

*The Shack*¹ and the Problem of Evil

by Craig Smith

Perhaps one of the most strategic intersections of faith and culture today relates to the problem of evil. In its simplest form, the problem of evil is this: *If God is all good and God is all powerful, then why does evil exist?* Since *The Shack* is, in many ways, an attempt to provide an answer to this question, many readers will naturally want to talk about this issue. Such interest provides Christians with an opportunity to share the Gospel with non-believing friends, family and others who would normally be uninterested or unwilling to listen. The following brief article is intended to help believers understand the basic issues and responses to the problem of evil so that we are better prepared to enter into profitable discussion with readers of *The Shack*.

The Problem With the Problem

On the surface, the problem of evil, as formulated above, seems quite difficult. If God is fully good then He should *want* to eradicate evil and if God is fully powerful then He is *able* to eradicate evil. And yet, evil persists. Some philosophers have used this reasoning as grounds for rejecting an attribute of God (i.e. His goodness or omnipotence) or the existence of God.

However, neither rejection is necessary. What is really needed is not a rejection but an addition: *God has a good reason for allowing evil to persist.* If we also add that *God is even now in the process of eradicating evil*, which the Bible clearly states that He is (see below), then the supposed problem of evil becomes considerably less problematic.²

Consequently, most attempts to “solve” the problem of evil depend on some hypothesis of what God’s reason for allowing evil might be. It should be understood at the outset that we simply don’t know for sure what this reason is; the Bible simply doesn’t say. In the absence of a clear revelation regarding this matter, we are forced to consider the biblical, theological and philosophical evidence and make a reasonable guess. Throughout history there have been many such attempts. Though this is by no means an exhaustive list, such attempts include:

Calvinism: Calvinism declares that all events are part of God’s righteous plan and, though evil actions by evil entities (human or otherwise) may be used to further the plan, this does not make the plan itself evil. A classic biblical text which appears to support this position is Genesis 50:15-20 (esp. v.20) in which we see Joseph state that a) his brothers intended evil against him but that b) God

¹ William P. Young, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007).

² This is true from a philosophical perspective, at least. Existentially, we do not necessarily feel better about the persistence of evil simply because we recognize that there may be a rational explanation for why God has allowed it so far. However, while the recognition of rational explanations does not necessarily completely alter our feelings on the matter, it does provide the necessary foundation for keeping our feelings on the subject from unduly determining our behavior.

intended to use their evil actions to further His good plan of providing for His people. Humans are responsible for their evil, but evil is never outside the control or redemptive activity of God.³

Open Theism: On the opposite end of the spectrum from Calvinism, Open Theism (which is a relatively new school of thought), argues that the future is genuinely unsettled and thus unknowable, even by God.⁴ This is thought to be a necessary pre-condition of the freedom which God created us to have. Consequently the evil that entered creation at the Fall was a surprise to God and He cannot eliminate it without eliminating the human freedom that was largely the purpose of creation itself.⁵

The Freewill Hypothesis: Similar to Open Theism, but without the emphasis on God's ignorance of the future, the Freewill Hypothesis argues that evil is a consequence of God creating humans with the ability to make authentic moral choices. He did this knowing that evil would result, and that He would have to redeem humanity via the cross, but He deemed this preferable to a world populated by creatures who lacked free will and thus could not choose to love Him. This view is often combined with the Greatest Good Hypothesis.

The Greatest Good Hypothesis: Whatever God is, He is maximally (e.g.. He is not just partially-powerful but all-powerful), and He seeks the same for His creation. Therefore He is not content to seek *some* good for His Creation but the *maximum* possible good. Thus, anything God does or allows must be understood to contribute to the attainment of the maximum possible good. This does not necessarily mean that each and every particular instance of evil (e.g. the death of a child) directly contributes to the greatest possible good but only that the present existence of evil, generally, contributes to the eventual attainment of the ultimate possible good.⁶

The Misperception Hypothesis: According to this view, much of what we think is evil is not actually so. It only appears to be evil because we have misunderstood either the nature of genuine evil or because we do not understand how difficult circumstances advance a greater good. Advocates of the Misperception Hypothesis often make a distinction between genuine, moral evil and natural disaster.⁷

³ This is, of course, a radical oversimplification of Calvinism but it will have to do for our purposes here.

⁴ As Open Theists see it, if God knows that Bill will choose scrambled eggs instead of fried eggs in advance of Bill actually making the choice, then Bill's choice is predetermined and thus not free. Consequently, for human choice to be real, the future must not be settled in any way, either by God's will or even by knowledge. The future is thus genuinely "open", hence the name of this system of thought. For a necessary and excellent critique of Open Theism from both biblical and philosophical grounds, see Bruce Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*.

⁵ See Greg Boyd, *God of the Possible* and Greg Sanders, *The God Who Risks*.

⁶ Personally, I find this the most logical and appealing hypothesis.

⁷ A distinction which is, in my opinion, important though making this distinction does not significantly strengthen the Misperception Hypothesis.

The Revelation Hypothesis: God allows evil to exist because its presence creates a sharp contrast to His own goodness and glory. Without evil, God would not be recognized as good. This does not mean that evil is necessary in any way but only that God has allowed it because it accomplishes something (i.e. the revelation of His goodness) that would otherwise not be accomplished or would be accomplished only to a significantly lesser degree.

The Dualism Hypothesis: Related in some ways to the Revelation Hypothesis but philosophically distinct, the Dualism Hypothesis maintains that good cannot exist without evil. Good and evil are thought to be two sides of the same coin and as a one-sided coin is a logical contradiction, so too is the idea of good existing without evil. Historically, this has not been a hypothesis favored by Christians but one favored by non-Christians. However, in recent years, the Dualism Hypothesis seems to have become increasingly popular among certain groups of Christians, especially those influenced by Eastern mysticism.

While innumerable other attempts could be listed, their differences are very subtle and almost all of them involve elements common to those described above.

What Does the Bible Say About the Problem of Evil?

Unfortunately, the Bible does not have a clearly articulated, formal theodicy. This does not mean that it has nothing to say about this important issue. It simply means that the Bible's answer to the problem of evil has to be inferred from other teachings. The Bible does clearly reveal several things which form necessary boundaries for any attempt to solve the problem of evil:

1. God exists (this is presupposed by the Bible).
2. Humans are morally accountable for their sin (Rom. 6:23, Gen. 3:17).
3. Angels are morally accountable for their sin (Gen. 3:14-15, Mat. 25:41).
4. Angelic and human sin led to the introduction of suffering, death and destruction (i.e. evil) into the world as a whole and not merely into human relationships (Rom. 8:20-22).
5. God is always benevolently active in the midst of evil, working to bring His people good out of even the worst circumstances (Rom. 8:20). Sometimes, He even uses specific instances of evil, perpetrated by others, to accomplish His unfolding plans (Gen. 50:20).
6. Though God may use evil to accomplish His purposes, He Himself is incapable of initiating evil because He is fully good (1Ti. 4:4, James 1:13).

7. God was unwilling to let evil permanently derail His good plans for creation but went to extraordinary lengths to redeem it and us, sending His own Son to die on the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice for our sin (John 3:16, Tit. 2:13-14, Col. 1:19-20).

8. There is a time coming when all evil, pain and suffering will be eradicated from creation (Rev. 21, Isa. 65:25).

The Theodicy of *The Shack*⁸

The Shack's solution to the problem of evil appears to be primarily a form of the Freewill Hypothesis, though with other elements thrown in. As Young has the Spirit say, "Papa has never needed evil to accomplish his good purposes"⁹ and "We carefully respect your choices, so we work within your systems even while we seek to free you from them."¹⁰ These statements are quite consistent with the Freewill Hypothesis. However, there also appears to be a bit of the Misperception Hypothesis ("You must give up your right to decide what is good or evil on your own terms"¹¹) and even a hint of Calvinism ("but your choices are also no stronger than my purposes and I will use every choice you make for the ultimate good and the most loving outcome"¹²).

While I do not judge *The Shack*'s theodicy to be fully satisfactory, for reasons that are too complex to go into here, I do find that it fits within these biblical parameters. Young clearly rejects Open Theism (Papa: "Remember, Mackenzie, I don't wonder what you will do or what choices you will make. I already know."¹³) and there is nothing in the book that suggests dualism of the sort described above. Since Open Theism and the Dualism Hypothesis are the only approaches outlined here that are clearly unbiblical, I find that *The Shack*'s theodicy is quite orthodox.

That doesn't mean *The Shack*'s theodicy is completely right, of course. It just means that it's a viable candidate. Since the Bible doesn't have a formal theodicy, we must maintain a charitable spirit on this matter, though we must of course insist that any attempts fit within the clear biblical boundaries.

In the end, we will have to wait to see exactly how our good God's good purpose is fully realized. I suspect we will all be a bit surprised...and delighted in ways we cannot now even imagine. Along the way, however, we just might find that our willingness to contemplate these things may be used by the Spirit to speak into the life of a non-believer in ways that will lead to their surrender to the redemptive work of our great and good God.

⁸ A "theodicy" is an attempt to formulate a rational answer to the problem of evil.

⁹ p. 165.

¹⁰ p. 123.

¹¹ p. 136.

¹² p. 125.

¹³ p. 187.