

# **The Problem of Evil**

by Craig Smith

Occasionally, when I'm speaking at Christian conferences or other events, I have the opportunity to listen to the tough questions people are pondering. I always find this a worthwhile experience for several reasons. First, some of the questions have relatively easy answers and I love being able to encourage people with truth. Second, some of the questions are new and interesting and give me lots to think about. Third, knowing the kinds of questions people are asking helps me keep my finger on the "theological pulse", so to speak, of contemporary Christianity. In my job, this is very important and so I always welcome the opportunity.

While these Tough Questions sessions always involve a wide variety of issues, certain questions seem to come up very frequently, so I thought this month it might be interesting to start a new series where I try to give a biblical answer to some of the more common questions that I get. Here is the exact question that I received earlier this summer at a student conference on the West coast: "Why would God make us if He knew some of us would reject Him and go to hell?"

This is a difficult, but important, question that comes up in just about every Tough Questions seminar I lead and it deserves a good, biblical answer. Unfortunately, the Bible doesn't have a specific, direct statement that answers this question. So, rather than answering the question by quoting a Scripture passage, what we have to do is reason our way biblically to an answer. What does solid biblical reasoning allow us to say?

Before we get started, we need to establish that, in fact, God *did* know some people would reject Him. This may seem like a pointless step since everyone knows that God is omniscient (all-knowing), right? Well, not exactly. In recent years, a movement called Open Theism has gained considerable popularity in otherwise conservative, orthodox<sup>1</sup> Christian circles. According to Open Theists like Greg Boyd, John Sanders and Clark Pinnock, God does not know the future because the future is genuinely "open" which, in their thinking, means that the future does not yet exist to be known. Consequently, God cannot know that which does not exist and so God's omniscience is limited to the past and the present. According to Open Theism, the answer to the question "why would God make people He knew would go to hell?" is this: He didn't. God didn't know that Adam and Eve would sin and He didn't know that anyone would go to hell.

There are at least two problems with this answer. First, it seems clear to me and to most other evangelical scholars - as well as to the vast majority of biblical scholars throughout the ages - that God *does* know the future exhaustively. Isaiah 46:9-10<sup>2</sup> is but one of

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the word "orthodox" here in the sense of "adhering to the classic tenets of Christian faith as taught by Scripture and recognized by the church throughout the ages."

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 46:9-10: <sup>9</sup> "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; *I am* God, and there is no one like Me, <sup>10</sup> Declaring the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure';

many passages that seem to state this clearly. The second problem with Open Theism, to my mind, is that it creates more problems than it solves. If God was genuinely surprised by Adam and Eve's sin (which is something that Open Theists explicitly claim), then God seems to have made a monumental miscalculation which calls into question His judgment and the advisability of trusting Him.

But if God knew that creating us would lead to a hell with its share of inhabitants, then why create us at all? Here's what I think we can say with certainty:

**1. God is good** (Gen. 1, 1Ti. 4:4, 3Jo. 1:11, et.al.)

This probably doesn't need much explanation. Not only is God's nature the standard by which all things are judged to be "good" or "bad", but God is also benevolent and therefore seeks that which is good for His creation.

**2. God is maximal**

This one probably requires some explanation. When I say that God is "maximal", I mean that whatever God is, He is to the maximum possible degree. So, God is not "partially powerful" but "all-powerful" (omnipotent). God is not "partially present" but "all-present" (omnipresent). He does not know "some things" but "all things" (omniscient). Further, because God Himself is maximal in every respect and because what God seeks flows from His nature, it stands to reason that whatever God seeks, He seeks to the maximum possible degree.

**3. God always seeks the maximum possible good.**

Since God is good and God is maximal, God always seeks the maximum possible good. He will never settle for "some good" but only for "the most good". Consequently, we can rest assured that whatever God does, He does because He knows it will result in the maximum possible good.

What does all this mean? It means that the answer to this difficult question about why God would create us if He knew some of us would reject Him is this: *because this world that God has made is the route to the greatest possible good.*

Now, a legitimate follow-up question would be: *how does this world, which includes some people choosing to reject God and suffering the eternal consequences of that decision, result in the greatest possible good?* And the answer to that question is: we don't know. Or, at least, we don't know with any certainty. The three points above are certain. Going beyond them is an exercise in speculation. *How* this world results in the greatest possible good may well be unknowable to us, but *that* this world will result in the greatest possible good seems like solid biblical ground.

But we can speculate on the rest, can't we? Sure we can, and here's my best guess: My stove is one of those flat-top ranges where a portion of the surface glows red when you turn on a burner, so you know where to put the pot. It's pretty cool and my kids were fascinated by it from a very young age. Do you know what they wanted to do with the

glowing red circle? They wanted to touch it. Now, of course, I told them not to, but imagine that they disobeyed me and touched it anyway. Two questions come to mind. First, will they ever touch it again? No, never. Second, will they be free to touch it again? Yes, always. So, how can they be always free to do something but never do it? Because the desire to touch it would have been, pardon the pun, burned out of them.

So now ask yourself this: will we be “able” to sin in heaven? I think the answer has to be yes. If we’re not “able” to disobey God, then this seems to require us to be some kind of mindless robots, the very sort of thing that God seems not to have been interested in creating in the first place...why else make creatures with “free will”? But the Bible is also clear that there will be no sin in heaven. Ever. So how can we spend the rest of eternity “able” to sin, but never sinning? Because we will have had the desire burned out of us. We have touched the stove and, while we do not always feel the perfect horror of that choice clearly now, when our transformation is complete we will look at our sin and the consequences of it and will be so horrified that we will never ever desire to sin again. But we’ll still be “able” to sin. And so we will genuinely love and obey God forever not because we have no other option but because we will want nothing more than this.

It seems to me that this is a reasonable speculation as to how God’s choice to create a world where some of His creatures reject Him will ultimately result in the greatest possible good. But of course I don’t know this for sure. All I know for sure, based on the character of God as revealed in Scripture, is that whatever God does He does because it will lead to the greatest possible good.

A few final points of clarification need to be made.

First, to say that this world is the route to the greatest possible good is not the same as saying that each specific thing that occurs in this world is an advancement of that good. When a child is abused or a car crash claims the life of a loved one, this is the result of our sin which has so damaged the world we live in, not the result of a direct act of God. I believe that God created a world where he *permitted* such things occur because of the greater good that will result, but I do not believe that God *ordains* each and every act of sin which occurs in this world. However, even in the midst of such things, God “causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose” (Rom. 8:28). God remains with us and actively involved in our lives even as we wade through the mess we’ve made of His world.

Second, what I have written here is an absurdly simplistic answer to a ridiculously complex question. I do believe it is an accurate answer, but it is really only a very broad framework of an answer. I have skimmed rapidly over some very deep waters. If you would like to dip your toes deeper into those waters with me, please visit the Shepherd Project online community at: <http://shepherdproject.ning.com/group/theproblemofevil>

