



ANSWERING THE HARD QUESTIONS

Relating To Your World

Spring 2007

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

Clarifying the Question

This question is phrased in a variety of ways. Why do the innocent suffer? If God is all-powerful, why does he allow suffering? Did God create evil? Often an event in someone's life has caused him or her to doubt God's existence. You hear the statement, "I could never believe in a God who allowed my child to die," or some other personal tragedy. All of these questions come down to the same issue. How can an all-good God and evil exist at the same time?

Discussion of Free Will

To answer that question we must understand the concept of free will. Free will is defined as the ability of an entity to make arbitrary choices. For instance, God, by definition, has free will because he can choose to do whatever he wants. Personal experience tells us that humans have free will, albeit in a limited form. We, as humans, have the ability to make choices. Further it must be voluntarily bestowed to human beings. God remains sovereign over all things.

If God exists, he can not contradict his all-powerful nature or he ceases to be God. As such, human free will is necessarily limited. God voluntarily suppresses his sovereignty in some things in order to allow free will to exist. But because he is sovereign, God has the capacity to revoke free will at any time. However, his truth and immutable nature requires him to keep his promise of free will in certain areas (namely our choice whether to follow or reject him).

While our free will is limited, our free will does not just extend to irrelevant issues. As a parent we often give our kids the choice of what clothes they want to wear. But this is limited to a few outfits pre-selected by mom. In that case, they have free will; but it is freedom to make an irrelevant choice. That is a meaningless form of free will. Human free will is not just limited to selecting the color of our socks. Human free will gives us the capacity to choose to conform or rebel against God's character. For whatever reason, God has granted us the ability to reject and disregard him.

Why did he grant us free will? Because it pleased Him to do so. Without free will we would not be creatures made "in the image of God." A person voluntarily seeking God brings more pleasure to the creator than a creature who has mandatory compliance.

The Ramifications of Free Will

While God will allow us to ultimately reject him, our free will is not without consequences. In our household we have a saying: "Good choices bring good consequences. Bad choices bring bad consequences." This is a fact of life that we try to instill into our children at an early age. You reap what you sow. This is an innate law of life that goes hand in hand with free will. For free will to have any value, consequences to actions have to take place. If my decisions did not affect anything, it really wouldn't be free will.

When we choose to make free will choices that contradict the character of God, there are negative consequences. We could call these negative consequences, "evil". Therefore, evil must exist in order for creatures to have free will.

God does not create evil, but it was allowed to develop as God's creatures freely chose to contradict God's character. If God had not allowed its development, there would be no negative consequences for behaviors antithetical to God's character. If there were no consequences, then our choices would serve no purpose, and would cease then to be free will all together.

Think of a parent who refuses to discipline a child. Only a parent who is apathetic or unloving towards their kid would allow them to make poor choices without making them face the ramifications of their choices. A loving parent brings discipline and allows the natural ramifications of choices to come to bear on a disobedient child. To do otherwise would be to shelter a child from the realities of life. In the same way, negative consequences ultimately reveal the loving nature of God.

Why Do Bad Things Happen To Good People?

God in his sovereignty allows free will. God in his love provides negative consequences (i.e. evil) for negative behavior. Because we our social creatures, those negative consequences affect more than just the person who is responsible for the negative behavior. Thus, bad things happen then to good people. This is most obvious in situations where the negative ramifications are readily identifiable. For example, we can see the negative ramifications of adultery. A marriage ends, causing pain to the spouse, the kids, and other loved ones.

But when the ramifications are more global in scale and not readily identifiable, this becomes a harder issue. For example, what negative behaviors caused Hurricane Mitch to kill 7,000 people in Central America this week? It is hard to trace back that negative consequence. But Christianity teaches that when man rebels against God, he brings all of creation down with him. The hurricane ultimately points back to the free will of humanity and humanity's "original sin." That is a tough point to bring out to a non-Christian, because the concept of original sin is uncomfortable. But if as a race we have rebelled against God, we can see the ultimate consequence would be the natural universe acting outside the control of mankind.

As we have discussed before, the existence of evil is often used as a proof against the existence of God. The fundamental argument is that since God is supposedly all-powerful and all loving, either God lacks the power to deal with evil or he lacks the desire to deal with it. This presumes however that nothing has been done to defeat evil. Christians believe Jesus' crucifixion defeated evil. Further it presumes that if evil has yet to be completely defeated that it will never happen.

This argument can also be turned around. For to believe in existence of evil, one must presume a God. Without a transcendent moral code, there can be no absolute evil. If we complain about the injustice of natural disasters or unforeseen events, we are assuming a value that can only come from outside the natural universe. Why should we assume that it is not right for a hurricane to kill 7,000 persons? Without a transcendent moral code, that is not evil or injustice. That's just the way the universe acts. But if it doesn't seem right, then there must be some ingrained moral code that has been built that into you. This would point to a transcendent cause, namely God.

Exclusivity of Christianity

Christianity is an exclusive religion. That is to say, that Christians believe the only way to find God, achieve eternal life, and live an abundant life, is to accept the claims of Christ and become a Christian. All other religions are considered false religions. There is only one path to God, and it is through Jesus.

The Claims of Jesus

This was not a late development by Christians. The exclusivity of Christianity was a teaching given by Jesus himself. As we saw above, Jesus made bold claims about himself. However, besides his claim to be God, He claimed that He was the only path to finding God.

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

John 14:6 NIV

This path through Jesus to God the Father was predicated on a person's belief that Jesus was divine.

If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins."

John 8:24 NIV

This bold assertion by Jesus was repeated over and over throughout the gospels. Jesus claimed that one could find God only through belief in him. The founder of Christianity established himself as the exclusive source of eternal life. There were no other methods presented, no other beliefs given as alternate paths. You either believe in Jesus or you are banished to eternal punishment.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

John 3:18 NIV

Teaching of the Apostles

This exclusivity was taught by Christ and affirmed by the apostles. Christianity from its earliest foundations claimed to have an exclusive hold on the path to God. Peter, in speaking with the Jewish leaders after having been arrested for healing in the name of Jesus, said this:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Acts 4:12 NIV

This narrow perspective was harsh. Those who denied Jesus are considered liars and antichrists. John, in his letter to the early church, condemns those who deny Jesus and equates belief in Jesus with belief in God.

Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist--he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

1 John 2:22 NIV

Objections to Exclusivity

Tolerance is a Virtue

This exclusivity is a tremendous barrier to many seeking to understand Christianity. Today, tolerance is the most favored virtue, and any belief system that sets itself as better than another is viewed as intolerant, harsh, and bigoted. Therefore, our post-modern world often views Christianity as a hate-filled religion, filled with condescending and arrogant people.

Christians often are intolerant

Often this view of Christianity, however, is formed in people's minds not because of the bold exclusive teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Often it is formed because Christians are hateful, arrogant, unloving, intolerant people. The church's crusading holier-than-thou attitude is justified by saying "we're right and you're not."

Being right, however, is no excuse for arrogance. Often we are more concerned with being right and letting people know we are right than we are about the people we are engaging. If we love our

neighbor as ourselves, we will respect their opinions, listen carefully, and then help them understand the claims of Jesus.

Real Tolerance

The definition of tolerance has changed in the last 10 years. Chuck Colson says

Pluralism no longer means tolerating competing ideas, but rather forced neutrality: no one should express any idea that could offend another (Colson, 136)

Real Tolerance requires three things (Taylor, 42):

1. Tolerance requires that the tolerant have some power over the other person. That is to say, impotence is not tolerance.
2. Tolerance requires that the tolerant have some moral or ethical opinion. That is to say, moral apathy is not tolerance.
3. Tolerance requires an initial objection. That is to say, agreement is not tolerance.

What is being passed as tolerance today is not actually tolerance, but it is either impotence, apathy, or agreement. Christians are not being asked today to be tolerant but to change our offensive beliefs.

In the aftermath of September 11, the President of the Southern Baptist Convention urged all Southern Baptists to pray that “God will miraculously reveal himself through Jesus Christ to Muslims.” This invoked anger and resentment amongst not just Muslims, but amongst many in the press (Southern Baptists Pray for Muslims to Join 'Only True Religion').

In 1999 Pope John Paul traveled to India, and was pressured by Hindu leaders to agree with them that Christianity was not the only valid religion (Colson).

All Religions Are the Same

When people say they are looking for tolerance, in actuality what they want is for us to agree to universalism. Most of the “tolerance” among religious leaders today really is a disguise for a consistent belief among those leaders that all religion points to the same God, just by different means.

There are certainly universal truths to which all the major religions ascribe: belief in goodness and evil; belief in a higher power; belief in life beyond death. These similarities have led many to believe that all religions are just different paths all pointing in the same direction. One can choose whatever path, because at their core, all religions are the same.

The essence of all religions is one. Only their approaches are different.

-Mahatma Gandhi

The problem, however, is that Christianity does not recognize any other religion as valid. Jesus claims are clear and understandable. If one does not believe he is the God, and that belief in him is the only way to God, then Jesus says they are condemned. Period. No exceptions.

No other major religion sees Jesus in this light. Jews see him as a blasphemous imposter. Muslims see him as a lesser prophet than Mohammed. Hindus and Buddhists see him as a good moral teacher. But Christianity sees Jesus as the monotheistic God himself in human form. These beliefs are mutually exclusive. Both can not be true.

Those Who Haven't Heard

The exclusivity of Christianity is often viewed as unfair. There are untold millions of people who have never heard of Jesus or his teachings. How can these people be held accountable when they didn't know better?

Interestingly, usually the only people who are asking the question are people who have heard about Jesus and his teachings. The question, then, is a hypothetical one for the questioner. The questioner needs to understand their own responsibility to deal with the claims of Jesus. Even if Christianity provided an escape clause for the ignorant, the person asking the question would not be eligible to exercise such a clause.

The Bible actually addresses this situation. Paul, in his letter to the church in Rome, states that creation provides adequate revelation for a person to understand who God is.

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

Rom 1:20 NIV

God is a just. He will deal with each in an appropriate manner. No one can understand or know all of God's character or understand the essence of Jesus nature. The question becomes not how much do you know about God, but what do you do with that information. For most people the issue is not lack of knowledge. It is lack of obedience. We don't live consistent with what we know to be true. As Gordon Ruddick says, "we are educated beyond the level of our obedience."

For someone who only sees the created universe, Paul says they have enough information to understand there is an eternal power with a divine nature. Do they seek to honor or respect that eternal power, or do they betray it, ignore that knowledge, and begin living life for themselves? For someone who has heard the claims of Christ, do they accept those claims, live life trusting in the validity of the claims, or do they betray it, ignore that knowledge and begin living life for themselves.

Exclusivity and Truth

Sincerity Doesn't Make It True

Often, we confuse objective truth with subjective opinion. We become more concerned with being sincere in our beliefs than we are in seeking truth. While being sincere is important, sincerity about something false is just as dangerous as taking truth lightly.

Suppose a pharmacist accidentally gives the wrong medication for my prescription. I maybe extremely sincere about taking the medication prescribed by my doctor. But all my sincerity may not heal me of the illness for which I am taking the medicine. In fact, if this were a serious mistake, my sincerity wouldn't prevent me from dying from an overdose of the wrong medicine. The truth about what is inside the medicine bottle is truth no matter how sincere I am.

Belief Doesn't Make It True

Just because someone sincerely believes something does not make it true. Truth stands alone regardless of what anyone believes. Truth is objective and is not reliant on belief nor is it determined by a majority vote.

For centuries, all educated people believed that the earth was the center of the solar system. Then a man named Galileo looked inside a telescope and discovered that the earth revolved around the sun. At the moment of that discovery, the sun did not move its location in the universe. It was always in the center, regardless of what most people think.

The reality is, there are things which we might all believe which are very likely as false as those people who saw the earth in the center of the solar system. We should not assume that what we believe is true. We must all be diligent to seek truth.

Exclusivity Doesn't Make It False

The question of Christianity's exclusivity assumes that because it is exclusive, it must be invalid. But exclusivity doesn't necessarily make something true or false.

There are many things we deal with on a daily basis that is exclusive and true. Arithmetic is very exclusive. $2 + 2 = 4$. That is a very narrow fact, but it is true. There is no tolerance allowed here. On my gas tank it says, "unleaded gas only." That's a very narrow requirement. How tolerant would my car's engine be if I poured water into the tank instead of gasoline? Dialing a telephone number, programming a computer, even driving a car requires that I adhere to exclusive truths.

Therefore, the issue we face is not whether or not Christianity is exclusive. The issue is whether or not Christianity's claims are true or not. We must examine the evidence, seek the truth, and not let a belief's exclusivity cloud our judgment.

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