

The Purpose of Evil

Arthur P. Adams
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*"I form light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil.
I, the Lord, do all these things." ~ Isaiah 45:7*

There is probably no subject in all the range of religious thought so hard to deal with as that of the purpose of evil.

The great question for theologians to wrestle with is this: How can you account for the existence of evil alongside a supreme, all-wise, holy and benevolent God?

Think for a moment on the condition of things in this world. Evil exists on the earth to embitter and darken, to blight and curse everything else that exists. On it goes, rolling through the world, crushing its helpless victims on every hand, and (the saddest feature of all) crushing without distinction the innocent and guilty together in one common quagmire of sin, suffering and death; and God allows it to go on when He might at any instant stop it, and on it has gone for six thousand years.

First let me say that there is no help out of this trouble in orthodoxy. In regard to this subject of orthodoxy [*i.e.*, the doctrine of religion] is hopelessly contradictory and utterly absurd.

Thus orthodoxy speaks: "It was not in God's original plan that evil should exist, but evil has come into existence and done incalculable harm; yet God's plans cannot be thwarted nor disarranged in the least, because He is all-wise and almighty. Evil being in existence before man was created, God allows it to come into contact with the man He created when He might have prevented it, knowing full well what the result would be; yet He is in no wise responsible for the consequences of evil. In fact, it is blasphemy to entertain any such idea. Evil having come into existence contrary to God's will, He cannot put it out of existence, but it will continue as long as He exists, an eternal blot on His otherwise perfect universe and a perpetual offense unto all the purified; yet His will is absolute and sovereign and the redeemed will be perfectly happy. Thus, God is in no wise responsible for either the origin, existence, consequences or continuance of evil; yet He can have everything as He pleases, and is the Creator of all things."

So Orthodoxy goes on, stultifying common sense, throttling human reason, and stupidly expecting that intelligent, thoughtful men and women will accept its idiotic patter as the infallible utterances of divine inspiration.

Cannot everyone see that the entire orthodox view is contradictory and absurd in the extreme, and hence self-destructive and untenable?

Now, I hold that the following proposition is self-evident: Given a God of infinite power, wisdom and goodness, He is responsible for ALL things that exist. This also follows from the wisdom and goodness of God: all things that exist are for an intelligent and benevolent end.

These conclusions are inevitable from the premises; they cannot be modified except by modifying the premises. For instance, if you say that some things exist contrary to God's will, then it follows that God is not all-powerful; and you cannot escape this conclusion by bringing in the orthodox doctrine of man's free moral agency, for whatever a free moral agent may do, He is responsible for it who made him a free moral agent. If God made man a free moral agent, He knew beforehand what the result would be, and hence is just as responsible for the consequences of the acts of that free moral agent as He would be for the act of an irresponsible machine that He had made.

Man's free moral agency (free will), even if it were true, would by no means clear God from the responsibility of His acts, since God is his Creator and has made him in the first place just what he is, well knowing what the result would be.

If God's will is *EVER* thwarted, then He is not almighty. If His will is thwarted, then His plans must be changed, and hence He is not all-wise and immutable. If His will is *NEVER* thwarted, then all things are in *accordance* with His will and He is responsible for all things as they exist. If He is all-wise and all-good, then all things, existing according to His will, must be tending to some wise and benevolent end.

Thus we come back to my proposition again: If God is infinite in power, wisdom and goodness, then He is responsible for *ALL* things that exist, and all existing things are tending toward some wise and good end.

He who sees the truth of this proposition will also see the truth of several corollaries depending upon it; viz., *ABSOLUTE* evil cannot exist because God is absolutely *GOOD*.

The absolute is the unconditioned and unlimited. If there were absolute evil, then the good *would* be limited, and hence *not* absolute, and hence again God would not be absolutely or infinitely good. But God *IS* infinite in goodness; hence evil is *NOT* infinite. Therefore it is relative, temporary and limited, and therefore again *endless* evil is an impossibility unless you make God less than infinite. Thus it is seen that the doctrine of endless torments is as contrary to reason as it is to Scripture.

We have arrived then purely by reasoning to the somewhat startling and yet perfectly scriptural

conclusion that “*all things are of God,*” or God is in all things, or is responsible for all things, including all so-called “evil” things as well as “good” things.

Is not such a position as this very dangerous? Is it not a fearful thing to say that “*evil*” is of God?

I answer there is nothing dangerous or fearful about this view unless the *truth* is dangerous and fearful. We have seen that reason compels us to this position whether we will or not, and everyone familiar with the Bible ought to know that this view is positively Scriptural – that, indeed,

“*All things are of God*” (II Corinthians 5:18)

This principle is declared over and over again in the Bible. The prophet Amos goes so far as to particularize evil as “of God” when in his question he makes an implied statement which from an orthodox standpoint would be blasphemous:

“*Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?*” (Amos 3:6).

Thus Job similarly asks,

“*What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?*” (Job 2:10).

What is still more to the purpose, we have the direct positive statement that *GOD creates evil!*

“*I form light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil. I, the Lord, do all these things*” (Isaiah 45:7).

This passage is most strange and unaccountable on the ground of any of the current orthodox creeds. God creates evil? It cannot be! Yet here it is in the Word. What will you do with it? “We must explain it somehow,” says Orthodoxy, “and yet save our creed.”

How shall it be done? Orthodoxy shall answer: “Suppose we say that the evil here spoken of is not moral evil, sin, or wrongdoing, but physical evil, famines, pestilences, tornadoes, etc., which God controls and sends upon mankind as punishment for their wickedness.”

That will not do! The word here rendered evil is the one commonly used throughout the Old Testament to denote wickedness, sin, wrongdoing. In some five hundred passages it is so used.¹ The very same Greek word is also rendered “wicked” and “wickedness” more than a hundred times.²

Suppose that instead of trying to explain this passage in harmony with some cut-and-dried creed, we let all creeds go and see if we can find out what the passage really means, and then,

1. For example, see Genesis 6:5; Numbers 14:27; Deuteronomy 31:29; I Kings 11:6; 16:30; Psalms 34:21.

2. See for example Genesis 6:5; 13:13; Psalms. 94:23; 101:4.

if the creed does not harmonize with that meaning, throw the creed away and form another one that will harmonize with it.

At any rate here is the statement in the Word and we will be brave enough to receive it as truth and trust the same One who made it to explain it. Since God is infinitely good and wise, and evil is one of His creatures, it must be that evil shall finally result in some good and wise end, as we have already seen.

How can that be? If we can by any means understand how it can be, the next question would be, What can it be? What can be the end, good and wise, toward which evil is tending?

We can understand how all evil ultimately tends to good from the fact that we know from our own experience how some evil tends to good, and in the Bible and in the world around us, we see the same thing illustrated again and again.

“As for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good” (Genesis 50:20).

Now if God has done this in some cases, and if, as we know, He *“worketh all things after the counsel of His own will”* (Ephesians 1:11), then surely it is not difficult to believe that He overrules all evil for good.

In fact, this must be so, for it is only on this ground, *i.e.*, that all evil ultimately tends to good in the end, that we can harmonize the existence of evil at all with the existence of a God of infinite power, wisdom and love.

It is not necessary for us to understand how in each particular case evil is overruled for good in order to believe that it is so overruled. The subject is made still clearer, moreover, from the fact that we can see and understand what some of these good ends are toward which evil conducts us, and thus we come to know something of the purpose of evil.

We see furthermore that this purpose is grand and glorious and in perfect harmony with the character of God and that it fully accounts for the existence of evil.

For example, how could God ever reveal Himself to man in His mercy, long-suffering, and compassion if it had not been that evil had put us into a position to call for the exercise of these attributes in our behalf? Furthermore, especially how could God manifest to us His love in all its intensity and greatness except by such an opportunity as evil furnishes? As it is written,

“In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because God sent His only Son into the world that we might live through Him,” (I John 4:9).

There could have been no such manifestation of the Father’s love if there had been no such thing as evil.

We might believe that a friend loved us even though his love had never been especially tested, but we never could appreciate his love unless circumstances transpired to give him an opportunity to exhibit it in all its strength and fullness.

So, too, we never could understand fully the love of God (and hence never could know Him fully, I Corinthians 13:12, for “*God is love*”) had it not been for our lost and wretched condition furnishing the Father with an adequate opportunity for its manifestation. It was “*when we were yet without strength*” (Romans 5:6) that Christ died for us.

“God commendeth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8).

It was because we were in such an evil case, without strength and sinners, that the love that sent the Deliverer is so marked and readily appreciated. Hence,

“Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He [Christ] laid down His life for us” (I John 3:16).

How should we have been able thus to perceive that love in its so great plenitude if we had never come under the power of evil so as to need this extreme manifestation of it?

Furthermore, as evil gives God an occasion to reveal Himself to us so that we may know Him, so it gives us the opportunity to exercise the attributes of God so that we may become like Him.

The existence of evil in the world gives the child of God the opportunity for the exercise of the godlike attributes of mercy, compassion, forgiveness, forbearance, meekness, and gentleness and thus he becomes like God; “*for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust ... He is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil*” (Matthew 5:45; Luke 6:35). Thus we see something of the purpose of evil in the blessings of mankind.

In addition to all this we have other direct testimony from Scripture that evil is one of God’s ministers for ultimate good. It is clearly intimated again and again that God uses evil for the accomplishment of His plans, which, of course, are always good.

See, for instance, Judges 9:23. Read the context and you will see that Abimelech by a most atrocious crime had obtained the rulership of Israel, and to punish him,

“For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

“God sent an evil spirit between him and the men of Schechem”

The result was the punishment of all the guilty parties.

See the same idea in I Samuel 16:14:

“The Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul and an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him.”

This evil spirit did not come from the devil nor from hell, but *from the Lord* to do His bidding.

See also I Kings 22:23 where the Lord is represented as using a “*lying spirit*” in order to deceive wicked Ahab for his own destruction.

The case of Job is one of the most striking and perfect illustrations of this wonderful truth. The Lord speaks of him as,

“My servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil” (Job. 1:8).

Thus it appears that Job was a remarkably good man, and this is confirmed by Ezekiel 14:14, 20.

“Though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness, saith the Lord God ... Though Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, as I live, saith the Lord GOD, they shall deliver neither son nor daughter; they shall but deliver their own souls by their righteousness.”

Now then, what does God do but deliberately hand over this perfect and upright man into the hands of Satan to do his worst upon him, only that he should not touch his life.

How could we have a more perfect illustration of how God uses evil as an instrument for good? Although Job suffered intensely, we know that in the end he was greatly blessed by his hard and bitter experience.

If God thus uses Satan, the embodiment of evil, as a minister for ultimate good in the case of one individual, is it hard to believe that all evil is overruled of God for good in all cases?

The New Testament teaches the same truth. Did you ever notice how strangely the evangelists Matthew and Mark speak of Christ’s temptation? The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil (Matthew 4:1; Mark 1:12-13). What a strange statement! The Holy Spirit of God drives the sinless Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted of Satan, the arch enemy of all good, a murderer from the beginning, and the father of lies!

Truly God creates evil and uses it, too, for His own purposes and glory! The apostle Paul fully understood this great truth and practiced it himself. Hence he writes to the Corinthians,

“To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (I Corinthians 5:5).

He declares in his letter to Timothy that he himself had delivered certain ones unto Satan,

“That they might learn not to blaspheme” (I Timothy 1:20).

It would seem also that the apostle knew something of this kind of discipline himself, for he says,

“Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure” (II Corinthians 12:7).

All this clearly proves that God overrules evil for good, and that even Satan’s work ultimately shall result in blessings for God’s children.

Finally, we will notice one more passage more remarkable, if possible, even than those I have cited.

In the 20th chapter of the Revelation we have an account of the total restraint of the devil and consequent suppression of evil for a thousand years. What a blessed era of peace and righteousness that will be and how desirable that it should continue and that evil should never again curse the earth!

Then at the end of the thousand years Satan is loosed out of his prison, and again goes out to deceive the nations, and peace is banished from the earth, and war and slaughter ensues with terrible suffering and destruction. According to the orthodox idea of the origin and final effects of evil, there would seem to be some terrible mistake here. Either Satan is not watched closely enough, or his prison was insecure, or there was treachery; some awful blunder or more awful crime has been committed to let the devil loose when once he was well secured, surely it would seem from the orthodox standpoint. Yet, so it is not.

All is plain when we see the great truth I have tried to set forth. Satan is God’s servant to carry out His plans. He is just as much under God’s control and works; just as truly under His direction as is Gabriel. God now leaves him free to work out his mischievous will among the children of men. Satan is the,

“Prince of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11);

“The spirit that worketh in the children of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2).

The time will come when he will be bound and put under total restraint and so remain through the Millennium. Then he will be loosed because God has something more for him to do, and he will finally be disposed, but we have seen that evil is needful and beneficial in the end. It is one of God’s creatures and His servant, and is conducive to the accomplishment of His gracious plans, as are all other things.

Thus the Word untangles this great mystery of evil for us and shows us clearly that it is not an interloper in God's economy. It is not a foreign substance in the delicate fabric of God's great plan, obstructing and disarranging its intricate mechanism; nay, it is a necessary part of that plan.

It rightly belongs to the marvelous congeries [stockpiles] of forces, that under the control and guidance of the One Supreme mind, works and interworks steadily and without interruption or delay, to the glorious end of creating a divine and godlike race. Thank God that on this, as in all other things, He will be glorified and man, in the end, be blessed!

Now, another thought. There are some who say that they could accept the foregoing position if it were not for one thing: the great injustice there is in the world. They can see how God can overrule evil for good in the case of the guilty. Those who deserve punishment are benefited by it, but the evil of this world falls with equal weight upon the innocent as upon the guilty, and even in many cases with greater weight upon the former than upon the latter.

The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. The innocent and helpless suffer most keenly on account of the viciousness and brutality of others, and thus, the most outrageous injustice is perpetrated continually around us in the world.

How can all this be permitted in the dominions of a God of absolute justice and boundless love? How can all this be conducive to good? Is there an answer to this tremendous problem? Two considerations, if I err not, will help us to a solution.

We have seen that one of the purposes of evil is to develop in our character attributes from God: pity, mercy, compassion, charity, gentleness, etc. Now suppose we lived in a world of absolute justice where no one suffered except what they strictly deserved to suffer, where the innocent never suffered, but only the guilty, and they suffered just so much – no more and no less – as was due to their transgression and as would be beneficial to the transgressor.

Suppose we lived in such a world as that. At first thought it would seem as though it would be a very nice kind of world; but how could we in such a world develop the godlike attributes above referred to?

There would be no room for heavenly compassion and sweet charity and pity in a world of absolute justice. We would not be likely to pity very much a person who we knew was receiving only the punishment due his fault and that in the end would be for his benefit and blessing.

Is it not plain that just this kind of evil, *i.e.*, the evil of injustice, is needed in order that those crowning attributes of God, the tender and loving qualities of our Father in heaven, may be developed and perfected in His human children?

Furthermore, so far as the injustice goes, that may be only temporary and apparent. Who shall say that in future cycles which God's plan has yet to run, all the apparent injustice of

this present time may not be perfectly adjusted, taken into account, and made right? Surely no one has any right to say it will not be so; and it is perfectly reasonable and probable that it will be so.

Yet there is still another consideration that fully confirms all the foregoing and still further explains the whole subject. We should always endeavor to discover the underlying principles of God's actions. Nothing that God does is arbitrary or capricious, but every one of His movements has an adequate and righteous cause. He always acts from principle. The outward act may change under different circumstances and toward different individuals, but His principles of action never change.

See this whole subject set forth in Ezekiel, chapter forty three. Hence, in order to become acquainted with God, to know Him more and more, we must endeavor to understand, not simply what God does, but why He does it. To know merely what God does is oft times very puzzling and inexplicable. To know why He does it makes all as clear and luminous as noon day. What we need to know, then, in order to know God are the reasons for God's actions, the purpose, "*the end of the Lord*" (James 5:11), the causes and principles of His movements and operations in His dealings with mankind. We may always be sure that there is a just and righteous reason for all God's ways and our endeavor should be to know and understand that reason.

Now let us apply this to the subject we are considering. Evil exists, things that seem utterly antagonistic to God and His way, but which we are sure from the foregoing considerations to be in some sense of God, in harmony with His will, and conducive to the furtherance of His plans.

Now then, is there any principle of action, just and righteous in itself, that will account for the existence of evil and indicate its ultimate result?

There certainly is such a principle, thus: It is a recognized principle in law and equity that it is right and just to inflict or permit temporary evil for the sake of an ultimate and permanent good. This principle, all will see is certainly correct.

It is upon this principle that all punishment of any kind is justifiable, and it is only on this principle that it can be justified. Punishment is an evil, but it is an evil that may finally result in good, and when it is inflicted for such a purpose, it is right and just.

Now we know from numerous examples, many of which I have given, that God acts upon this principle. He uses evil as an ultimate instrument for good. Admit that this principle is correct and that God acts upon it, and all is at once accounted for and its final result indicated.

This sweeping conclusion may not at once be clear to all, but a little thought will show that it is fully justified. If it is right to use evil as an ultimate instrument for good, and if God acts upon this principle, the principle fully explaining and justifying the act, then is it not reasonable to conclude that all evil is so justified?

We cannot enter sufficiently deep into God's plans to be able to explain the how and the why of each individual case, but, once admitting the principle, and seeing numerous examples of its application that we can understand, the conclusion is fully warranted that this principle applies to all cases.

Of course, no one could accept this conclusion who believed in endless torment. The above principle will not explain or justify unmitigated and eternal evil. I have already shown that such evil really dethrones God, or at least shares His throne with Him, which is equivalent to dethroning Him. To say that evil is absolute and eternal is to fully invest it with attributes peculiar to Deity; but this cannot be. At that rate there would be two gods, a good and a bad one, and each of them would eternally exist and be eternal foes. To such a frightful conclusion does the doctrine of the eternity of evil lead us. Let those believe it who can; but if we take the Bible teaching on this subject, the principle enunciated fully accounts for and explains the existence and purpose of evil.

It may seem to some that this principle cannot apply to all evil. They are able to see how some evil may be overruled for good, but that all the terrible forms of evil can be so overruled seems to them impossible. Yet such a question is simply one of degree.

If God can make some evil conducive to good, can He not so make all evil of whatever form or quantity? If it is true that God uses evil for good at all, how can we tell, not knowing perfectly God's plans and methods, just what kind of evil and just how much evil God will so use?

We must conclude that all the evil we see about us in every horrifying form and in all its vast amount comes under the same category of part and parcel of the great plan that through sin, corruption, chaos and death is moving on to holiness, purity, order and life eternal.

“Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Romans 5:20).

Furthermore, the final outcome of God's plan, so clearly revealed in Scripture, fully confirms the foregoing view and, in fact, irresistibly drives us to that view.

All the details and every particular of the plan in all its length and breadth are not revealed, but the result is revealed. That result, the final outcome, is a perfect and absolute triumph for goodness, truth, and justice.

“Every knee shall bow ... and every tongue shall confess ... to the glory³ of God” (Philippians 2:10-11; Romans 14:11; Isaiah 45:23).

“The creature ... shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption” (Romans 8:21).

“That ... He might gather together in one All things in Christ” (Ephesians 1:10).

3. Also translated in other places as “praise” and “worship.”

“Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (I Corinthians 15:54).

“There shall be no more curse” (Revelation 22:3).

“The people which shall be created shall praise the Lord” (Psalms 102:18).

This is the outcome! Thank God, it is good enough! To this final result all things are tending. To such a universal victory we are traveling on. We can see it by faith afar off.

I cannot doubt that good shall fall
At last, far off, at last to all.

Thus does reason and the Word set forth the purpose of evil. My feeble powers of expression are altogether inadequate for the full presentation of the great truth, but these thoughts will suggest the solution to the problem and will help the lover of truth to a deeper and fuller apprehension of the unique and wonderful ways of God;

“Lo, these are parts of His ways; but how little a portion is heard of Him? But the thunder of His power, who can understand?” (Job 26:14).

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