

“Why is there evil in the world? Scott Christensen shows that this difficult question is bound up with two larger questions: ‘Why did God make the world?’ and ‘Why did God the Son become a man and suffer evil?’ Scripture gives the ultimate answer: to manifest the glory of God. Christensen’s articulate, inspiring, and gospel-driven presentation of the ‘greater-glory’ theodicy explores a significant way that God’s Word addresses the problem of evil to strengthen our faith and evoke our worship.”

—**Joel R. Beeke**, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary,
Grand Rapids, Michigan

“The problem of evil is the most important argument against the existence of God. It is said to be all the more difficult to answer when one adopts a Reformed/Calvinist view of human free will and divine providence, according to which God, in his sovereign decree, determines everything that comes to pass. Scott Christensen accepts the challenge and offers a Reformed *tour de force* in response to the multifaceted problem of evil. He argues that evil is not merely, as the French say, a *pétard mouillé* (a ‘wet petard/firecracker’); rather, it is one that does explode, but backfires into glorifying God, in the biblical-theological grand narrative of creation, fall, and redemption. Christensen offers a response that is truly Reformed, not just because of his Calvinist view of free will (though it certainly has that), but because of its focus on the glory of God, the centrality of the person of Jesus, and the good news of redemption in Christ.”

—**Guillaume Bignon**, author, *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God*;
executive committee member, Association Axiome, a society of
French-speaking Christian scholars

“This is the most Bible-saturated, ‘logic-sensical,’ and God-honoring answer to the so-called problem of evil in our generation. Gifted writer and thinker Scott Christensen has produced in *What about Evil?* an invaluable resource for both the inquisitive believer and the inquiring skeptic alike. I heartily recommend it to everyone wrestling with the reality of a good and sovereign God and the fact that evil still remains in this world.”

—**Grant R. Castleberry**, Executive Director, Council on Biblical
Manhood and Womanhood

“Scott Christensen’s book *What about Evil?* deals with the ‘problem of evil’—how can evil exist in a world created and ruled by a God who is sovereign and completely good? Many authors (including me) have taken

up this challenge, but it remains a powerful objection to the truth of the Christian faith. Christensen gets beyond the more traditional approaches to the problem, by reminding us that God's wisdom pervades everything he ordains so that the very existence of evil serves his purpose of maximizing goodness and glorifying himself. Of course, Romans 8:28 and other verses *say* that this is true. But Christensen shows us *how* it is true, how even in this fallen world we can begin to grasp something of God's light in the midst of the darkness, indeed *especially* there. I commend this book to readers who seek a serious and thoughtful treatment of this issue."

—**John M. Frame**, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

"Scott Christensen delivers an unflinching, clear, and honest defense of the Reformed position on the problem of evil. The volume excels at integrating biblical theology with systematics and rightly situates theodicy in the history of redemption, a story that ultimately brings glory to the triune God. I recommend this project to students, pastors, and teachers who want to ponder this difficult problem anew. I suspect that I'll commend this volume for years to come."

—**Benjamin L. Gladd**, Associate Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson

"Scott Christensen's work on theodicy is well crafted and contributes to this important conversation in a significant and helpful way. Christensen's assertions are clear, tight, and accessible, reaching the intended audience with persuasive clarity. His appeal to the *felix culpa* argument as found in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed theology is both unusual and helpful as it grounds theodicy in the doctrine of God's eternal glory in Christ, rather than in a series of explanations or excuses that merely appeal to human desire to be satisfied intellectually or emotionally. Christensen's work is solidly argued and well researched; this book deserves a wide audience."

—**Grant Horner**, Professor of Renaissance and Reformation Studies, The Master's University

"Christians take the problem of evil more seriously than anyone else. This book avoids simplistic philosophical solutions. Instead, the author appreciates that the historical fact of Christ's incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and return provides the only hope when we just don't know all the answers."

—**Michael S. Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“This book covers a lot of ground as it discusses the perennial question, ‘What about evil?’ Cogent, clear, and convincing, Christensen’s book will require some work to refute. There is a delicate balance between awareness of historical and present-day polemics, which will leave readers satisfied that they have a good idea of the issues at stake concerning a Reformed theodicy.”

—**Mark Jones**, Senior Minister, Faith Vancouver Presbyterian Church (PCA), British Columbia, Canada

“Scott Christensen has a real gift for answering difficult theological questions plainly, thoroughly, and above all biblically—with colorful, engaging writing that readers at practically any level can easily comprehend and learn from. If you’re troubled by the question of why a good and omnipotent God would create a universe that includes evil—or if you are a Christian struggling to explain the problem of evil to someone else—you will greatly benefit from this book.”

—**John MacArthur**, Pastor-Teacher, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California; Chancellor Emeritus, The Master’s University and Seminary

“This is a bold venture. After all, every attempt to explain the ‘Why?’ of sin faces the *prima facie* difficulty that sin, as defined by St. John (1 John 3:4), is without law, and thus irreducible to reason and order. This has not, however, deterred the world’s greatest minds from trying, and Scott Christensen belongs to a long and honorable succession. In this volume he sets forth a ‘greater-glory theodicy’ reminiscent of Augustine’s *felix culpa*, according to which the fall created a need for redemption, which in turn created the opportunity for God to show the glory of his redeeming love in the person of his Son. In essence, the answer to the question ‘What about evil?’ lies in the history of redemption: the story itself is God’s vindication, but what is striking is the way in which this volume relates this history to modern theories of the ‘architectonics of storytelling.’ All great stories, Christensen argues, follow this pattern: creation (the good), fall, and redemption. But the pattern’s original lies in the biblical narrative, the unique plot of the transcendent Author himself. Behind the story, however, lies the redemptive acts themselves and, supremely, the hero, Jesus Christ the Redeemer. God’s design from all eternity was that in him he would give the supreme revelation of his glory. Christ’s work, culminating in a new heaven and a new earth, is God’s happy ending. These remarks do scant justice to the massive and varied erudition that lies behind this

book. The *felix culpa* argument has never had a more thorough or a more accessible presentation.”

—**Donald Macleod**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Edinburgh Theological Seminary

“One question that I often get as a pastor is: Why does evil exist? Without realizing it, the churchgoer is asking a theological question pertaining to one of the most challenging doctrines in all of Christianity. Thankfully, my friend Scott Christensen has written what I believe to be the definitive book on theodicy, *What about Evil?* I’ve grown to expect from Scott nothing less than cogent thinking, thorough examination, engaging writing, and biblical orthodoxy, and this book delivers on all fronts. After surveying the landscape of thinking on theodicy, Scott argues for the solution that gives God the greatest glory. More than just a sit-down-and-read-through book, *What about Evil?* is a resource that will aid the pastor, scholar, and mature believer. I cannot commend this volume highly enough, and I’m thankful for Scott’s tireless labors in writing it.”

—**Nate Pickowicz**, Pastor, Harvest Bible Church, Gilmanton Iron Works, New Hampshire; author, *How to Eat Your Bible*

“What Scott Christensen has accomplished with *What about Evil?* is truly exceptional. So many Christians experience an onslaught of questions from unbelievers whenever something of a catastrophic nature seemingly upends society. The natural response of unbelievers is: ‘Where was God?’ Christians need reasonable answers to this question. I am often disappointed when I hear ministers answer it by chalking the evil up to ‘bare permission.’ *Permission* is neither helpful nor comforting when a sovereign, benevolent God is on the throne. Scott has masterfully demonstrated from Scripture how believers can answer the seeming ‘problem of evil’ that puzzles believers. I happily commend this work to the thoughtful student of Scripture.”

—**Peter Sammons**, Associate Professor of Theology, The Master’s Seminary

“Christensen tackles what is perhaps the most difficult question for Christian theology—the problem of evil. No one can answer every question, as Christensen himself admits. Still, the book is a faithful and learned study on the whole matter, reflecting careful research and scholarship. Here we find a combination that is quite rare: the book is biblically grounded, theologi-

cally perceptive, and philosophically astute. Explaining evil in the context of the storyline of the Scriptures is particularly helpful.”

—**Thomas R. Schreiner**, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The problem of evil is one of the most difficult questions faced by Christians in the proclamation and defense of the gospel as well as in our daily lives. The question of why God has allowed sin and evil to exist in his good world must be answered with biblical and theological fidelity. Unfortunately, many of the answers given to this question by Christians over the years contain parts of the truth but often miss the big picture centered in the glory of God and God’s eternal plan of redemption. In this excellent and helpful book, however, Scott Christensen breaks new ground and offers an antidote to subpar ways of answering the problem of evil by returning to Scripture and giving us a robust ‘greater-glory theodicy.’ In doing so, this book is faithful to Scripture, is true to Reformed theology, interacts with past and present discussions on the problem of evil with care and precision, and most of all helps the church make sense of the riddle of sin and evil in God’s eternal plan to bring glory to himself. If you have wrestled with the issues of theodicy and want the best of theological thinking on them, this book is a must-read. It will give you answers to your questions—but more than this, it will lead you to trust and glory in our triune God in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

—**Stephen J. Wellum**, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; editor, *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*

“Scott Christensen’s *What about Evil?* seeks to reconcile the existence of God and evil by appealing to ‘the grand storyline of the Bible.’ While acknowledging that he is not an analytic philosopher, Christensen displays great facility with what philosophy can bring and has brought to the table on this question, while choosing to focus his considerable exegetical and systematic-theological gifts on unpacking for his readers the implications of specific biblical revelation for this question. The result is a ‘cross-centered theodicy of redemptive glory,’ a ‘greater-glory theodicy’ that, while having affinities with greater-good theodicy and best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy, is more specifically grounded in biblical narrative, rather than sanctified speculation. Christensen’s interaction with contemporary literature on this

topic is both wide-ranging and charitable, and much profit may be gained in considering how he lays out his case. Of special note is his anticipation of objections from both secular readers and fellow Christians who might take a different point of view. Highly recommended.”

—**Greg Welty**, Professor of Philosophy, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Why Is There Evil in the World?*

“In his *What about Evil?* Scott Christensen makes a genuine contribution to the discussion of the problem of evil. His treatment of the question from the perspective of the Bible’s own story of God’s glory in human redemption is self-consciously biblical rather than philosophical, as well as being engaging and conceptually clear at every point. A pleasure to commend!”

—**Fred G. Zaspel**, Pastor, Reformed Baptist Church, Franconia, Pennsylvania; Adjunct Professor of Systematic Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; executive editor, *Books at a Glance*

WHAT ABOUT
EVIL?

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WHAT ABOUT EVIL?

A DEFENSE OF GOD'S
SOVEREIGN GLORY

SCOTT CHRISTENSEN



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To

Eddie Ogier, Joe Rice, and Marty Irons.

Friends for a lifetime. Brothers in Christ forever.

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FOREWORD

Occasionally one comes across a writer who manages to deal with big themes in exemplary ways—i.e., a writer who seems to know the tiny alleyways of the subject, but keeps the reader’s attention focused on the big picture. Such a writer, truly gifted, says something fresh and thought-provoking about the far horizons, yet without losing sight of the details—and without demeaning those who uphold other, more traditional positions. But above all, if that writer is dealing with biblical and theological themes, the treatment of Scripture is fresh and compelling.

Such a writer is Scott Christensen, and his “big theme” is the sovereignty of God. We came across him five years ago in his book *What about Free Will? Reconciling Our Choices with God’s Sovereignty*. It is one of the ablest defenses I’ve seen of confessional compatibilism—that is, the kind of compatibilism upheld by confessing Christians, as opposed to the kind of compatibilism largely condemned by analytic philosophers. Christians hold that two fundamental truths commonly assumed and even taught in Scripture are mutually compatible: (1) God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never mitigates human responsibility; (2) human beings are morally responsible before God (they believe and disbelieve, they obey and disobey, they love and hate, and these and other actions are morally significant actions for which they are rightly held responsible), but such morally significant behavior does not make God absolutely contingent. If you hold both these statements to be true, you are a compatibilist. In his earlier book, Christensen sought to show that such biblical compatibilism is worked into the very fabric of the biblical storyline and, rightly understood, anchors how Christians think about suffering, prayer, providence, faith, freedom, what the cross achieved, and more.

Integrally related to the theme of divine sovereignty is the theme of theodicy: if God is both utterly sovereign and immaculately good, how can he ordain (permit?) evil in this world? Or, alternatively, granted that there is so much evil and suffering, perhaps he is not good; or, if he is good,

perhaps he is not sovereign—he's doing the best he can, poor chap. This is the set of conundrums that Christensen sets out to address in this book, *What about Evil? A Defense of God's Sovereign Glory*.

Christensen rightly insists that the challenge of theodicy is not a uniquely *Christian* problem: *every* worldview faces the problem of evil in one fashion or another. The distinctively Christian form of the problem arises from the distinctively Christian understanding of who God is. Oddly enough (as Christensen points out), most arguments that claim to be Christian theodicies are cast in the categories of analytic philosophy, not biblical theology (though, of course, their proponents quote the Bible often enough). For example, the free-will defense, enthusiastically defended in many Christian circles, argues that free will, often understood in a libertarian sense, is a great, necessary, and glorious element of being human. If God wants us to be human, and not merely robotic, he must allow us free will. By opening up that door, however, God takes a risk: his image-bearers might defy him and bring down evil on themselves. There may be an element of truth in the free-will defense, but it is not a distinctively *biblical* argument, and it has its problems. To give but one example: if in the new heaven and the new earth we human beings are so transformed that sin is no longer possible (i.e., free will ceases to exist), does it mean that we will no longer be human? And if one replies that God simply strengthens our wills so that we will no longer want to sin, then why did he not strengthen our wills before the fall so that we would not want to sin then, thus avoiding the sorry and sordid mess in the first place? Not surprisingly, other theodicies have been advanced: the natural-law defense, the greater-good theodicy, and so forth, all of which Christensen respectfully examines, profiting from them where he can, but ultimately finding them unsatisfactory. They are unsatisfactory, he says, not only because of intrinsic weaknesses, but also because they are not biblical enough: their arguments are too heavily indebted to philosophical structures of thought and too little shaped by the narrative of Scripture.

Christensen argues throughout his book that questions surrounding evil and its place in God's universe under God's sovereignty cannot be faithfully reflected on until they are nestled within the storyline of the Bible itself. Christensen is not so much developing a new theodicy as allowing the themes of the Bible's metanarrative to unfold in their own terms. Small wonder that he is quick to indicate how other writers have pointed the way. In any case, "as every story of redemption must have its crisis (evil), so also it must have its hero. Christ is the protagonist in God's plan of redemption, and his death and resurrection are the instruments by which he achieves

it. They are the nucleus of redemption and therefore of God's glory. . . . While we shudder at the shamefulfulness of Adam's sin that thrust our world into a dark place, paradoxically we can cry out, *O felix culpa!* O fortunate fall! that occasioned the need for a great Redeemer to display the riches of God's glorious grace (Eph. 1:6)."

Nor is this a merely cognitive "solution" to the "problem" of evil. The Bible's narrative of redemption is so relentlessly subversive that Christ's followers are called to weakness, to grace, to showing mercy to the wicked. What begins as a theodicy to the praise of God's glorious grace sweeps along and establishes, among other things, a distinctively Christian ethic.

To feel the weight of Christensen's argument demands a careful reading of the whole book, surely not so much a chore as a glimpse of glory.

D. A. Carson
Emeritus Professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

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PREFACE

When I wrote my first book, *What about Free Will?*,¹ I knew I would have to deal with the so-called problem of evil. The question of free will intersects the question of the existence of evil in important ways. Yet my treatment of the problem of evil in that book seemed to only touch the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Reconciling the existence of God and evil has been a perennial conundrum in the history of Christian theology, and the vast literature is as daunting to get one's arms around as the topic itself. So why add another book? Why this book?

Well, first of all, I felt a need to explore the matter by dipping a bit deeper below the surface of the icy mass of the problem that *Free Will* was not designed to do. But second, my offering is a bit unusual for this topic. There have been numerous attempts to produce a rational and morally satisfying Christian theodicy² that seeks to make sense of why God has allowed evil to pervade his world. Many of these defenses have been helpful, as I hope to show. Most answers, however, tend to get tangled in a thicket of questions that I believe miss the mark.

While popular treatments abound, most rigorous Christian responses to the problem of evil are dominated by strictly philosophical approaches, and I find this unfortunate. That is not because I find them problematic. To the contrary, they are useful; but by themselves they remain inadequate. Comprehensive biblical, theological, and exegetical responses are wanting. Many scholars who engage in systematic and biblical theology have conceded the problem to the philosophers, and this is not helpful to the church at large.

The fact is, the most satisfying answer to the conundrums surrounding God and the existence of evil is not primarily rooted in the discourse of rational and moral logic and its carefully constructed syllogisms, as helpful

1. Scott Christensen, *What about Free Will? Reconciling Our Choices with God's Sovereignty* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2016).

2. The term *theodicy* was coined by the eighteenth-century German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. *Theodicy* combines the Greek words for "God" (*theós*) and "justice" (*dikē*). The theodicy attempts to justify God in the face of evil.

as these have proved to be, including my own investigations here. Instead, it is theological in nature. Furthermore, it is discovered in the grand storyline of the Bible.

In treating this subject, I will not be as rigorously focused on the plethora of apologetic matters that most philosophical books on this topic are concerned to address. This does not mean that the book has no apologetic value. I believe it does. But traditional apologetic approaches are not my immediate objective. Furthermore, I hope to address logical conundrums with some level of competence even though I lack any expertise as an analytical philosopher. My audience is the perplexed believer searching for a scripturally constructed theology for answers. Even so, I hope an unbeliever can begin to understand something of the wonder of the biblical faith, its God, and its central message by looking at Christianity through the lens of theodicy. Consequently, this will be a profoundly biblical and theological exploration. And I believe the answers provided in the pages of Holy Writ will reflect matters that resonate deeply in the soul of every human being.

I should also say that many books address the problem of evil with a view to providing an immediate salve to suffering readers. This is not one of those books—but not because I lack empathy for those who suffer. I pray that troubled souls are encouraged by the truths I hope to point us to, but this work will not pretend to be the first line of defense for bringing practical relief from pain and suffering.³ My task will be centered on the bigger picture—how sin, evil, corruption, and death fit into the broad outlines of redemptive history.

These caveats demonstrate that probing the problem of evil can quickly swallow one's cognitive (and emotional) resources. It is impossible to be exhaustive. John Feinberg has rightly said that there are many problems of evil.⁴ And there are multiple ways in which these many problems have been addressed. Furthermore, a great deal of epistemic humility is necessary here. Some of the thorny problems with evil are impenetrable to our limited minds.

3. Among the many excellent books on handling pain and suffering, I recommend the works of Joni Eareckson Tada. See especially *A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God's Sovereignty* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010); Joni Eareckson Tada with Steve Estes, *When God Weeps* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). See also Paul David Tripp, *Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018); David Powlison, *God's Grace in Your Suffering* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018); Dave Furman, *Kiss the Wave: Embracing God in Your Trials* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018); Elisabeth Elliot, *A Path through Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1990); Elisabeth Elliot, *Suffering Is Never for Nothing* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2019); Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008); Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Deserted by God?* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1993).

4. John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 21–27.

I do not mean to say that certain problems have no solutions, but those solutions will remain hidden from us as long as we remain hidden from God's full disclosure. "The secret things belong to the LORD" (Deut. 29:29). There may be a thousand and one lesser reasons for any instance of evil. God may choose to reveal all, one, or none of them to us. And even when the scales on the eyes of the redeemed have been completely removed on the day of resurrection, there is no guarantee that we will be fully relieved of the nagging unanswered questions. Yet we can be assured that if this is the case, we will have no need for redressing such minor quibbles. I believe we can make sense of the most important questions concerning evil now because God has already revealed them to us.

So what has he revealed? Unfortunately, too many have thought he has said little or nothing. But is Scripture so silent? If one searches for explicit proof texts, perhaps so. We don't find such proclamations as: "And the Lord God said, 'Evil hath come into the world in order that . . .'" Nonetheless, there is a certain ubiquity to the answer threaded throughout the pages of Scripture in compelling ways that we will explore. My hope is that this humble offering will begin to open doors to seeing this broken world in a new light—that God's glorious purposes in creating the conditions for the emergence of such a dark world will become clear to the reader and evoke unprecedented wonder. May it lead us all to cry out: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11:33).

Sola Deo Gloria

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Writing a book of this nature, seeking to tackle such grave and consequential subject matter, was a daunting task, to say the least. But the weight of the burden was lightened by many who came alongside me and offered their assistance in various ways. I begin by thanking my editor John Hughes, who urged me to write on this subject. Not only is he a wonderful editor, but he has become a great friend. His wisdom and expertise have guided me throughout the project. He read the whole manuscript and made many invaluable suggestions for improvement.

Second, I want to thank the elders of my former place of ministry (Summit Lake Community Church), as well as my current place of ministry (Kerrville Bible Church). Both have graciously allowed me times of study leave to finish the book.

This topic is too vast to try to digest every possible line of thought. I am no scholar, and even though I have tried to read widely and thoroughly, some things will elude even the most careful researcher. With that in mind, I want to thank Cory Madsen, Evan May, James Gibson, Grant Horner, Richard Shenk, Nate Shannon, Christopher Watkin, Fred Zaspel, Mike Riccardi, Phil Johnson, Peter Sammons, Marco Barone, Vern Poythress, and Guillaume Bignon, each of whom read early drafts of various sections of the book and made valuable critiques and suggestions based on their varied perspectives and areas of interest or expertise. They saved me from many catastrophes.

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been indispensable. Of course, none would agree with everything I've said; thus, any missteps, errors, and omissions are wholly mine.

Once again, I am deeply honored that D. A. Carson, one of the great biblical scholars of our day, was willing to write the Foreword. The folks at P&R Publishing are wonderful to work with, especially copyeditor Karen Magnuson with her expert eye.

Finally, I thank my beloved wife, Jennifer, and my four sons, Daniel, Andrew, Luke, and Matthew, who have had to put up with long hours of reading and researching, thinking aloud, and wearing out keyboards. We have all gained some lessons in long-suffering! Finally, I thank the transcendent Lord of the universe, who condescended to come to this cracked earth, who loved me and gave himself for me. May my humble offering bring him the glory that only he is worthy to receive.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>IJST</i>	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
<i>JCLT</i>	<i>Journal of Christian Legal Thought</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JRT</i>	<i>Journal of Reformed Theology</i>
<i>MSJ</i>	<i>The Master's Seminary Journal</i>
NASB	New American Standard Bible
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	William A. VanGemeren, ed., <i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis</i> (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997)
NIV	New International Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
PAP	Principle of Alternative Possibilities
<i>SBJT</i>	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

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INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

There is a darkness in this world that inevitably presses hard on us all, leaving an indelible mark of pain and suffering. Consider these familiar occurrences. A mother endures months of a difficult pregnancy and finally gives birth to a beautiful girl. The emergence of a newborn babe produces a kind of euphoria that only a mother can know. But within days, the frail little child succumbs to infection and dies. Compounding matters, it becomes evident that the hospital staff acted carelessly. Her death could have been easily prevented. Or consider a young married couple working fervently for years to buy that picture-perfect property in the Rocky Mountains. They scrimp and save, using their own hands to build their humble little dream home situated in a stand of thick ponderosa. After driving in the final nail, they relax on their charming new porch to enjoy the fruits of their labor. But the pleasant afternoon sunshine gives way to menacing storm clouds. Suddenly, lightning strikes a nearby tree, and the house is soon caught in an inferno. The owners are without insurance.

Nothing can prepare a father who casually enters his daughter's bedroom, only to discover that she has hanged herself with an extension cord. Then there is the beloved and highly decorated soldier who returns home from several tours of duty in hostile lands. He is rightly treated as a hero. Yet he cannot escape having witnessed unspeakable carnage. Nightmares and horrific flashbacks plague his daily existence. He turns to alcohol and violence to relieve his terror, driving his battered and exasperated wife to file for divorce. His young and confused children are left to wonder what has happened to their beloved daddy.

These are but minor episodes in the distressed history of human tragedy, of pain, of suffering—of evil. A thousand similar awful tales could be recounted over the course of time, most of which are far worse: tales of systemic oppression, murder, rape, racism, terrorism, genocide, and geophysical decimation. In the last seventy-five years alone, one thinks of the Rape of Nanking, Auschwitz, the Russian gulags, Cambodia's Killing Fields, and the Rwandan genocide. Among the countless tales of moral depravity, other tales of natural disaster fill our minds with equal dismay: stories of the European Black Death (1347–51), Chilean earthquakes (1647), Krakatoan volcanoes (1883), Spanish flu pandemics (1918), Indonesian tsunamis (2004), Chinese coronavirus pandemics (2020), and endless twisters in Tornado Alley—all laying waste to hearth and home, while obliterating tens of millions of unsuspecting souls. Who has ever walked this earth and not cried out: "When I hoped for good, evil came, and when I waited for light, darkness came" (Job 30:26)?

Disturbing questions emerge from such harrowing, yet all-too-common, incidents. Why? Why must we endure such pain in this world? Why so many foolish errors, misjudgments, and purposeful acts of malice that mar our lives? There is certainly plenty of human blame to go around. But this doesn't fully explain why such darkness constantly hovers over us. A more penetrating set of questions emerges: Where is God? Could he not protect us from harm? Could not the Almighty prevent the demise of so many tragic lives? The one who stops the wind and staves off waves with a word (Mark 4:39, 41) could certainly abate all manner of approaching storms with a simple command. His sovereign power could orchestrate small providences here and there, ensuring our safety in the midst of calamity, or at least mitigate the harsher aspects of our daily travails.

Why does he not intervene?

THE QUESTION OF THEODICY

Such appalling incidents of moral wickedness and natural forces of annihilation are unrelenting, and even mind-numbing once the number of atrocities piles up past counting. And here caution comes knocking, for "evil thrives upon indifference—moral negligence, a stupor of uncaring."¹ Nonetheless, the specter of evil is reawakened when it barrels through the deeply personal and sometimes paralyzing tragedies we suffer, things we wish could be forever erased from our memories. Perhaps Thomas Hardy

1. Lance Morrow, *Evil: An Investigation* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 84.

has spoken for the weary world: “Happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain.”² Something is not right with the world. This is not the way it is supposed to be.³ Consequently, these collective ills raise the most troubling quandary that we distraught creatures can possibly face. How can the good and almighty God allow evil to coexist in the created order he crafted with such singular beauty? What has become of his good creation? Why has he allowed evil to corrupt the broad landscape of our planet and its inhabitants?

This is the question of theodicy—how does one seek to justify a good and sovereign God in the face of evil? John Milton states boldly in *Paradise Lost*: “I may assert eternal providence, and justify the ways of God to men.”⁴ Is such a task even possible? The problem of theodicy in its more formal articulation goes back to the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 B.C.). It forms a trilemma, juxtaposing the following notions with one another: (1) God is good; (2) God is powerful; and (3) yet evil exists, putting one or both of the first two points under suspicion.

Epicurus’s concerns with God and evil were succinctly restated by the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume: “Is [God] willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? From whence then is evil?”⁵ C. S. Lewis casts the problem with his familiar wit: “If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore, God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.”⁶

Historic orthodox Christianity has affirmed these two indisputable characteristics of God: his all-encompassing goodness and his sovereign power. Not a single trace of evil can be discerned in his wholly righteous being. It is impossible for his being to entertain some hint of corruption. Furthermore, by virtue of his sole status as Creator of all space, time, matter, and energy *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), he is undeniably omnipotent. He is the source of all power—every minuscule photon of energy residing in every corner of every galaxy. Now, an omnibenevolent God could not entertain evil in

2. Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (New York: Dover, 2004), 243.

3. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 7–8.

4. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Random House, 2007), 1.25.

5. David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1980), 63.

6. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 26.

his creation—right? And if by some mysterious plot evil should stealthily slip into the universe, he would have reason to exercise his omnipotence to remove it immediately—yes?

Alas, evil remains.

So what gives? How can this dystopian reality persist in God's good creation?

Although the existence of pain and evil in the world places these two overarching attributes of God under the microscope of human scrutiny, they are not the only divine attributes to suffer the skeptical eye of his creatures. For example, the existence of evil places God's justice on the witness stand. It seems that any evil that God refuses to prevent exposes his injustice. But maybe the problem lies with his faulty omniscience. Does God fail to see bad stuff coming down the pike before he has a chance to respond? Is he simply unaware of the murder and mayhem going on down here? What about his wisdom? Does he need a remedial course on the best strategies to prevent or arrest evil?

Surely there is no good or wise reason for evil to take root in this world if God is truly in charge. Again, consider the beauty of God. Some would say that devious deeds, disease, death, and destruction all mar the orderly and harmonious elegance of the created order and thus reflect an ugly dimension of the Creator. Does God care? Does he lack true compassion for those who suffer? Or is he subject to the same suffering we face, inhabiting our same weaknesses?

Evil certainly tempts God's creatures to impugn his character, and so this is indeed a serious problem, especially for those who are inclined to accept the testimony of God's supreme and flawless character that the Bible attributes to him. If evil exists, how can God escape culpability for being evil himself? Has the Bible pushed a pack of lies? If Scripture represents the self-revelation of God himself, is God deceiving us? Is he the devil in disguise?

One can easily understand how the problem of evil has become the Achilles' heel of Christian apologetics.⁷ While some Christian apologists have been moved to redefine or tweak the attributes of the God of classical biblical theism, this is the one thing that cannot bear the burden of the problem. To toy with the clear revelation of God's character when attempting a theodicy is to admit failure. To the contrary, retaining a robust understanding of the divine attributes is the starting point when seeking to bear the load of evil's unrelenting weight. Unfortunately, we live in a time when anemic views

7. R.C. Sproul, *The Invisible Hand* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996), 159.

of God within the church persist and unrealistic views of reality expose a saccharine weakness to our Christian outlook.

John Piper writes:

Our vision of God in relation to evil and suffering [has been] shown to be frivolous. The church has not been spending its energy to go deep with the unfathomable God of the Bible. Against the overwhelming weight and seriousness of the Bible, much of the church is choosing, at this very moment, to become more light and shallow and entertainment-oriented, and therefore successful in its irrelevance to massive suffering and evil. The popular God of fun-church is simply too small and too affable to hold a hurricane in his hand. The biblical categories of God's sovereignty lie like land mines in the pages of the Bible waiting for someone to seriously open the book. They don't kill, but they do explode trivial notions of the Almighty.⁸

We are long overdue for a supremely muscular theodicy, a reorientation to Scripture's witness to God's purposeful and unyielding engagement with the powers of darkness—of chaos and misery.

MAPPING THEODICIES

The Christian theist who posits a genuine *theodicy* seeks to set forth a clear purpose of God in allowing evil into his good creation. Other theodicians are more modest, calling their theodicies a *defense*, which merely shows that the problem of evil does not disprove God's existence and that he cares about the adversity that marks human existence. Throughout the ages, many theodicies and defenses have been offered. The following represent some of the more common responses to the problem of evil:⁹

(1) *Free-Will Defense*.¹⁰ This is the most prevalent response to the problem of evil. Free will is regarded as a cherished feature of our humanity without which we could not be responsible for our actions. Furthermore, without free will, we would be consigned to a cold and robotic existence. But this means that our freedom of choice results in both good and evil outcomes. So evil is usually regarded as a risk that God had to allow in order to grant humans significant freedom and responsibility.

8. John Piper, "Suffering and the Sovereignty of God: Ten Aspects of God's Sovereignty over Suffering and Satan's Hand in It," in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 18.

9. I will examine and assess each of these responses in greater detail in chapters 5 and 6. It should be noted that many combine different aspects of these various theodicies into a more comprehensive response to evil.

10. See Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

(2) *Natural-Law Defense*.¹¹ God designed orderly, repeatable, predictable laws to govern the world, and good and bad consequences can result from the proper or improper use of these laws. For example, gravity helps stabilize our world but can also be utilized in destructive ways. Therefore, it is not God's fault when we misuse such laws.

(3) *Greater-Good Theodicy*.¹² God has multiple good purposes for evil in the world. Out of such evils come greater goods that could not otherwise come. These goods outweigh the evils that they overcome. Some good purposes are ascertainable and some are not. The fact that some purposes remain hidden does not soundly argue against their existence.¹³

(4) *Soul-Making Theodicy*.¹⁴ Humans are born in a state of immaturity and must experience pain and adversity in order to mature. The Bible indicates that suffering resulting from various evil circumstances builds character. Just as the fiery furnace purifies gold, evil and suffering purify and strengthen the human soul.

(5) *Best-of-All-Possible-Worlds Defense*.¹⁵ An omnibenevolent God would create only a world that was the best possible world that could exist. Yet this world is imperfect and full of undeniable evils. Therefore, those evils must be necessary for God to bring about subsequent goods that make this the best possible world.

(6) *Divine-Judgment Defense*.¹⁶ Pain and suffering are the result of God's retributive punishment of evildoers, including the everlasting judgment of hell. Good comes out of judgment in the form of rehabilitation, deterrence, societal protection, and retribution. The hope of ultimate divine justice redresses the suffering of the innocent.

GREATER-GLORY THEODICY

The theodicy that I believe is most faithful to Scripture is a specific version of the *greater-good theodicy* with modified traces of the *best-of-all-possible-*

11. See Lewis, *Problem of Pain*.

12. See Greg Welty, *Why Is There Evil in the World (and So Much of It)?* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2018).

13. In a sense, every Christian theodicy seeks to advance the greater good. In other words, evil is a reality that we must make theological sense of, and therefore God must have some good reason for it to exist.

14. See John Hick, *Evil and the Love of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

15. G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. Austin M. Farrar, trans. E. M. Huggard (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2009).

16. This is not so much a stand-alone theodicy or defense championed by any one theologian or theodicist, but a complementary response to evil in the world that seeks to defend the goodness, righteousness, and justice of God.

worlds defense. In offering this theodicy, I do not suggest that it solves every problem connected to evil in this world. That would be presumptuous. Rather, I offer a theodicy that seeks to resolve the broader issue of why evil exists in the first place. I call it the *greater-glory theodicy* because it seeks to resolve the problem by examining what brings God the greatest glory.¹⁷ God's greatest glory is found in Christ's work of redemption. This work of redemption becomes unnecessary, however, unless there is a good world that was ruined by evil—a world that then cries out for restoration. This theodicy can be summarized by the following argument:¹⁸

1. God's ultimate purpose in freely creating the world is to supremely magnify the riches of his glory to all his creatures, especially human beings, who alone bear his image.
2. God's glory is supremely magnified in the atoning work of Christ, which is the sole means of accomplishing redemption for human beings.
3. Redemption is unnecessary unless human beings have fallen into sin.
4. Therefore, the fall of humanity is necessary to God's ultimate purpose in creating the world.

This theodicy is sometimes referred to by the Latin phrase *felix culpa*. It can be translated as “fortunate fall,” indicating that the fall of humanity in the garden of Eden, though terrible in itself, was a good (fortunate) thing.¹⁹ Some who have suggested or shown an affinity for a theodicy along these lines include Augustine (A.D. 354–430), the great English poet John Milton (1608–74), the Puritan divine John Owen (1616–83), the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), and more recently the Christian philosophers Alvin Plantinga and Paul Helm.²⁰

The idea is simply this: the fall of humanity was no mistake. It did not catch God by surprise. Nor was it the result of Adam and Eve's free will, as most understand the term *free will*. The fall was planned by God because it

17. Daniel M. Johnson calls this theodicy a species of a “divine glory defense.” He believes that divine-glory defenses approaching the problem of evil are distinctive to Calvinism. See “Calvinism and the Problem of Evil: A Map of the Territory,” in *Calvinism and the Problem of Evil*, ed. David E. Alexander and Daniel M. Johnson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 43–48.

18. See chapter 12 for a detailed explanation of each of these points.

19. The phrase can be traced back to the fourth-century liturgical hymn known as the *Exultet*. See David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 274.

20. Others who show an affinity for a similar theodicy without explicitly endorsing the *felix culpa* argument include Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) and, more recently, John Piper, Jay Adams, Robert Reymond, and Randy Alcorn. See chapter 12 (esp. 299n63).

brings about the greater good of redemption. A fallen-but-being-redeemed world is far better than an unfallen-not-needing-redemption world. Such a world brings greater glory to God. No better world seems possible than one in which Christ's redemptive work brings such supreme glory to God.

The broader picture here is the Bible's grand, dynamic, and dramatic narrative of creation, fall, and redemption. History does not follow an invariant course—a monochromatic vista of flat, endless tedium. It moves in this downward arc from initial goodness to a world wrecked by sin and natural ruin, and then back upward again toward a magnificent plan of redemption. The lowermost point of the arc (the crisis of sin and evil) accentuates the subsequent upward goal of restoration (via the person and work of Christ). And it is precisely this contrast that magnifies God's glory. Redemption could never enter the scene unless evil's devolution of the good creation made it the inevitable and desired response of God.

What is of interest here is how human beings seem to be hardwired for framing history and our place within it precisely in terms that mirror the Bible's storyline. As we will see, the whole history of storytelling as a fundamental human impulse reflects a single ubiquitous storyline, sometimes called the *monomyth*. Every great story, whether historical or fictitious, gravitates toward some crisis that cries out for resolution. Only such stories captivate the human imagination and longing. A story that is worth its salt is always a story about redemption. But I do not wish to trivialize the afflictions of evil by simply comparing it to a good story. The fact is, our lives are living stories racked with unexpected and unwanted pain whereby we long for redemption.

In either case, as every story of redemption must have its crisis (evil), so also it must have its hero. Christ is the protagonist in God's plan of redemption, and his death and resurrection are the instruments by which he achieves it. They are the nucleus of redemption and therefore of God's glory. The cross and empty tomb are the fulcrum on which the hero shifts the weight of victory. Most heroes overcome the crisis of their story by means of conventional power. They generally defeat the villain (antagonist) or evil by summoning great determination or brute force.

But Christ is no conventional hero, and the cross is no conventional weapon. We do not naturally associate a hero's victory with his death. If the hero of a story dies, this is usually tragic. The cross is an especially tragic symbol. It bespeaks shame and defeat, not victory. Yet surprisingly, in the cross, Jesus defeats evil. Jesus defeats death by dying. He crushes evil by laying it on himself and then shows it to be powerless by rising from

the dead. He becomes our hero by being treated as a villain. Weakness is power. This subversive storyline defies all human expectations. It appears foolish to the natural mind (1 Cor. 1:18) and thus proves that the narrative of biblical redemption hails exclusively from a divine source.

It should be clear that the theodicy I offer is commensurate with an evangelical and a broadly Reformed understanding of Scripture and theology.²¹ It upholds the meticulous sovereignty of God. It is radically theocentric—God is squarely at its center. The problem of evil is resolved by focusing attention not on some ill-directed notion of human freedom and autonomy, but on how God’s actions in creation and providence serve to maximize his own glory. While we shudder at the shameful of Adam’s sin that thrust our world into a dark place, paradoxically we can cry out, *O felix culpa!* O fortunate fall! that occasioned the need for a great Redeemer to display the riches of God’s glorious grace (Eph. 1:6).

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Here is a chapter-by-chapter summary that outlines the flow of the book’s argument.

Chapter 2 considers the historical, religious, cultural, social, and personal context for why evil is such a problem. Chapter 3 explains what evil is and how our conception of the moral character of God frames the problem. There is no question that evil is a problem for both theists and atheists, but only biblical theism provides the preconditions for making sense of evil, and so it is also a particularly potent problem that atheism faces, yet without adequate resources to address it. Chapter 4 sets forth the parameters for establishing a faithful defense or theodicy. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the most common solutions to the problem of evil that Christians have offered. I will consider the strengths and weaknesses of each of these solutions and where the theodicy I offer fits among them.

Chapter 7 considers how our view of God’s power and transcendent control over the course of history is essential to a proper theodicy. If we do not understand who God is, then we cannot make sense of how he interacts with evil in the world. Chapter 8 considers the issues introduced in chapter 7 and goes deeper. How do the biblical writers portray evil, and what role does the sovereign God play as evil unfolds? The Bible is

21. Reformed theology is commonly associated with the Reformer John Calvin (1509–64), but finds its roots in the theology of Augustine (A.D. 354–430) and has had a rich tradition since the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and later Puritanism emerging in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

unprecedented in history in terms of its multifaceted interface with evil and God's comprehensive control over it.

Chapter 9 explores where moral responsibility lies when evil is committed. How is God exonerated from being culpable for evil? How does the Bible address these issues? Furthermore, the chapter explores the cause of the fall. What are the origins of sin and evil? This will set the stage for a broader understanding of the problem of evil. Throughout Scripture, there is a sharp tension between God's meticulous providence and his absolute goodness, between his decretive (sovereign) will and his preceptive (moral) will. Thus, we can only conclude that God decreed the fall for some morally good reason.

Chapters 10 through 13 are the heart of the book. Chapter 10 begins by looking at the motif of redemption through the history of storytelling. God has hardwired human beings to long for heroes in redemptive roles whereby evil is defeated and good prevails. Literature and other storytelling mediums reflect a *monomyth*—one universal storyline that evokes a human longing for redemption even as pagan myths and secular stories corrupt the source and true meaning that stand behind this unified storyline.

Chapter 11 sets forth the historical and narrative paradigm that Scripture provides for understanding this ubiquitous story. It summarizes what C. S. Lewis calls the *True Myth* embodied in the divinely directed events of creation, fall, and redemption that lesser monomythic stories can only indistinctly mirror. The inspired, inerrant historical narrative of Scripture frames our understanding of reality and helps us see where evil fits into God's providential unfolding of history.

Chapter 12 is the most important chapter of the book. It presents the case for the biblical theodicy that I call the *greater-glory theodicy*. Once the source for monomythic themes in the history of storytelling can be ascertained in the Bible's grand storyline, this theodicy will begin to make greater sense. It shows how God's ultimate end in creation is to maximize the display of his glory to his creatures through the redemptive work of Christ. But redemption is made unnecessary without the fall. Therefore, God purposed the fall to magnify his glory in a way that an unfallen world simply could not do.

Chapter 13 examines important episodes in the biblical canon that not only mirror the metanarrative of Scripture but highlight this theodicy of redemptive glory. In particular, I focus on the exodus of Israel from Egypt as a paradigm for God's redemptive actions. Within this discussion, I draw special attention to Romans 9:22–23, perhaps the most seminal passage in Scripture that provides us with some propositional anchors to ground this

theodicy more directly. I then look at some episodes in the Gospel of John culminating in the Passion Week and how these narratives highlight Christ's redemptive glory.

Chapter 14 narrows the focus on the unique and paradoxical features of the incarnation and kenosis (self-emptying) of Christ that make redemption so glorious. Christ as *the* peerless archetypal Redeemer stands above all redemptive motifs in his utterly unique defeat of evil. There is nothing in the history of ideologies and religions with which to compare him, or his work to redeem sinners. Without the unique features of the person and work of Christ, there can be no hope of redemption. Furthermore, the uniqueness of Christ as the one and only Redeemer of this fallen world further serves to magnify God's glory in redemption.

Chapter 15 dives deeper still into the unique nature of Christ and his suffering. How can God, who is impassible (unable to suffer), enter the world as a suffering Savior? And how is this transcendent, impassible God able to sympathize with his suffering creatures and offer them comfort?

Chapter 16 expands the focus of the greater-glory theodicy to encompass the cosmic scope of redemption. God's glory in redemption includes not only the salvation of a people for himself, but the redemption of the whole of his creation from its corrupted state. Christ's work of redemption does not end at his death and resurrection but continues through his exaltation and the future consummation of his kingdom at his return.

This restoration of "all things" culminates in the creation of the new heaven and the new earth. It considers the comprehensive work of Christ in both judgment and salvation via the *Christus Victor* theme carried in the atonement and Christ's broader victory over Satan and the forces of evil. All instances of evil that have not been defeated by the surprising work of the crucified Lamb at his first coming will be defeated by God's expected use of retributive power as the fierce Lion at his second coming. The contrast between judgment and the grace of salvation provides a further layer of magnification for God's redemptive glory.

Finally, chapter 17 explores one of the surprising results of the Bible's subversive model of redemption. Instead of encouraging conventional power to defeat evil, it encourages unconventional displays of the transformative grace by which one has been rescued from sin and judgment. This means extending mercy (compassion) toward victims of evil, bearing up as a victim under the merciful hand of God, and treating perpetrators of evil with mercy.

Extending forgiveness to one's enemies is perhaps the greatest manifestation of what some call the *grace effect*. This mirroring of how Christ defeats

evil in our own lives is one of the greatest tangible apologetics for the Christian faith. The appendix examines the so-called lapsarian debate in Reformed theology, and how it has relevance to the theodicy that I am arguing for.

LIGHT POURING OUT OF DARKNESS

How are we to interpret a world where evil, pain, and suffering permeate the ground we stand on and the air we breathe? Can we make sense of a good, wise, and powerful God in such a world? Can Christianity offer a rational and biblical defense of the God it offers as the only hope for humanity and the crisis we face? If one penetrates the black core of even the most horrendous episodes of the crisis, we find something surprising. Within the core we inevitably find a hope that brightly emerges and illumines our understanding of God's powerful redemptive work—a bold plan that transcends the pain and overcomes the crisis.

An illustration may help us see this truth.

Few episodes in the annals of American history compare to the horrific tragedy of the Donner Party expedition during the winter of 1846–47. Thirty-nine out of eighty-seven people died after being trapped in a frozen landscape in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California. Several fast-moving and unusually severe storms prevented the emigrants from making their way to a new life in the Sacramento Valley. They quickly threw together makeshift shelters that were soon buried in as much as twenty-five feet of snow. Over many months, they entered successively desperate stages of starvation, leaving their thinning bodies with little insulation against the howling cold and near-constant blowing snow.

Unabated hunger is a force so primal that it brooks no rivals for the brutish grip it holds on its victims. Joseph Conrad's wandering seaman Marlow describes such hunger in the haunting novel *Heart of Darkness*:

No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze. Don't you know the devilry of lingering starvation, its exasperating torment, its black thoughts, its somber and brooding ferocity? Well, I do. It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly. It's really easier to face bereavement, dishonor, and the perdition of one's soul—than this kind of prolonged hunger.²²

22. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 76.

The Donner Party knew these dark sentiments all too well. With no way of escape and no source of food, most who perished (including many women and children) were reluctantly at first, and then remorselessly, cannibalized by their fellow trekkers desperate to avoid the same fate.

In the midst of this ghastly ordeal, however, a curious yet unexceptional incident enthralled little three-year-old Eliza Donner. Many gray days made life in the cold, dank dungeons that served as shelters more miserable than most. But on one particular day, Eliza was sitting on the icy floor of her crude home as a shaft of sunlight briefly cast its beam down into the dark hole. Years later she fondly recalled, “I saw it, and sat down under it. Held it on my lap, passed my hand up and down in its brightness, and found that I could break its ray in two.”²³ For a person surrounded by death and carnage, this seems an odd thing to remember. Yet it was the one delightful if fleeting moment for the little girl stuck in that awful place. And who does not savor what is delightful over what is dreadful?

This incident reminds me of how John opened his magisterial gospel expounding on the great protagonist of history. He describes Christ with a profound metaphor: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). Like Eliza Donner’s sunbeam, the apostle’s description of the incarnation of Christ represents the entrance of that singular shaft of light capable of penetrating a bleak world full of atrocity, pain, and hopelessness. This light dispels the blackness. It is what Christ came to do. It is what highlights the glory of God and secures the greatest possible good for those who are irrepressibly stained by evil.

But the apostle Paul draws on another light-darkness metaphor in 2 Corinthians 4:6: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” The image of light shining out of darkness alludes to the creation account, which begins as an unlit watery void (Gen. 1:2–3). Suddenly out of the darkness pours forth a mysterious light. The image is subversive. We don’t think of light shining out of darkness, but of light shining into darkness—like shafts of sunlight pouring through openings to miserable prisons encased below layers of hardened snow.

Yet the metaphor aptly describes the work of redemption. We are not conditioned to expect good to emerge out of the murky mass of evil. But God designed evil so that something remarkably white and wonderful would emanate from its black depths. As William Cowper penned, “Behind a

23. Ethan Rarick, *Desperate Passage: The Donner Party’s Perilous Journey West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 146.

frowning providence he hides a smiling face.”²⁴ The glory of God penetrates the darkened hearts of sinners bound by a fetid dungeon of wickedness.

This glory is seen in the face of the divine hero of redemption—Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He immersed himself into the heart of evil on a black Friday and emerged from that evil on a bright Sunday three days later. He defeated death by death. Ironically, he crushed evil by loading its monstrous weight on his buckling body. He became a hero by being treated as a villain. He is not only the light that shone in the darkness; he is also the radiance that streams forth from the abyss. The pages that follow will attempt to highlight the wonder of this divine light pouring out of darkness. In the end, I hope we will see that there really is no problem of evil—only an unfathomably glorious God whose wise and wonderful ways should elicit our astonishment and our adoration.

KEY TERMS

defense
greater-glory theodicy
problem of evil
theodicy

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the problem of evil, and why is it such a problem?
2. Why is it important for Christians to develop a theodicy?
3. Has evil in the world or in your personal life caused you to ask questions about God? If so, how did you resolve those questions?

FOR FURTHER READING

C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).
Greg Welty, *Why Is There Evil in the World (and So Much of It)?* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2018).

24. William Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” (1774). The hymn was originally titled “Light Shining out of Darkness” under a section entitled “Conflict” in the famous Olney Hymns (written together with John Newton). See Susan Wise Bauer, “Stories and Syllogisms: Protestant Hymns, Narrative Theology, and Heresy,” in *Wonderful Words of Life: Hymns in American Protestant History and Theology*, ed. Richard J. Mouw and Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 220. On the significance of the afflicted William Cowper and his powerful hymns, see John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God: The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).