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**R. C. SPROUL**

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R. C. SPROUL



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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## Chapter One

# The Problem of Evil

**T**wo separate but closely related problems that Christians often hear when people object to Christianity are the problem of evil and the problem of human suffering. The first problem with respect to evil is usually stated like this: How can a being who is infinitely righteous, holy, and perfect create a creation or a creature with even the possibility of sin's being present? If all things go back to the being of God, would we not have to find evil somewhere within God Himself to account for the presence of evil



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in this world? So the question of evil has to do with the integrity and holiness of God. The question of suffering is closely related, but it is not the same question. The question of suffering is, How can a benevolent God allow all the suffering that we find existing in life? These are two separate questions. The first is more of a philosophical question. The second is more of a practical question of dealing with the problem of pain, anguish, and tragedy in this world. Let's look at one at a time.

A nineteenth-century theologian stated that the problem of evil is the Achilles' heel of the Christian faith. He argued that no satisfactory explanation can be given for the existence of evil. Many skeptics and atheists have stated that if God could not have stopped the entrance of evil into the universe, then He is not omnipotent. If He could have stopped it but chose not to stop it, then He is not benevolent. So either way you look at the problem of evil, somehow a shadow is cast over the nature of God.

Historically, many attempts have been made to answer the question of the origin of evil from a Christian perspective, and those attempts have come to us by means of what is called *theodicy*. A theodicy—from the Greek meaning “to justify God”—is an attempt to justify God for the

existence of evil in the world. But in my opinion, no one has yet been able to adequately answer the question of the problem of evil.

The first thing a Christian must do when he's confronted with this question is to immediately say, "I don't know the answer," and acknowledge the seriousness of the question. Don't try to play games. Don't try to hide. Don't try to evade it, but deal with it head-on. It's important that people see that we Christians recognize there's a serious problem here, that we're not oblivious to it. So let's look at a couple theodicies to see how some have dealt with this problem. First, some have approached this question by denying the reality of evil altogether and arguing that evil is an illusion. In my opinion, that's a cop-out, because it does not seriously reckon with the reality that we all experience every day.

The second approach is that evil is actually a necessary prerequisite for the appreciation of the good, and so in the final analysis evil is good. Let's state it in concrete terms: For man to really experience goodness in freedom, he had to experience the problem of evil. He had to experience the reality of evil so that he might appreciate his redemption. In this schema, which has been offered many times in the

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history of the church, the fall was actually a leap forward. It was a fall upward rather than downward. This fails to deal adequately and seriously with the negative judgment that God Himself placed on the entrance into the world of human sin.

Another important and fascinating theodicy is the one offered by Gottfried Leibniz, who was in the rationalist school of philosophy that grew out of seventeenth-century Cartesian thought. Leibniz's theodicy is clever, and I have seen Christian people use it to convince other people that we do have an explanation for the origin of sin. In fact, I did an experiment once in a philosophy class in college. I told the students that I was going to give them a philosophical explanation for the problem of evil, and I produced Leibniz's case as passionately and eloquently as I could. When I was finished with my lecture, I asked the class, "Does that make sense?" Every single student in that class bought the argument. That taught me something. I realized I could use this argument and win debates all the time. But I knew it was wrong, and I knew there was a fallacious element to it. After I showed the class why they shouldn't have accepted that argument, they changed their minds. But Leibniz's case can be very persuasive, and I warn you that Christian

integrity demands that we don't use such sophistry in dealing with the question.

Leibniz begins his theodicy by making a threefold distinction with respect to evil. He distinguishes between what he calls moral evil, physical evil, and metaphysical evil. Evil in all these notions involves a common thread of meaning: in each, evil is defined in negative categories as some kind of lack. This goes back to the medieval definition of evil as *privatio* or privation, a lack of the good.

Moral evil is a lack of moral good. It's a deficiency. Physical evil is a deficiency of physical good. Metaphysical evil is a deficiency of metaphysical goodness. Moral evil has to do with the actions of moral creatures, the volitional behavioral patterns of moral agents. Physical evil would be those things that we describe in terms of calamity or tragedy: earthquakes, tornadoes, fire, wind, storm, and pestilence. Metaphysical evil has to do with ontological imperfection. Ontology concerns "being," the essence of things. An ontological matter is what something is, its being, its essence. Metaphysical imperfection is to be less than an eternal self-existent being, to be less than ultimate. An imperfect thing would be that which is created and dependent, that which undergoes change, generation, and

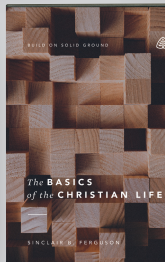
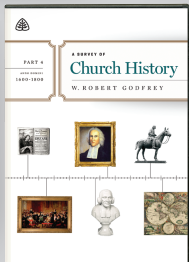
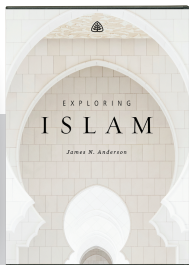
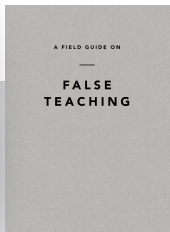
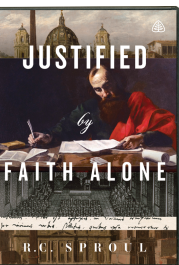
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decay. In a word, that which is metaphysically lacking is that which is finite.

Leibniz's basic thesis is that physical evil "flows out of" metaphysical evil, and moral evil "flows out of" physical evil. So, the reason we have moral evil is because the world is full of metaphysically imperfect beings. I sin because I'm weak. I'm weak because I'm finite. And the only way I could be without sin would be if I could transcend the intrinsic metaphysical weakness that associates itself with finite creatures. To err is human, because we're finite. There are limits to our knowledge, our physical strength, and our endurance. By definition, we are not all-powerful, we are not all-wise, we are not all the things that God is. So there is a sense in which it is inevitable that out of my simple human weakness I would sin.

But the question remains, Why would God create such a limited, weak, finite creature? Leibniz understood that the fact that God creates at all is a benevolent act on His part. So we can't fault God for wanting to create. But if God is going to give this gift of life, this gift of being, to other creatures, how can He best do it? Why doesn't He create man morally perfect? This is the judgment the

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# If God exists, why do bad things happen?

With all the suffering and evil in the world, where is God? This can be an important question for Christians to grapple with. It is also a common accusation that seeks to undermine our faith. How should we respond to skeptics and comfort sufferers when questions about evil arise?

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul addresses the problem of evil, examining how Christians have wrestled with these questions through the ages. Together with them, we can have confidence in the God who is in control of this world and is working all things in it for our good.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

**Dr. R.C. Sproul** was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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