

God in the Shadows

Evil in God's World

Brian Morley


CHRISTIAN FOCUS



To my father, who endured the childhood loss of his mother, the great depression, the bombing of London, jungle fighting in Burma, and then strove to raise a family in America. He is a model of taking evil seriously while never losing idealism. And to the memory of my mother, who always sought in this fallen world, to find the good, the true, and the beautiful.


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INTRODUCTION

LORD, I DON'T THINK I WANT TO KNOW YOU

I sat on the edge of my bed one night, reflecting on the pain, evil, and misery in the world. It was overwhelming. There were the major sources of suffering, from the hopelessness and violence of ghettos, to crime, famine, disease, and warfare. Though the century still had three decades to go, it had already been one of the bloodiest in history.

The cold-war brought tensions all around. I had grown up with bomb drills in school during which we dropped under our desks. For a time the government maintained bomb shelters in case of a nuclear attack. There was civil unrest – race riots, several assassinations, and protests of everything that represented traditional values. Organized crime was quietly thriving, as was the drug trade. Serial killers made the news from time to time.

In addition to the spectacular evils, I contemplated a myriad of lesser hurts, the daily ones that never show up on the news but that tear at us nonetheless. These are the "little murders" caused by gossip, backstabbing, disloyalty, rejection, and ridicule. Then there are relationships that grow cold and die, not from deliberate cruelty, but from neglect, or wrong priorities, or misunderstandings.

Besides interpersonal pains there are natural ones – wretched diseases that kill millions, tornados, fires, earthquakes, floods, and on and on.

At that time, too, I was struggling to work through the normal stresses and strains of growing up.

Sitting in the dim light that night, as a non-Christian adolescent trying to understand God and His world, I boldly voiced my feelings to God Himself. "Lord," I said candidly, "if this is the world you have made – if this is your world – I don't think I want to know you."

I had been searching to understand God for some months. I had concluded that the world must be a fairly accurate portrait of its creator. It wasn't a pretty picture.

I thought my brief prayer would bring closure to my search for God. I had been a bit brazen and I knew that God had every right to be displeased. Given His power that was a bit scary. But I had been honest, which I supposed was better than saying something I didn't believe in order to get a favor. And anyway, if God is responsible for the miserable world then I didn't mind Him keeping me at arm's length from now on.

Just then, to my surprise, I felt flooded with God's love. With it came the clear sense that He Himself loathed evil, which I then realized comes from the things people do with the powers they have been given. I sensed too that God grieves over the world's tragedies far more than I ever could.

I was relieved and puzzled at the same time. How could the world not reflect the will of God if He is its creator, and so powerful?

I decided that I would trust God even though I did not understand it all.

It was my first real attempt to understand God's relationship to pain and evil. It would be a subject to which I would return many times over the years.

A few years later I came to believe that the cross of Christ was God's solution for a fallen world. In Christ God had accepted the punishment for our wrongdoing so that we could have an intimate relationship with Him. Justice was satisfied and swallowed up in love.

That answered some of the problem of evil, but it also invited deeper searching. Yet when I turned to other believers for answers I found that so many of them had little more than incomplete, cliche responses to the profound questions which remained.

I went on to major in philosophy at the University of Southern California. Working my way through school as an ambulance attendant and training in a busy emergency room, I had plenty of time to think

about suffering. Some of the things I saw were shocking and horrible. I also dealt with psychiatric emergencies so I saw mental pain that was, if possible, more tragic than the physical pain – people shattered from struggles and tragedies, some real and some merely notional. Working twenty-four hour shifts I would sometimes lay awake at night between calls, trying to deal with – or forget – what I had seen that day.

But at the same time I came to realize that divine grace and providence were also at work. The healing process, for example, sometimes seemed miraculous. One young woman was brought to the emergency room after a bad traffic accident in which she was thrown through the windshield of her car. Her face and body were shredded and she was completely unaware of anything, yet she was mindlessly thrashing about in shards of glass. We were trying to restrain her, stitch her back together, and put blood and fluids into her veins. We frankly didn't think she would make it. Yet only a week later a co-worker and I visited her hospital room. The transformation was astonishing. The skillfully stitched cuts were healing beautifully; she was up joking around and eager to leave the hospital. She had no recollection of the accident nor how badly she had been injured. Neither had she any idea how close she had come to dying, so she even avoided mental scars. I saw it as another example of the healing power God had graciously built into the human body.

On a broader scale I could see how an orderly society limits evil and suffering. I constantly saw how ambulances and hospitals took care of the injured, fire fighters arrived to put out fires, police caught evil doers and prisons kept them from continually harming the public. It seemed as though a hidden hand of grace were behind it all, providentially caring through human compassion and order.

The picture of the world was coming into focus as a place of not only great tragedy but also of great grace.

Going on for graduate work in seminary and then for a doctorate gave me a lot of time to develop my thinking. At the Christian college where I am starting my seventeenth year of teaching biblical studies and philosophy, one of my courses is entitled, the "Problem of Evil." The topic has a way of showing up in my other courses, such as those on theology, world religions, philosophy, logic, ethics, and apologetics.

The subject still holds plenty of mysteries for me, but answers have become much more distinct. This book is my attempt to share that picture that has been getting clearer over the years. The clarity has

not removed the shadows from the picture because, as I've discovered, life's shadows have a vital role. They give depth and shape, making the picture more vivid. As I'll explain later in the book, the picture which emerges, shadows and all, is a portrait.

The topic of this book is in many ways the central issue of the age. Suffering of every kind, the struggle between good and evil, and resolving diverse conflicts, are the themes of a thousand stories, epic poems, novels, and movies; as well as part of the subject of ethics, psychology, counseling, sociology, anthropology, and more. The struggle of a person against his or her inner self, of one person against another, and of people against nature – all at root aspects of the problem of pain and evil – fill our culture, our personal lives, and the daily news.

Some of the most successful modern authors have focused most poignantly on the theme of good and evil. Nowhere is this more evident than in two of the most popular writers of our time, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. The focus is no less evident in works like George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and *Animal Farm*, about the cold realities of utopian ideals gone awry; and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, which shows how even the most innocent among us are capable of the darkest deeds.

Other authors have revealed not only their thoughts on evil, but their deep struggle over it. Herman Melville heavily marked his Bible in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. Raised in the Dutch Reformed Church, he had come to question orthodoxy. In *Moby-Dick*, captain Ahab abandons his Quaker roots in his quest to vanquish evil, personified for him in the great white whale. Ahab seems to challenge God Himself, asking, "Who's to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar [of justice]?"[1] Author Nathaniel Hawthorne revealed the struggles of his friend Melville when he said of him, "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief..."[2] The writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne reveal his own inner turmoil, some of which arose from learning of his ancestor's role in the prosecution of supposed witches in the Salem trials.

Some lost the struggle to hold onto faith in the face of evil. It was said that Mark Twain became embittered against God after the death of his favorite daughter in 1896. W. Somerset Maugham recounted how he prayed earnestly as a boy that God would remove his stammer. The next morning he was sure it had been answered – until he had to

speak. He was so profoundly disappointed that he never believed in God again.

Of course the problem of evil has had a deep affect on other opinion makers. A devoutly religious young man in Tennessee was a prayer group leader and planned to become a missionary. Then his sister died of leukemia, after which his father committed suicide. In the aftermath of these tragedies the young man lost his faith completely. Growing up to become an outspoken non-believer, Ted Turner went on to found the Cable News Network (CNN).[3]

A school teacher recently told me that when he began working at a middle school he immediately noticed that another teacher would scream continually at students on the playground. This went on day after day, for a decade. Then one day it stopped. He expected it to start up again, but after about a year of no screaming he asked his colleague what had changed. The colleague explained that many years ago his son had died, and the school children were a constant reminder of him. He had struggled with hostility toward God – even though, he also revealed, he had been a Christian for many years. He said he had finally resolved his feelings about a year ago. Unresolved grief affects many people more deeply than they let on.

The Bible sheds light on the ultimate resolution of the problem of evil, which has been so central to human experience.

Most believers are quick to appeal to mystery and the need for faith when it comes to serious questions about pain and evil. "We'll never know," it is often said; or, "we'll never know this side of heaven – we just have to trust God." Deuteronomy 29:29 is often quoted, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God...."* There is even a mentality that associates original sin with the desire for forbidden knowledge; then it associates forbidden knowledge with pushing too far for answers to the truly difficult questions of the faith.

This book emphasizes the second part of Deuteronomy 29:29, "...but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever...." We will explore what can be known, pushing toward the boundaries. We need not fear that we will discover something God wants kept hidden. If He wants it hidden there is no way we will find it out (as Prov. 25:2 says, "it is the glory of God to conceal a matter").

The Bible says that God is pleased when we strive to understand Him deeply. We are to "seek His face continually" (Ps. 105:4), to search for Him with all our heart (Jer. 29:13), and to "press on to

know the Lord" (Hos. 6:3). Paul thought that knowing God in a deep way is so valuable that by comparison everything else looks like garbage (Phil. 3:8 σκύβαλον, "refuse," "dung"). We are not to glory in riches, strength, or even wisdom (Jer. 9:23). But we are to glory in knowing God. We are told, "'Let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,' declares the Lord" (Jer. 9:24).[4]

This book explores how there can be a God who is loving, just, and righteous – in spite of the fact that the world is so full of pain and evil.

The "problem of evil" is a way of referring to the problem that the existence of God does not seem to fit with the existence of either pain (including mental suffering) or moral evil. It is called simply "the problem of evil" rather than "the problem of pain and evil" because pain is regarded as a type of evil. But when not used in the phrase "the problem of evil," evil still generally refers to moral evil only.

There are several parts to the problem. The first is the logical problem of evil. That is the argument that any amount of pain or evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of God. The issue was debated in the 1960s and 70s, but eventually nearly everyone, including atheists, have come to agree that this argument against the existence of God doesn't work. As was decisively shown by Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga, that is because there is no way to rule out conditions that would allow for the existence of both God and some pain or evil. It may be impossible, for example, for humans to be given free will and for God to guarantee that no one ever does wrong.

So since the 1980s the focus has shifted to the evidential problem of evil. It argues that the amount or type of evil that exists means that God *probably* does not exist. It depends a lot on the idea that some suffering is pointless and that without such suffering there would be just about as much goodness. This book will explore a number of answers to this challenge. It will show that God has good reasons to allow a world like ours, and that furthermore, we are simply not in a position to know otherwise (more about our ignorance in chapter 13).

That still leaves what is sometimes called the pastoral problem of evil: how to practically deal with the pain and evil we face in life. This problem exists because sometimes we need more than intellectual answers (we will look at practical issues in part four of the book).

As we get started in section one, we will take a brief look in the first chapter at various views that are unacceptable to traditional believers in God (theists). These unacceptable views hold, for example, that evil does not really exist, or that God does not exist, or that He is not powerful enough to prevent evil, or that He is not purely good and thus does not want to eliminate evil. Rejecting such alternatives will leave us to defend the orthodox view that God is good and all powerful in spite of the existence of evil. Although nearly everyone will find it helpful to understand what is wrong with alternative answers to the problem of evil, readers who are not particularly interested can skip this chapter and will not be disadvantaged later. For that matter, each chapter was designed to stand alone as much as possible, so the reader can skip a chapter and perhaps come back to it later; as well, a single chapter can be shared with a friend.

In chapter two we will see just what it means for God to be good. We will see why some of our expectations of a good God are unfounded. We will see why, for example, a good God does not need to make the happiness of every creature His top priority, and why He need not be more gracious to any of His creatures than He has been.

Part two looks at major reasons for pain and evil. Within that section, chapter three shows that if we are to be physical beings who can make moral choices we must have a certain type of environment. It has to be consistent, for example. That means God cannot constantly intervene to prevent all harm. Then chapter four looks at the controversy over what it means to be free and how that impacts the problem of evil. In chapter five we see that this world is not a place where everyone is as happy as can be, but that it accomplishes a much more important goal. Chapter six shows why God is just to bring some pain on those who make evil choices. We will see why He is still good even if the punishment does not result in the betterment of the wrongdoer. That means that God does not have to be loving to be good; He can simply be just.

Part three deals with a lot of important special issues. Answers to the puzzling problem of animal suffering are explored in chapter seven, where we find out, for example, how easy it is to overestimate the problem. Chapter eight explores religious misconceptions about God and illnesses, and shows how illness can make important contributions to human life. Then in chapter nine we consider death as a consequence

of human fallenness and how it leads to a blessing for some people. Chapter ten looks at the difficult problems of birth defects, the diverse origins of poverty, and the causes of war.

Chapter eleven shows how the future figures into the problem of evil, healing the hurts of some, yet tragically – though justly – leaving those who refuse divine grace to suffer. We will see how God is good even though hell exists, because justice is a type of goodness, and the highest good is not pleasure but something else. Whether God feels the sufferings of His creatures or instead cannot be affected by anything outside Himself is taken up in chapter twelve.

Part four, "Application," begins with chapter thirteen in which we answer skeptics. We will look at how we reason and hold worldviews, and why our mental capabilities fall far short of what we would need to conclude that a good and all-powerful God does not exist. We also look at a wide array of reasons to believe that God exists apart from the problem of evil. In chapter fourteen we glean valuable lessons from some of God's most distinguished followers, each of whom had an important insight into the problem of evil that we can apply to our lives. Finally, in chapter fifteen we emphasize our personal part in resolving the problem of evil. We need to go far beyond merely understanding why God allows pain and evil. We have to take the opportunity to help resolve the problem evil by, for example, showing kindness and meeting the needs of people around us. In so doing we act as God would act, thereby glorifying Him.

Having said something about the plan of this book I need to say something about its method. I will use a lot of the Bible but I hope by the end of the book I will have gone far beyond quoting and discussing individual verses (important as that is). I aim to use the nuts and bolts of individual passages to build the superstructure of a Christian view of pain and evil.

To put it another way, we will connect the dots of individual passages to form the big picture of God and evil. Drawing lines between dots requires a bit of reasoning. Generally, the farther apart the dots, the more skill is required to form the picture. Some of the biblical dots on the problem of evil are rather far apart, which is why Christian thinkers can disagree on where to draw the lines (as we'll see for example in chapter four, on what it means to be free).

To form a picture of anything – of what is ethically right and wrong, a Christian view of history, the nature of God – we have to

go beyond the dots, beyond the nuts and bolts. We have to put the biblical specifics together to form Christian ideas.[5]

Some people are uncomfortable doing that because they think of it as usurping God's authority and supplanting revelation with reason. But I think God expects us to take what He has given us and form a cohesive view of things, such as who we are and who He is, what we ought to do and think – and why He allows pain and evil. To live as believers we have to build cognitive superstructures, we cannot live among piles of nuts and bolts. Building these big ideas is something we do whether we realize it or not. If you go beyond specifics to think about an entire subject, you are using the nuts and bolts to build a cognitive superstructure. To think about God's omnipotence, or what you should do about a situation, or to think about virtually anything, you must draw the lines between the dots.

In drawing the big picture, this book will do more than exhort the reader to do what is right. Though there will be some of that, we will invest a lot of time forming an answer to one of life's hardest questions. So we will invest a lot of time in what we should think and believe, because that is the foundation for what we feel and do. If the foundation isn't there, whatever is built up will not stand.

To help deepen our thoughts and personalize them, as well as to integrate them with our actions, I have added questions after each chapter. Some questions review the content, some invite the reader to draw out implications, and some lead to application. A glossary reviews concepts crucial to the book.[6]

In the end we will not remove mystery from this issue, nor the need for faith. But we will see that God has understandable and wonderful reasons for bringing about a world like ours. Nevertheless the good things that can come from it are mostly opportunities rather than guarantees. Cancer, for example, can cause us to have more faith, hope, patience, and sensitivity to those around us; or it can make us doubtful, bitter, angry, and full of self-pity.

Whether pain and evil benefit us has a lot to do with what we know and how we respond. So let us press on to a better understanding of God and how to make the most of our brief sojourn in this fallen world.

NOTES

*All Scriptural quotations are in the New American Standard (NASB) unless otherwise noted.

1. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble, 1993), 453 (ch. 132). For pointing me to this reference, I am indebted to D. Bruce Lockerbie, *Dismissing God: Modern Writers' Struggle Against Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 87.

2. Eleanor Melville Metcalf, ed., *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 83; quoted in Lockerbie, 89.

3. For the examples of Hawthorne, Twain, Maugham, and Turner, I am indebted to Lockerbie, 72-77, 232.

4. Of course God is not a sexual being and therefore has no gender in a literal sense, however I will use the traditional masculine pronoun ("He") since that is how God represents Himself in Scripture.

5. Going from what I have been calling the nuts and bolts of specific biblical passages (or the dots, if you like) to the superstructure can be described in much more detail. Subjects like linguistics, history, archeology, and the study of the original biblical languages (Greek and Hebrew) help to do exegesis. Exegesis gives us the straightforward meaning of the text. To do this we use principles of interpretation, or hermeneutics (the concepts undergirding the application of hermeneutics are sometimes called philosophical hermeneutics).

We can put these exegetical blocks together to construct "biblical" theology, which looks at the style, themes, and theology of specific biblical writers, thus giving us, for example, Pauline theology (i.e., the theology of the apostle Paul). (In this technical sense "biblical" theology does not mean biblically correct theology as opposed to biblically incorrect theology.) Bible exposition expounds the themes and issues that run through individual biblical books, biblical writers, or whole divisions of the Bible (such as the gospels, or the entire Old or New Testament). Theology puts all the pieces together to form the superstructure. It does not just deal with what a particular passage tells us, for example, about God's goodness and evil (exegesis); or what the apostle Paul said about the subject ("biblical" theology), or how the subject appears in the flow and thought of books and major sections of the Bible (Bible exposition). Rather, theology deals with what the entire Bible says about God's goodness and evil. Theologians sometimes also benefit from historical theology, which deals with past Christian thought on a subject. For instance, as we deal with God and evil in this book we will find the thoughts of Calvin and Augustine especially relevant.

I've simplified this description of how it works since in actual practice going from text to theology may not always be a straight line upward. Considerations from biblical theology, for example, may influence how we interpret a particular passage.

Finally, the content from exegesis, biblical theology, Bible exposition, and theology, are applied to life through activities such as preaching and counseling. It is obvious that it would be difficult to effectively apply the Bible to life without first building upward from exegesis, in other words, without "connecting the dots." We will go from text to application in this book, but we will spend a lot of time putting the big picture together.

6. In some of the illustrations I have changed one or more details to preserve the anonymity of people involved.