Christianity’s Answer to the Problem of Evil

By Rev. Ian Pacey
Introduction
Of all the questions Christians encounter as challenges to our fundamental beliefs, the problem of evil is without a doubt one of the most popular. Why do we suffer? Why do terrible things happen to my family and friends? Why do horrors like 9/11 or Auschwitz take place? Why are “natural” disasters allowed to bring forth death and destruction? If there is a God, why do these things happen?

The Question or “Problem” of Evil
Formally, the question or the problem of evil (the typical term) goes something like this: Christians, on the basis of Scripture, believe God is omniscient (all knowing), omnipotent (all powerful), and omnibenevolent (all good). If God is omnipotent, He can do all things. If God is omniscient, He knows all things. If God is omnibenevolent, He desires to prevent all things that would frustrate or corrupt good. In other words, He would eliminate the very possibility of evil.

Let’s put this together: If God is who the Christians say He is, evil should not exist. Nevertheless, evil does exist. Therefore, as the argument goes, the God of Christianity does not. If there is any “deity” out there, because evil exists, he is not all powerful, or he does not know, or he does not care. In any case, He is not god as Christianity declares and He is not worthy of our concern.

Answer the Question!
As we begin, it is necessary to remember some ground rules. Too often, when we Christians are faced with this question and others like it, we often respond with nothing more than a challenge of whether those asking the question can even know good from evil. If the questioners cannot know good from evil, then they are in no position to ask the question. It is true that, without objective standards, the knowledge of good and evil is an utter impossibility. Nonetheless, this is not an acceptable answer. In fact, it is not an answer at all. What we need here is a real, truthful response to the problem of evil.

Defining Good and Evil
For Christians, the first part of our response is establishing basic, Biblical definitions. The claim we are countering is: The Christian view of God and evil cannot coexist. For this reason, we must first define what we mean by God and evil. Establishing the Christian view of God is fairly simple. For brevity’s sake, let’s go with something like the “supreme being.” When it comes to evil, things are a bit trickier. This is because evil is all too often identified as anything that causes pain. When it comes to evil, Christians do not narrowly define evil as what causes pain, but as any thought, word, and/or deed that is not in accord with God’s moral will.

Philosophical and Existential Problem of Evil
With God and evil defined, an answer can now be worked out. At the core, there are three basic points the Christian must make: 1. God is not the author of evil. He cannot go against His own will; 2. Evil exists because of human sin, or human desire to reject God’s will; and 3. The existence of evil does not necessarily preclude the existence of God. Man, not God, is responsible for evil. God could or does have reasons for allowing evil to happen.

Again, the charge skeptics make here is that it isn’t logical for God and evil to coexist. These three factors, taken as a whole, dismiss the logical problem of evil. The problem we now have is many who struggle with evil are not addressing it logically. Instead, they are working on the emotional or existential problem of evil. People in this situation see evil in the world and their gut level response is: “This cannot be right!”

The True Answer to Evil: Jesus
For those struggling for an answer at the gut level, the one answer, the best answer the Christian has to offer, is Jesus! Jesus as revealed in His life, His death, His resurrection, and His eternal promises. Jesus as summarized by what we call the Gospel. It may sound trite. It may sound cliché. But, overuse and abuse notwithstanding, Jesus is the best answer; He is the ultimate answer to our struggle with evil.

With the coming of Jesus in the flesh, what we have is nothing less than God coming into our world and declaring His war against sin, death, and the devil; against all evil. Follow this up with our Lord’s life, death, and His resurrection, by which He paid the debt for sin, and the reality is an actual, true overcoming of evil in this world and in the world to come.

Does this mean evil will cease to exist in this life? No, it is not quite that simple. Scripture is clear on that point. What we learn in Christ is the fact that God is not indifferent to our troubles. By becoming man, Jesus has entered into our suffering, and in His death and resurrection, He has removed both the power and the problem of evil forever.

Rev. Ian Pacey is an LCMS Campus Chaplain at the University of Arizona. He can be reached at revpacey@yahoo.com