

# Answering the Problem of Evil

## Reflections on September 11, 2001

By Lewis Winkler

### A Day That Will Live in Infamy

The day was September 11, 2001. Osama Bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda network had devised a devious plan to make an infamous mark upon the face of history. And when it was all over, there lay in their wake a bloody drama that changed the world forever. How did it ever happen? How could it have been prevented? What can we learn from this? The questions proliferate, along with the many speculations and attempted answers.

In my own mind one of the most difficult questions raised by the 9/11 tragedy is the so-called, “problem of evil.” In the wake of such a horrendous event, many people were left to ponder this perplexing dilemma: “How could a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good allow something like this happen?”

In fact, the question is not new, and many great hearts and minds across the ages of time have wrestled with the answer. There are, in fact, a finite number of replies, some satisfying and some not, some biblical and some not. Is there really a good answer to this problem of evil in the world? I believe that there is, and I will attempt to briefly share it.

### Two Inadequate Answers

Before endeavoring to give a good answer, it might be helpful to survey two inadequate answers which have been repeatedly offered through the centuries. One answer, articulated by the late Rabbi Harold S. Kushner in his 1983 book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, is that God is not really all-powerful. He feels for and with us, He weeps with us in our pain and loss, but He is essentially powerless to prevent these or any other types of tragedies. In my estimation, this is not true to God or His word, and makes Him into a God who is less than worthy of worship. Here, God is empathetic and compassionate, perhaps, but He is certainly not able to bring about a change in the situation.

Another answer is given by the atheist. He or she simply says that since there is evil in the world, God does not exist. Otherwise, if He did exist, He would, by necessity, prevent it and make this world a perfect (or at least a little better) place in which we can live and move and have our being. This is the position articulately argued by philosopher J. L. Mackie in his 1982 book, *The Miracle of Theism*.

In opposition to this position, though, it can be argued that the atheist has a deeper problem with evil if, in fact, God does not exist. This is brought out both by Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga in *God, Freedom and Evil*, and especially by Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias in his 1994 book, *Can Man Live Without God*. If God does not exist, then it is virtually impossible, to find an objective standard by which to determine what is actually evil and good. The atheist may express personal aversions to certain so-called “moral” activities and actions, but these personal aversions have no external or logical reference point to stand upon. The act may violate the atheist’s own moral sensibilities, but if all that life is comprised of is amoral matter and energy in

their various forms, then there is no adequate way to judge between right and wrong. And so for the atheist, the problem of evil becomes this: why am I so offended by so many things when the whole of the material universe is inherently non-moral? Atheists have yet to articulate a good answer to this formidable dilemma.

But since it is easier to refute a position than to present and defend one, I will proceed to the more difficult task of providing a preliminary answer to the problem of evil in our world today.

### **Are we good or are we bad?**

First, it must be noted that part of the problem our world has today with understanding such incidents as the 9/11 massacre is that we do not have an adequate view of human beings. There is a deeply held assumption that human beings are essentially good, and that faulty socialization and similar factors produce evil in the hearts of basically good people. Biblically, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, Romans 3 (and many other passages) clearly teaches us that there is sin in the heart of every person, even from the very earliest stages of life. And while our personal pride wants to deny and ridicule this fact, history is full of confirming examples of this sad reality. As it has been said, in light of humanity's sin nature, what is remarkable is not that such atrocities occur. What is more amazing is that they do not happen with greater frequency.

Thankfully, I think this is the case because although it is fallen and corrupted, the moral image of God in human beings has not yet been destroyed. And the vestiges of it, along with God's Spirit in the world and in the church, restrain and limit us from doing even worse things to our world and to others than we have already done. Human beings are not as bad as they could be, but they are still very bad indeed. And some, by the nature of our free choices, are worse than others.

### **Are we free or are we slaves?**

This raises another important issue in the problem of evil discussion. The fact of the matter is that God has made us, to a limited but real extent, both morally free and therefore morally corruptible. The ability of human beings to choose to do good or evil did not bring about the *necessity* of evil. After all, Adam and Eve were not *required* to sin. But free will did bring about the *possibility* of evil. And so, as we read and weep in Genesis chapter 3, Adam and Eve *did* sin. In a world where we are really free, evil is not necessary, but it is possible. And sadly, in the case of Osama Bin Laden and his evil network, this *possibility* became a *reality*.

Could God have prevented what happened on 9/11? Theoretically, yes. But if God were to prevent all evil from happening, He would be removing something far more valuable. First and foremost, He would be removing human freedom. And a world where freedom is real, is better than a world where we are essentially slaves. I would rather love and be loved freely than to love and be loved by obligation, for then love is no longer love, but merely a subtle form of manipulative coercion. And the tragic irony of living in a world like ours which openly rejects transcendent moral standards is painfully clear. We expect goodness from free individuals, but we reject the foundations upon which moral restraints are both built and practiced. As C. S. Lewis put it in his brilliant essay, "Men Without Chests" on page 35 of *The Abolition of Man*,

And all the time—such is the tragi-comedy of our situation—we continue to clamour for those very qualities we are rendering impossible. . . . We laugh at honour and are

shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.

### **Making Good from Evil and Setting the Wrong to Right**

Beyond these prior thoughts, a world where there is some evil also allows for certain “higher” moral virtues that could not be exercised in a world without it. For example, praiseworthy things, like moral development, courage, and self-sacrifice, can hardly be imagined in a setting devoid of evil, challenges and hardships. This is the process that John Hick calls, “soul-making” in his 1978 book, *Evil and the God of Love*.

Two more thoughts can be raised here. First, God is able to take any situation and cause it to work together for good (Romans 8:28). While the action may be evil, God is not overcome by it, but can overcome it by the power of His will working in and through the reality of life in a fallen world. For those who have followed the event subsequent to 9/11, this reality has been clearly apparent. God has been truly glorified. But nowhere is this idea more evident than in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. In a strange and wonderful twist of reality (what C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien called a “eucatastrophe”), God takes the ultimate act of evil and makes it into the greatest moment of triumph in all of human history! By means of a hideously evil act, God brings about the final forgiveness and righteous reconciliation of all who will trust in Jesus.

One final note should be shared. Whether we like it or not, our ultimate hope and cry for justice will not be wholly fulfilled in this life. The Bible is very clear: Jesus Christ will return someday in glory and will, once and for all, make all wrongs right (Matthew 16:27). Justice will be served. But until then, we labor and strive for goodness and justice in a free and fallen world, seeking to know Him and make Him known to those in desperate need of a Savior from the problem of evil that still lurks in the heart of every individual—yours and mine included.