted those words from Psalm 22:1, and the rest of the psalm ends in triumph.

On the cross, Jesus looked forward to a hope that, at the time, He could not see. How can we draw comfort from His experience when we, too, cannot see hope before us?

“There Are Many Things We Do Not Know”

The end of history will come with the triumph of love over evil. But, in the meantime, many troubling questions remain. How can we think and talk about the problem of evil in a way that might be helpful?

Read Job 38:1–12. How does God’s answer to Job shed light on the problem of evil? How much do we know and not know about what might be going on behind the scenes?

In the narrative, Job had suffered much and had voiced many questions himself about why so much evil and suffering had befallen him. He requested an audience with God in order to seek answers to his questions, not knowing that far more was going on behind the scenes, in the heavenly court (see *Job 1, 2*).

God’s response to Job is striking. Specifically, “the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: ‘Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?’” (*Job 38:1, 2, NKJV*). One translation puts it this way: “Why do you talk so much when you know so little?” (*Job 38:2, CEV*). And, God adds in *Job 38:4*, “ ‘Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding’ ” (*NKJV*).

Read Job 42:3. How does Job’s response illuminate what we should recognize about our own position?

By His responses to Job, God made it clear to Job that there are many things that Job did not know and did not understand. Like Job, we, too, should humbly recognize that there are many things going on in the world, and behind the scenes, that we know nothing about. The fact that we may not know the answers to our questions does not mean there are no good answers or that one day everything will not be resolved. Until then, we need to trust in the goodness of God, which has been revealed to us in so many ways.

Think about how little we know about anything. Why, then, should we learn to live with unanswered questions about the most difficult of subjects: evil and suffering?

The Skeptical Theist

God proclaims in Isaiah 55:8, 9, “ ‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the LORD. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts’ ” (*NKJV*).

God’s thoughts are far higher than ours. We cannot even imagine the complexities of God’s plan for history. Given this, why should we expect to be in a position to know just what God’s reasons are for what He does or does not do in various situations?

One way of approaching the problem of evil, based on recognizing how little we know, is called “skeptical theism.” The skeptical theist is one who believes God has good reasons for acting as He does, but given our limited knowledge, we should not expect to be in a position to know just what those reasons are. The skeptical theist is skeptical regarding the human capacity to be aware of or to understand fully God’s reasons relative to the evil in this world. Just because one cannot see, for instance, germs floating in the air all around us does not mean there are no germs floating in the air all around us. The fact that one does not know what God’s reasons are certainly does not mean that God has no good reasons.

Read Psalm 73. How does the psalmist approach the evil and injustice around him? What does he see that puts his understanding in a different perspective?

The psalmist was deeply troubled by the evil in the world. He looked around him and saw the wicked prospering. Everything seemed unjust and unfair. He had no answers to give. He wondered whether it was even worth believing in and serving God. Until, that is, he looked into the sanctuary.

The sanctuary provides part of the key to the problem of evil—namely, recognizing there is a righteous Judge who will bring justice and judgment in His own time.

How can the Adventist understanding of the judgment and the sanctuary doctrine shed light on the problem of evil? Is it helpful to you to know that, while we have many questions now, the details of history and God’s righteous judgments will be revealed in the end?

The Freewill Defense

However much we don't understand of God's ways and thoughts, Scripture does reveal some things that help to address the problem of evil. One avenue for addressing the logical problem of evil is known as the freewill defense.

The freewill defense is the view that evil is the result of the misuse of creaturely free will. God, then, is not to blame for evil, because evil is the result of creatures misusing the free will that God has given us for good reasons. Why, however, would God give such free will? In this regard, C. S. Lewis once wrote that "free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other. . . . And for that they must be free."—*Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1960), p. 52.

Read Genesis 2:16, 17. How do these verses display the moral freedom granted to Adam and Eve?

Why command them unless they had free will to begin with? Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, and since then our planet has been filled with evil. In Genesis 4, the next chapter after the Fall narrative, the terrible consequences of sin are seen in the murder of Abel by his brother. The narrative of the Fall shows how the misuse of Adam and Eve's free will brought sin and evil into the history of our planet.

All through Scripture, we see the reality of free moral will. (*See Deut. 7:12, 13; Josh. 24:14, 15; Ps. 81:11–14; and Isa. 66:4.*) Every day of our lives, to one degree or another, we ourselves exercise the free will given to us by our Creator. Without free will, we would not be recognizably human. We would be more like a machine, or even a mindless robot.

Sony Corporation has created a robot dog called Aibo. It will not get sick, not get fleas, not bite, not need shots, and not shed fur. Would you trade your flesh-and-blood dog for an Aibo? If not, how might your choice help you better understand why God created us as He did, with free will—despite the risks?

Love and Evil?

God has granted creatures free will because it is necessary for love; misuse of this free will is the cause of evil. Again, many questions remain. God allows evil (for a time), while passionately despising it, because to exclude its possibility would exclude love, and to destroy it prematurely would damage the trust necessary for love.

“The earth was dark through misapprehension of God. That the gloomy shadows might be lightened, that the world might be brought back to God, Satan’s deceptive power was to be broken. This could not be done by force. The exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God’s government; He desires only the service of love; and love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority. Only by love is love awakened. To know God is to love Him; His character must be manifested in contrast to the character of Satan.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 22.

Without free will, there could be no love, and if God is love, then it seems clear that it is not really an option for God to negate love or the freedom needed for love to exist. One could suppose, too, that if we knew the end from the beginning, as God does, we would not want Him to get rid of our freedom. After all, who would want to live in a loveless universe?

Read Romans 8:18 and Revelation 21:3, 4. How can these texts give us confidence to trust in God’s goodness, despite all the evil in our world?

Even when we cannot see through the darkness, God can see the end from the beginning. He can see, too, the eternal bliss promised to all who place their faith in Jesus. According to Romans 8:18, “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (*NKJV*). Do we have the faith and trust to believe this amazing promise?

Also, so sacred, so foundational, was love, and the freedom inherent in love, that rather than deny it to us, Jesus knew it would send Him to the cross, where He would suffer greatly. Yet, He granted this freedom to us anyway, knowing what it would cost Him. Why is this such a crucial thought to keep before us always?

How does keeping in mind the fact that God grants us free will help protect us from thinking that everything that happens is God’s will?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Why Was Sin Permitted?” pp. 33–43, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“Even when he was cast out of heaven, Infinite Wisdom did not destroy Satan. Since only the service of love can be acceptable to God, the allegiance of His creatures must rest upon a conviction of His justice and benevolence. The inhabitants of heaven and of the worlds, being unprepared to comprehend the nature or consequences of sin, could not then have seen the justice of God in the destruction of Satan. Had he been immediately blotted out of existence, some would have served God from fear rather than from love. The influence of the deceiver would not have been fully destroyed, nor would the spirit of rebellion have been utterly eradicated. For the good of the entire universe through ceaseless ages, he must more fully develop his principles, that his charges against the divine government might be seen in their true light by all created beings, and that the justice and mercy of God and the immutability of His law might be forever placed beyond all question.

“Satan’s rebellion was to be a lesson to the universe through all coming ages—a perpetual testimony to the nature of sin and its terrible results. The working out of Satan’s rule, its effects upon both men and angels, would show what must be the fruit of setting aside the divine authority. It would testify that with the existence of God’s government is bound up the well-being of all the creatures He has made. Thus the history of this terrible experiment of rebellion was to be a perpetual safeguard to all holy beings, to prevent them from being deceived as to the nature of transgression, to save them from committing sin, and suffering its penalty.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 42, 43.

Discussion Questions:

1 “Theodicy” is a term for the justification of God in the face of evil. But it is not the justification for evil itself. Imagine someone in heaven saying, “Oh, yes, Jesus, now I understand why my family was tortured and murdered before my eyes. Yes, it all makes great sense now. Thank You, Jesus!” That’s absurd. How can we come to understand that it is God, not evil, that is ultimately vindicated in the great controversy? (See lesson 9.)

2 Have you ever felt somewhat like Job? Have you ever been tempted to think that there could not possibly be a good explanation for the suffering you or your loved ones have experienced? How does Job’s final realization that he “uttered what” he “did not understand” (*Job 42:3, NKJV*) shed light on the position we are in relative to our own questions?

A Voice in the Dark

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Grace Babcock woke up suddenly in the middle of the night to the sound of an angry voice. “You don’t know,” the voice said. “You don’t understand.”

Grace wasn’t scared. If anything, she was annoyed about being woken up in her one-bedroom apartment at the Holbrook Indian School, where she worked as a teacher. She listened.

“God is using you like a puppet,” the voice said. “There is stuff that you don’t know. You are following God blindly, and God is tyrannical.”

Grace had been struggling to trust God. The recent death of a Holbrook student in a bus accident had hit her hard. She had many questions for God, but she hadn’t really wanted to talk to Him about them.

Now the voice was accusing God, and she didn’t like that, either.

“Go away,” she said. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

The voice fell silent.

But the accusations against God hung heavily in the room. Grace didn’t want to talk to God, but she thought that it was only fair that He be given an opportunity to respond. She asked God about each specific accusation that she had heard. Silence. She fell asleep.

The next day, Grace went to a nature spot where she often liked to think. Sitting on a brown rock, she brought up the accusations again to God. Silence. As night fell, she went home.

The next day, she returned to the nature spot. Again, silence. But as she walked home, she sensed a voice say, “You don’t need to know the answers to these questions that you are asking. You need to have faith and trust.”

“That’s true,” she said. “I don’t need to know the answers. But I do need to know that You are good. Right now, I don’t know that You are good.”

At home, Grace opened the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* and began to read. As she read, she sensed a voice say, “Look up.”

Looking up, she saw a picture from a coloring book on her refrigerator. The picture had been given to her by a fifth-grade student, and it depicted Jesus’ cross and the words of John 3:16. “You did that for us, Jesus,” Grace said. “Since You did that, You are good. You really are good. I can trust You, even though I don’t have answers to all my questions.”



This mission story offers an inside look at a previous Thirteenth Sabbath project. Grace Babcock teaches elementary students at the US-based Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School, which received the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 2021. Thank you for supporting the spread of the gospel with this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on March 29.