

**D E F E A T I N G  
E V I L**

How God Glorifies Himself  
in a Dark World

Scott  
Christensen



P U B L I S H I N G  
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2024 by Scott Christensen

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NASB) are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked (NET) are taken from the NET Bible® copyright © 1996–2016 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com). The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Christensen, Scott, 1965- author. | Christensen, Scott, 1965- What about evil?

Title: Defeating evil : how God glorifies himself in a dark world / Scott Christensen.

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: “Revised, adapted, and condensed for a broader audience, this companion edition of *What about Evil?* shows how sin, evil, corruption, and death fit into redemptive history and magnify God’s glory”-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023046881 | ISBN 9781629959238 (pbk) | ISBN 9781629959290 (ePub)

Subjects: LCSH: Theodicy. | God (Christianity) | Good and evil--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BT160 .C462 2024 | DDC 231/.8--dc23/eng/20231106  
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023046881>

To my fellow elders:

Chris, Toby, Murray, Thad, Ken, Carson, and Bernie

*Pressing on toward the goal for the prize of  
the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*

# CONTENTS

Foreword by Joel R. Beeke . . . . .	ix
Preface . . . . .	xiii
1. Encountering the Darkness . . . . .	1
<i>Introduces the problem of evil, theodicy, and the basic Christian responses to the problem.</i>	
2. Confronting the Darkness . . . . .	21
<i>Introduces two theodicies: the free-will defense and its problems and the greater-good defense.</i>	
3. The Grand Author of History . . . . .	41
<i>Shows how a proper understanding of God's holiness, sovereignty, and goodness is the critical starting place to establish a biblical theodicy.</i>	
4. Who Is to Blame? . . . . .	61
<i>Addresses moral responsibility, compatibilism, and whether God is the author of evil.</i>	
5. Tell Me the Old, Old Story . . . . .	81
<i>Examines the universal patterns in storytelling and shows how the storyline of Scripture (creation, fall, and redemption) sets the framework for a biblical theodicy.</i>	
6. The Greater-Glory Theodicy . . . . .	103
<i>Introduces the greater-glory theodicy and shows why it makes the best sense of Scripture.</i>	

## Contents

7. The Grand Hero of History . . . . . 125  
*Focuses attention on the person and work of Christ as the center of the greater-glory theodicy, especially his redemptive suffering as the incarnate Son of God.*
8. The Rest of the Story . . . . . 147  
*Shows how Christ defeats evil through both his atoning sacrifice and his coming reign and judgment of all other evil, which includes the restoration of the cosmos.*
9. Finding Hope in the Darkness . . . . . 169  
*Examines the practical implications of the greater-glory theodicy and what Christ does for the believer ravaged by sin and the curse.*
10. Transforming Grace, Amazing Glory . . . . . 191  
*Demonstrates how the response of believers to evil in the world is one of the greatest apologetics of the Christian faith as it highlights God's grace and glory.*
- Glossary . . . . . 213
- Selected Bibliography . . . . . 225
- Index of Scripture . . . . . 229
- Index of Subjects and Names . . . . . 239

# FOREWORD

On August 8, 2023 (just two weeks before I wrote this foreword), a wildfire broke out on the island of Maui, Hawaii, and razed the town of Lahaina to rubble. At the time of writing, over a hundred people have been confirmed to have perished in the fire and almost a thousand more remain missing—making the Maui wildfires the deadliest in the United States since 1918. Many people wonder: “Where is God in all this? Why did God allow this to happen? And why does God allow any calamity to happen at all?” We struggle to make sense of pain, suffering, and death, for these are unnatural intrusions that have stormed the postlapsarian human experience because of the curse. Yet it is this very curse that frames the history of redemption and defines the biblical story.

Perhaps you have evangelized someone who asks something like this: “If God exists—and if he is perfectly good and powerful—then why is there evil in the world?” If answered biblically, questions about the problem of evil can be very fruitful by providing immense apologetic value and ultimately leading to doxology. Many Christians are dissatisfied with theodicies—defenses of divine goodness considering the existence of evil—because many of these theodicies are simply unbiblical. Scott Christensen’s work *Defeating Evil* is a welcome change to this unfortunate trend.

You hold in your hands a fine work of theodicy. In his other books, *What about Free Will? Reconciling Our Choices with God’s Sovereignty* and *What about Evil? A Defense of God’s Sovereign Glory*, Christensen has helped the church understand perennial questions about the relationships between divine sovereignty, human suffering, the existence of evil, and the

nature of the will. Here, Christensen has carefully simplified, condensed, refined, and abridged (and sometimes expanded!) *What about Evil?* to produce an accessible edition for a more popular audience. Throughout this work, he grapples with thorny questions such as these: “What is the problem of evil, anyway? If God decrees evil, then is he the author of it? And how do we reconcile human freedom and divine sovereignty?”

Christensen begins by scanning the entire field of theodicy, explaining different ways in which the church has responded to the problem of evil. He gives special attention to the two most influential theodicies ever given by the church—the free-will defense and the greater-good defense. He then proves that debates about theodicy are often extensions of the larger Arminian-Calvinist debate: should the center of gravity in our theological systems (including theodicy) settle on human autonomy or on theocentrism? Christensen’s solution is thoroughly theocentric (think Calvinist) rather than anthropocentric (think Arminian). For example, within the context of compatibilism (Christensen happens to write an admirable defense of this position), Christensen insightfully rearranges the greater-good theodicy to propose what he calls the *greater-glorify theodicy*.

This should be no surprise, of course, for Christensen’s treatment of the problem of evil is thoroughly Reformed, and *solī Deo gloria* is the crux of the Reformed worldview. All of life, including evil itself, exists for the glory of God—somehow. And it is that *somehow* that fascinates Christensen and propels his well-articulated work into fertile areas of exploration.

In writing a theodicy of his own, Christensen grounds what he calls his *biblical theodicy* in the work of Jesus Christ, the metanarrative of Scripture (creation, fall, and redemption), and the attributes of God—particularly his holiness, sovereignty, and goodness. Christensen successfully demonstrates that such a biblical theodicy is grounded in both soteriology and Christology and has profound implications for doxology. The reader finds eschatology here too. For example, Christensen explains how the existence of evil is part of the grand story of what God is doing to restore all things forever. He is careful to move from doxology to praxis. In constructing a biblical theodicy, he shows that the Christian’s response to evil in this world is a powerful apologetic tool in shining as lights to

*Foreword*

unbelievers. In this way, Christensen's treatment is practical, evangelistic, and experiential—uniting the head, the heart, and the hands.

I heartily recommend this God-exalting, well-researched, balanced, engaging, and practical volume. This work ultimately leads the reader to glorify Jesus Christ, for he is the Light who shines in the darkness (John 1:5). May Christensen's (shorter) book on the problem of evil lead you, dear reader, to greater depths of knowledge so that the triune God may receive all glory in your life and for all eternity.

Joel R. Beeke  
Chancellor, Professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics  
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary  
Pastor, Heritage Reformed Congregation, Grand Rapids, MI



## PREFACE

I spent five years researching and writing *What about Evil? A Defense of God's Sovereign Glory* (P&R Publishing, 2020). The book seeks to address the so-called problem of evil, which has proved to be the thorniest issue that the Christian faith has ever faced. The problem is simply stated. If God is supremely good and powerful, then why is there evil in the world? Since the book came out a few years ago, I could not have predicted how important the topic would become, given the rapidly disintegrating culture that we find ourselves living in.

I have been surprised at the wide and favorable response that the book has received. A number of people have shared with me how their lives have been transformed by its contents. That is deeply humbling to me. I had no idea that it would generate this kind of response. All I can do is to give glory to God because God's glory is precisely what I wanted to highlight in this book.

The most common response I have received concerning *What about Evil?* has been this: "When are you going to write the shorter, more reader-friendly version?" Those who have waded through the 544 pages of the big book have acknowledged that it was a chore—though worth the effort, I hope! Although it was not intended as an academic tome, it does contain a lot of foreign terminology and difficult concepts that most readers are unfamiliar with. It is a subject that will certainly tax one's brainpower. And while I encourage *anyone* who is up to the challenge to tackle the bigger book, I also realize the tremendous value of having a smaller, more accessible volume to introduce a wider audience to this important subject.

## Preface

With that background, I introduce *Defeating Evil*. Much of the basic material is the same as in *What about Evil?*, just in condensed form. I have minimized technical language and simplified concepts. This book contains far fewer footnotes. Other illustrations and subject matter have been added or expanded where appropriate, and I have tried to emphasize more practical concerns. Nonetheless, this is still largely a work of theology and exposition of Scripture because I believe the issue demands that we think theologically and biblically about it. Prayerfully, this will lead to the best practical application.

I have more people than I can count to thank for encouraging me in the writing of this shorter book. I want to thank the members of my Sunday school class at Kerrville Bible Church, who served as taste-testers for the material I present here. I also thank those who have invited me to speak on this subject in numerous podcasts and church conferences. The comments and interactions in all these venues have helped to sharpen my thinking, as I hope is reflected in the present work. I also thank the good folks at P&R Publishing who continue to think I should write books! John Hughes and Dave Almack deserve special thanks for this encouragement. Thanks also go out to James N. Anderson for his thorough review of the manuscript and helpful comments, as well as to Karen Magnuson for her excellent editing skills.

Finally, I thank my wife, Jennifer, and my son, Matthew, for putting up with my long hours of writing; my church family, who is a pure joy to serve; and my Lord Jesus Christ, whose grace brightly shines on me. May he be pleased to use this humble offering to help many see the glory of God in the face of evil.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

# ENCOUNTERING THE DARKNESS

Untold evils lurk in the ever-present darkness of our disturbed world, a world that is not what it ought to be, a world that is often cold and inhospitable, where pain and suffering seem to be the rule of the day. Consider the story of Louis Zamperini.<sup>1</sup> Louie was a promising young American track champion who ran in the 1938 Berlin Olympics. But the outbreak of World War II brought unimaginable misery to Louie. Drafted as a bombardier, he inexplicably lost control of his B-24 and crashed into the Pacific Ocean. He managed to survive in shark-infested waters for a record forty-seven days before being captured by the Japanese navy. He was transferred to several POW camps over the course of the next twenty-seven months.

Louie's first experience as a POW was to be shoved into a filthy little wooden shack infested with rats, lice, and the stench of human urine and feces. Beatings were regular, and the food was usually leftover slop full of rat droppings and maggots. Scurvy, dysentery, and beriberi were common killers in the camps. The Japanese strategy for POW treatment during the

1. See Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (New York: Random House, 2010); Louis Zamperini with David Resin, *Devil at My Heels* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

war was to dehumanize their victims, stripping them of every ounce of dignity, to take away their will to live.

In a prison camp named Omori, Louie met his nemesis, Corporal Mutsuhiro Watanabe, the disciplinary officer known as “the Bird.” Watanabe was a psychopath of the first order. His menacing black eyes told the story. “Decades after the war, men who had looked into those eyes would be unable to shake the memory of what they saw in them, a wrongness that elicited a twist in the gut, a prickle up the back of the neck.”<sup>2</sup> The Bird would beat a man senselessly for hours and then bizarrely come to tears and apologize, hug him, and give him candy, beer, or cigarettes. Then in a moment he’d return to pummeling the poor soul in another fit of rage. “When gripped in the ecstasy of an assault, he wailed and howled, drooling and frothing, sometimes sobbing, tears running down his cheeks.”<sup>3</sup>

Seeing Louie’s utter determination to survive this kind of hellish treatment, the Bird singled him out for his most malicious attacks. One day Louie’s leg was severely injured by a guard. Because he was unable to do the labor of the others in coal and salt mines, the Bird had him clean a pigsty, using no tools. He was consigned to crawl around, wiping excrement from the sty with his bare hands while secretly stuffing his mouth with pig food to keep from starving.

The Bird sometimes enlisted a line of prisoners to punch the faces of their fellow prisoners who were officers as hard as they could. Those who refused were subject to brutal beatings themselves. Louie was pegged for the worst of this kind of treatment. Each of the enlisted men reluctantly hammered him as he repeatedly dropped to the ground and then finally blacked out. When he regained consciousness, the Bird screamed for the men to resume their punches, which lasted several hours into the night. With every new blow, the Bird became increasingly enraptured with glee. Louie’s face was swollen like a basketball for days.

The climax of wills between Louie and Watanabe occurred when the Bird punished Louie for supposedly letting a goat die under his care. He

2. Hillenbrand, *Unbroken*, 232.

3. Hillenbrand, 237.

was ordered to pick up a six-foot wooden beam and hold it straight above his head in front of the other prisoners. If he should lower his arms, a guard was instructed to hit him with the butt of his rifle. The Bird sat on the roof of an adjacent building, laughing and mocking Louie as he stood quivering in the baking sun. Louie was undeterred. He looked the Bird straight in the eyes with unflinching hatred.

Louie's arms seared with pain. After ten minutes, they grew numb. He faltered slightly, and the guard jabbed Louie with his gun. He straightened up but started becoming disoriented, his thoughts turning hazy and his consciousness weakening. Nonetheless, he summoned a steely resolve: *He cannot break me*. After some thirty-seven minutes, the Bird was dismayed with Louie's defiance. He jumped off the roof and rushed to his unyielding enemy, giving him a massive blow to the gut. Louie collapsed, the beam striking his head as he fell unconscious.<sup>4</sup>

By now, Japan's defeat was imminent, as the devastating B-29 bombing missions heard and seen overhead made clear. The POWs entertained hope, but they also had every reason to fear that the guards would make good on the military's "kill-all" orders for prisoners if the war were to end. Of the more than thirty-four thousand American POWs held in Japan during World War II, nearly 37 percent (13,000) died, compared to the 1 percent who died while being held by the German Nazis and Italian fascists.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Louie was liberated, but his ordeal was not over. He could not adjust to civilian life. Flashbacks brought the sounds and sights of war and prison rushing back. The wrong sound or a difficult recollection would elicit panicked outbursts. The Bird followed him, tormenting him almost nightly in his dreams. The line between reality and illusion became blurred. Sudden and unpredictable rage possessed Louie like a demon. He sometimes assaulted innocent bystanders in public places at the slightest provocation. He turned to uncontrolled alcoholic consumption to relieve his terror, but it was useless. He couldn't hold a job. He made shipwreck of everything he tried to do. Even his return to the running track failed.

4. Hillenbrand, 296.

5. Hillenbrand, 315.

Louie then set himself to a singular objective. He would find the Bird and kill him, and all would be set right. But every wasted scheme on this front failed as well. Most of all, he failed his new bride, Cynthia. He treated her as though she were another enemy. She became frightened *for* him and then *by* him. During one nightmare, he found himself in a deadly match with the Bird. He had his neck in a death grip when suddenly he awakened and realized that he was strangling his terrified wife. Sometime later, Cynthia came home to see her drunken husband shaking their newborn baby with the same death grip. She had no choice. She and the baby left him. Louis Zamperini was in worse condition now than he had been in the prison camps.

## COMING TO GRIPS WITH THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

The story of Louis Zamperini is one of countless examples throughout history that expose evil in all its feral wickedness. A whole constellation of evils encompassed the life of Zamperini. Not only did he endure morally evil people, but his human vulnerability had to endure all sorts of natural evils. He was a victim of a malfunctioning aircraft. While adrift at sea, he endured an inadequate life raft, ravenous sharks, hunger and thirst, inedible fish and fowl, and unexpected typhoons. In the camps, he experienced scorching heat and bitter cold, muscle atrophy, delirium, repeated multiple contusions, malnutrition, and disease.

Theologians make a distinction between both kinds of evil. *Moral evil* refers to the unrighteous thoughts, words, and actions<sup>6</sup> of all morally responsible creatures—angelic and human—in violation of a holy God's moral commands and principles to whom all stand accountable.<sup>7</sup> These evils cause pain and suffering for others. *Natural evil* refers to adverse conditions in the world that also cause pain and suffering. Such evil can proceed from (1) natural disasters, such as earthquakes, tornadoes,

6. See Gen. 6:5; Matt. 5:21–30; 1 John 3:15.

7. See Rom. 1:18–32; 2:14–15; 3:9–20, 23.

wildfires, or tsunamis; (2) accidents and mishaps due to the unfortunate consequences of the laws of nature, such as when someone drowns in a lake because he can't swim or a boulder falls from a cliff and crushes a busload of schoolchildren; (3) sickness and disease, such as pancreatic cancer or COVID-19; (4) physical and mental handicaps, such as paralysis or Down syndrome; and (5) physical toil that inhibits our bodies almost daily.

Natural evil is the result of the fall of Adam and Eve into moral rebellion against God whereby he brought about a perpetual curse on the creation, altering its favorable conditions (Gen. 3:14–19). We live in a broken world where things don't function as they should. The laws of nature do not always work in our favor. Decay and corruption have spoiled the pristine goodness of the original creation. Gone is the order, beauty, and functional perfection of Eden.

### **Evil in a Fallen World**

The collusion of all these heavy chains of pain and suffering can hardly be comprehended. The history of the world is the history of humanity's faltering under the weight of unending systemic moral evils: greed, deceit, exploitation, sexual perversion, rape, racism, terrorism, slavery, murder, war, and genocide. Modern history has no shortage of examples. The Atlantic slave trade captured and sold some fifty million men, women, and children in the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries. In the twentieth century, Adolf Hitler enacted the Final Solution to kill six million Jews. Eighteen million dissenters of Vladimir Lenin's and Joseph Stalin's tyranny suffered in their hellish gulags. Mao Zedong's revolution starved, persecuted, imprisoned, or executed some sixty million innocents. From 1975 to 1979, Cambodia's Khmer Rouge exterminated over two million souls, most of them buried in the mass graves called the Killing Fields. Other harrowing examples could be recounted.

Contemplating the sheer numbers of such atrocities can become numbing, demonstrating our own desensitization to evil. Yet moral evil is not the only problem we face. We are ever threatened to be laid waste as well by a myriad of natural evils: earthquakes cracking the earth beneath our feet, hurricanes assaulting the cities on our shorelines, floods rushing

through our docile subdivisions, tornadoes ripping our homes to pieces, and fiery infernos decimating our beloved forestland. Our physical bodies suffer under endless injury, sickness, disease, and threats of worldwide pandemics. Youth and strength give way to old age and an onslaught of incalculable bodily ailments. No sooner do we emerge bright and beautiful from our mother's wombs than we are thrust into a storm-tossed sea of pain that pitches us toward death.

No human being is exempt. We all suffer evil. Our personal tragedies are sometimes unrelenting and unbearable. Life seems unfair. Injustice prevails. True acts of righteousness are rare commodities. Wickedness dominates the menu. The guilty flourish while innocent ones languish. All humanity cries out with Job, "But when I hoped for good, evil came, and when I waited for light, darkness came" (Job 30:26). Just when the future looks bright, evil comes roaring back to shatter our hopes. Even now, we seem to be entering a new and disconcerting age when evil is accelerating at a dizzying pace. This has caused no small amount of consternation, fear, and uncertainty about what lies ahead.

The nefarious thinking behind various Marxist-inspired critical theories has emerged to radicalize the world and marginalize any resistance, castigating those who don't walk lockstep with its tyranny as bigots, racists, privileged upstarts, and truth-deniers who need to conform or be silenced.<sup>8</sup> Its divisive and corrosive effects were first incubated in our universities, and have now infected nearly all our K-12 school curriculums. It is relentlessly pushed by Hollywood and our news media. The poison is injected into all forms of our entertainment, sports, and advertising. The

8. See Voddie T. Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, DC: Salem Books, 2021); Owen Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness: How the Social Justice Movement Is Hijacking the Gospel—and the Way to Stop It* (Washington, DC: Salem Books, 2021); Erwin W. Lutzer, *No Reason to Hide: Standing for Christ in a Collapsing Culture* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2022); John MacArthur and Nathan Busenitz, eds., *Right Thinking for a Culture in Chaos: Responding Biblically to Today's Most Urgent Needs* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2023); Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).



largest and most influential corporations are colluding with government entities at all levels to utilize this radical ideology to deconstruct all the world's cultural institutions and to reshape education, language, law, economics, entertainment, the arts, and so forth.

This is especially true in the realm of sex and family. The sexual revolution has all but destroyed the family—the fundamental communal institution that God designed for a society to flourish. Our hypersexualized age knows no bounds of perversion with its confusion about so-called gender and sexual identity. Who would have thought that The Walt Disney Company, known for producing family-friendly fare for nearly a century, would redirect its mission to the aggressive sexualization of our children?

Pornography is often a requirement for elementary-school education. Drag shows have become the new entertainment for kids. Genital mutilation is pressed upon young people confused about their gender identity. The purveyors of this abuse have the gall to call it *gender-affirming care*. Pedophilia is the next socially acceptable perversion, calling its perpetrators *MAPs* (Minor-Attracted Persons) to soften its heinousness. Sex trafficking is a multibillion-dollar industry. Unfettered promotion of sex for anyone with anyone or anything is increasingly part of the driving ethos of the age.

The moral landscape of the Western world has completely shifted as we are poised for collapse. We undoubtedly live in a post-Christian world where God has been “de-godded”<sup>9</sup> and set aside as an outdated relic of a childish bygone era. The notion of unchanging, universal, objective morals has been relegated to the trash heap. If you ask the average person on the street how to distinguish between good and evil, most will have no clue. We live in an age of “expressive individualism”<sup>10</sup>—an age reminiscent of the dark days of the judges, when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 17:6; 21:25).

9. See D. A. Carson, *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 33.

10. Trueman, *Strange New World*, 22–24.

## **A Corrupted Christianity**

Nowadays what usually passes for Christianity, even evangelical Christianity, is nothing more than what Christian Smith calls “moralistic therapeutic deism.”<sup>11</sup> This man-centered religion has simply adapted the insipid values of the world to its belief system. Its namby-pamby deity sits aloof and allows us all to set our own course toward happiness so long as we tack a Bible verse to the end of our sentences and try to be nice to others. Its religious creed is “God helps those who help themselves.” God is no demanding deity but an easygoing and tolerant buddy, cheering us on from the sidelines so that we can feel good about ourselves while we pursue psychological wholeness and follow our hearts wherever they may lead us. Pay no mind to what the prophets of old declared concerning the deceitfulness of the human heart (Jer. 17:9).

This benign religion and its illusory notion of God obscures a looming problem. We have been programmed by our culture and by our own self-centered and self-deceived nature to put all our focus on the evil that lies outside us, thinking that we are basically good (however we define *good*). But alas, the true God who has revealed himself in his Word does not allow us such a truncated and distorted perspective. We are not merely victims of evil. We are also perpetrators of evil—*all* of us. We are violators of true good—good that is defined and exemplified by God himself, not by us and not by the culture.

Under the divine standard: “None is righteous, no, not one; . . . no one seeks for God. . . . No one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10–12). We are selfish glory-seekers, liars and deceivers, lovers of wanton pleasure (2 Tim. 3:1–5). We are willing to kill and steal to get our way (James 4:1–3). This does not bode well for us. Our intractable and inescapable bondage to our own personal sin (John 8:34) deceives us (Rom. 7:11). It generates no true happiness. Rather, it is a path to unrelenting misery.

11. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

## Why, O Lord?

And so we are utterly dismayed by this black world and the hopeless conditions we find ourselves in. Unpleasant questions plague every soul under the sun. We cry out—why!?! Why all the lies and deception, the dismantling of truth? Why the ugliness, the marring of what was once beautiful? Why the corruption and waste, the dissolution of what is good? Why all this murder and mayhem, the destruction of life itself? And why are we all helpless and impossibly obstinate accomplices in this cosmic catastrophe? Surely this is not the way that it's supposed to be.

But most of all, we demand—where is God?

We cry out: “Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Ps. 10:1).

Why couldn't God prevent all this madness from unfolding? Why doesn't he protect us from harm? Why does he allow us to continue unabated down the hellish trail that the devil has blazed for our darkened souls? Does God not love us? The Almighty One has already shown that he has all the requisite powers to stop the wind and stave off the waves with a simple word (Mark 4:39). What about all the other storms that afflict us? Surely his sovereign power could minimize our harm and maximize our safety. Why doesn't he do more to prevent chaos and promote peace? Better yet, why does a supremely good and powerful God permit all this calamity in the first place?

Theologians and philosophers call this the *problem of evil*. It is, no doubt, the most difficult problem that humanity faces. But it is a particularly troublesome matter for genuine and thoughtful Christians, sometimes called the Achilles' heel of the Christian faith. Why is this? Because Christianity alone among all the world's religions and ideologies holds to the belief that God is supremely good, righteous, holy, wise, loving, and powerful—the Creator, Sustainer, and Governor of *all* that exists. His perfections are infinite, unchanging, and unassailable.

No other conception of deity or deities can possibly compare. In fact, the Bible is clear—there is no other God (Isa. 43:10–13). If this is true—and it is—then how can such an unfathomably glorious God permit his wonderfully designed creation and creatures to be decimated by the fall—to descend into this disconcerting darkness?

## TRACING THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Throughout the ages, many unbelievers have refused to acknowledge the God of the Bible directly; nonetheless, they know in their heart of hearts that such a God exists, as Romans 1:18–32 clearly teaches. Furthermore, they have surmised the basic contours of the problem of evil, yet doggedly insist that it proves that God does not exist. And yet, ironically, they intuitively know that if God did not exist, then there would be no problem of evil. Why?

Because we cannot avoid presupposing that a supremely wise God of perfect goodness, righteousness, justice, and truth *alone* sets the standard by which all things that fail to meet this standard must be measured. Without the sun, we'd never know that we lurk beneath the shadows. In other words, without a supremely good God, you cannot say that there is such a thing as evil. And you would have no basis to ask God the question “why?” when evil smacks you hard in the face.

Skeptical philosophers—going back to Epicurus (341–270 B.C.) and, famously, to David Hume (1711–76)—have tried to frame the problem of evil as a logical conflict between the existence of God on the one hand and the presence of evil on the other, as shown in the argument put forth below. Notice, however, that the argument does not target some generic version of God. Only the God of the Bible undergoes the sort of scrutiny that the problem of evil demands. In fact, we all know this as creatures made in his image. We don't have to be skeptics to question how the one true God fares in the face of evil while it tests just how much faith we really have in him.

Here is the argument:

- (1) The God of the Bible is all-powerful (omnipotent).
- (2) The God of the Bible is all-good (omnibenevolent).
- (3) Yet evil exists.
- (4) Therefore, the God of the Bible cannot possibly exist.

The argument assumes that statement 3, “evil exists,” is not in dispute; and this is true. Rarely does anyone dispute this fact. What is in dispute

is either statement 1 or 2. But notice that the argument has some hidden assumptions and can be reworded this way:

- (1) The all-powerful (omnipotent) God of the Bible *can* prevent evil.
- (2) The all-good (omnibenevolent) God of the Bible *wants* to prevent evil.
- (3) Yet evil exists.

This leads to some preliminary conclusions:

- (4) Therefore, either God is not all-powerful (he *cannot* prevent evil) or he is not all-good (he does *not want* to prevent evil).

The supposed conflict between these two preliminary conclusions leads to the same conclusion as before:

- (5) Therefore, the God of the Bible cannot possibly exist (because the Bible insists that God must be *both* all-powerful and all-good).

Let us examine this argument. Some suppose that statement 1 is false while statement 2 is true. This is what Rabbi Harold Kushner argued in his best-selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. The famed rabbi wrote, "I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason."<sup>12</sup> People who believe this must find themselves in a miserable quandary, believing in an impotent God who can do nothing more than cry with us when tragedy strikes.

On the other hand, many smug secularists are happy to concede that statement 1 is true while statement 2 is false; this way, they can claim that any God who allows evil when he could easily prevent it must be evil himself. But are these the only two conclusions that one can draw from

12. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 134.

the argument? Christianity does not need to cower in a dark corner when faced with the supposed conundrums here.

When this argument is closely examined, one serious problem is seen with it: statement 2. All orthodox theologians acknowledge that statement 1 is true, and the Bible itself is clear on this matter. God has all the requisite powers to prevent or stop any instance of evil. But it does not necessarily follow that God in his all-encompassing goodness *wants* to prevent or stop every instance of evil, as statement 2 suggests. The fact is, he clearly has not done so, and the Bible is also clear on this. The skeptics think this means that either he is evil or he cannot exist. But is it possible that the God of the Bible can be supremely good, having no possibility of evil in his being, and yet somehow have a sufficiently good and wise reason for allowing evil to exist? The burden of this book is to answer that question in the affirmative.

## **MORE THAN ONE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

There is more than one problem of evil. The mere existence of evil is not a sufficient reason for many people, especially Christians, to question the existence of God. Consider, however, the vast extent of evil or the horrendous nature of some evils. Does this not impugn God? The Holocaust serves as one of countless examples. Maybe one could forgive God if six or even sixty Jews had died at the hands of the demonically inspired Hitler. But what about six hundred? Six thousand? That seems to stretch our patience.

If sixty thousand Jews had died or, God forbid, six hundred thousand, Hitler would still be one of the greatest villains in the history of the human race, and many would demand that God has some explaining to do. Yet that is not what we are dealing with. We are confronted with the fact that nearly all European Jews—six million of them—were wiped off the face of the planet, regarded as vile creatures in the eyes of not only Hitler, but most ordinary, God-believing, hardworking, family-oriented German citizens (and many other ordinary citizens throughout Europe).

Can you see the problem that the Christian faces?

But that is not all. The vast extent of the Holocaust is one thing. Consider the horrendous nature of many of the crimes that were committed by the Nazis. No one has captured the horror of the Holocaust as Elie Wiesel has in his memoir *Night*. Wiesel survived both Auschwitz-Birkenau and Monowitz concentration camps during World War II. When he first arrived at Auschwitz, he watched helplessly as little babies were unloaded from the back of a lorry and nonchalantly tossed into a fire to be reduced to ashes.

NEVER SHALL I FORGET that night, the first night in camp, which  
turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.  
Never shall I forget that smoke.  
Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies  
I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.  
Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.  
Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all  
eternity of the desire to live.  
Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my  
soul and turned my dreams to ashes.  
Never shall I forget these things, even were I condemned to live as  
long as God Himself.  
Never.<sup>13</sup>

We look at such horrendous evil and we say that it is senseless, gratuitous, having no possible good reason to transpire. Why would God allow it? Later Wiesel and multitudes of other prisoners fixed their eyes on two men and a boy who were ordered to the gallows for sabotage in the camp.

The three condemned prisoners together stepped onto the chairs.  
In unison, the nooses were placed around their necks.

13. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 34.

“Long live liberty!” shouted the two men.

But the boy was silent.

“Where is merciful God, where is He?” someone behind me was asking.

At the signal, the three chairs were tipped over.

Total silence in the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting. . . .

Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive. Their tongues were hanging out, swollen and bluish. But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing. . . .

And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

“For God’s sake, where is God?”

And from within me, I heard a voice answer:

“Where is He? This is where—hanging here from this gallows. . . .”

That night, the soup tasted of corpses.<sup>14</sup>

As Wiesel so poignantly illustrates, it is not just the extent and horrendous nature of evil that gnaws at us. It is the way in which evil impacts us directly, personally, powerfully, hauntingly, ripping its deadly claws through our tender souls and leaving us to cry out to God.

Does he hear us? Is he there?

If you are honest with yourself, you have been in this place too: When your beautiful baby unexpectedly dies. When your wife declares that she does not love you anymore and leaves for good. When your business fails because your partner embezzled all its funds. When the fire from your faulty furnace lays waste to your uninsured home. When your church splits in two because your pastor has been exposed as a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

14. Wiesel, 64–65.



How about when your grandchildren have to live with parents who exist in a perpetual delirium while being decimated by methamphetamines? When terminal cancer has canceled all your plans for the future? When your girl comes home from school and declares that she is a boy? When child protective services comes knocking because you disagreed with the school's assessment of your girl's transition?

We have our stories. We have our anger, our bitterness, our depression, our disillusionment. We have our ceaseless sorrow, our unfading wounds. We have our questions for God.

Will he answer us?

## **SEARCHING FOR A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

Believers have been responding to the problem of evil from the beginning of history. The technical term in theology used by believers to defend the Christian faith with respect to the problem of evil is *theodicy*, a word coined by the eighteenth-century German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. It combines the Greek words for “God” (*theós*) and “justice” (*dikē*). Consequently, a theodicy is an attempt to put forth a solution that “justifies God” in the face of evil, defending his divine integrity and exonerating him from the charge that he is morally culpable for the evil that permeates his creation. Ultimately, a theodicy tries to show why God has allowed evil to ruin his good creation. While Christians have put forward many different theodicies, they can be consolidated around two basic approaches.

The first and most common theodicy is often called the *free-will defense*. This solution says that evil unfortunately arises as a risk God takes when he grants free will to his moral creatures. There are serious problems with this solution, as we will see in chapter 2. The second basic approach to the problem of evil is often called the *greater-good defense*. This theodicy's solution says that God allows evil only in cases in which that evil is necessary for the emergence of some greater good—a good that could not otherwise emerge unless the evil connected to that good existed.

The theodicy I present in this book is a species of the greater-good defense. It takes the ideas that are crucial to this solution and advances them in very specific and far-reaching ways. Most solutions to the problem of evil are content to provide the most succinct and sufficient way that the Christian faith can avoid the charge that God is culpable for evil. By contrast, a more robust theodicy gives reasons not merely why God is not culpable for evil, but in fact why he has a very clear and definite purpose for it.

In other words, most theodicies are strictly defensive positions, trying to defend God from the fiery darts of the skeptics and all those dismayed with a God who seems too inept to handle all this pain and suffering. This is unfortunate. The God of the Bible is never backed into a corner of the ring, trying to avoid all the punches thrown his way. The Bible is not afraid to expose the full gamut of evil right from its very first pages. Rather, evil, in all its manifestations, is a prominent part of the whole storyline of Scripture, and God is never tainted by his indispensable connection to it.

Evil was no accident.

Yet the Bible does not provide a direct answer to the questions: Why evil? Why the fall? Why all this corruption, pain, and suffering marring the cosmos? Nonetheless, it tells a remarkable story that narrates God's plan for history in which it becomes clear why he not only permits evil, but dare we say, planned for it—all of it—to contribute to his glorious plan. The theodicy that the Bible implicitly unfolds is one in which the incomprehensible magnificence of our God is on full display.

Many Christians suppose that God's purpose in creating human beings is to maximize their happiness. Evil disrupts these plans, and so the solution to the problem of evil is to figure out why God hasn't restored human happiness. But if maximizing human happiness is God's purpose, then let's be honest: he has not done a very good job.

Furthermore, this solution is cringeworthy because it places humanity at the center of God's purposes, as though human happiness were the supreme good of all reality. That is simply not true. God is at the center of all reality. God's purpose in creating humans and the rest of the created order is to put his own glory on display, and to do so supremely. In fact, it could be no other way. If God is truly God, then he must of necessity be at

the center. If reality were analogous to our solar system, then he must be the sun and we be the planets orbiting the sun. Only the sun has the mass and gravity to maintain the center and to keep the planets from flying to pieces. Nothing can displace the sun from its central place.

Likewise, we can never imagine a world where God does not occupy the place of singular majesty and glory. Everything that takes place, whether good or evil, must not detract from that glory. Rather, every last vestige of good and evil was purposely designed by God to magnify his glory and to do so supremely. And it is here that a legitimate pursuit of human happiness lies. The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism captures this point well: “What is the chief end of man?” The answer: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Our joy as human beings is found in one place—the glory of the incomprehensibly magnificent God (Ps. 16:11).

Thus, whatever theodicy the Bible supports must be one in which God is supremely glorified. For that reason, the theodicy I propose is called the *greater-glory theodicy*. The greater goods that God brings out of the darkness must shine a brilliant light on a greater glory resting in himself. Furthermore, he has designed his plan for history to magnify the well-being (happiness) of his adopted children, whom he has chosen to pull out of the darkness and to set before his glorious grace.

In the light of his wonderful countenance we find our greatest good and our greatest joy. Furthermore, what magnifies our own personal well-being is directly tied to the fact that we *had* to be dragged through all the filth and debris of a dirty, broken world, of our souls’ being corrupted by evil within as well as victimized by all manner of evil without. The grace of God that penetrates the darkness within and without is what in the end supremely magnifies God’s glory and works for our greatest well-being.

## **THE REST OF ZAMPERINI’S STORY**

This is exemplified in the rest of Louis Zamperini’s story. Louie’s wife filed for divorce after his abuse and violence reached a point of no return.

But shortly afterward, she attended the well-known 1949 Los Angeles Crusade that jump-started the evangelistic career of the young firebrand Billy Graham. Cynthia was converted to Christ the first night she attended and told Louie that she was dropping the divorce.

After days of resisting, Louie finally consented to go with her one night to hear Graham preach. The evangelist was in dead earnest in his gospel appeals. Louie was uncomfortable. But when Graham spoke of divine judgment for those who think they are good, Louie was moved to anger. He thought of himself as a good man. Yet he knew that he was a liar. With every word Graham spoke, Louie's thoughts grew more haunted. He huffed home that night and faced the maniacal Bird once again.

Louie was convinced to see Graham the following night. This time, Graham spoke directly to the problem of evil and why God allows such suffering, and then how he often penetrates the pain with a supernal peace. Louie was transported to a day in 1943 when he was adrift at sea after his B-24 crashed. He entered that place along the equator called the doldrums where the sea mysteriously turns into a motionless sheet of glass. He knew without a doubt that the strange feeling of absolute serenity he felt that day could come only from the hands of an immensely powerful and benevolent God. Louie knew that he should have never survived his ordeal. God's mercy had sustained him every moment.

Then Graham spoke of the saving grace that all must find in Christ. Still, Louie resisted, his head sweating now, throat constricting, the weight on his chest increasing. His rage returned, and he grabbed Cynthia and bolted from the service. But as he rushed outside the tent, it began to rain. He stopped and turned toward Graham. Then he had one final flashback. It was a moment on the life raft when he had made a promise to God: "Lord, bring me back safely from the war and I'll seek you and serve you."<sup>15</sup>

This recollection was the turning point. He soon dropped to his knees and begged God for pardon and trusted Christ. Louie went home that night in a state of serenity that he had never experienced before. God had indeed saved his physical life; now he embraced Christ to save his

15. Zamperini and Resin, *Devil at My Heels*, 241.

spiritual life. He threw all his alcohol down the drain along with his anxiety, his anger, and his thoughts of revenge. The Bird came to him no more—neither that night nor any night since. Suddenly, Louie developed an insatiable appetite to know Christ and the Bible.

Louie Zamperini was a new man, and the gratitude he felt for his salvation was incomparable to the misery he had endured for the previous six years. In fact, the contrast between the depths of his misery and the heights of his peace made his experience of God’s grace and glory all the more remarkable.

Zamperini’s story is one of many that provide us with a glimpse into what God is doing in this broken world. “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” (2 Cor. 4:6). The one whose head is “like white wool, like snow,” whose eyes are “like a flame of fire, his feet . . . like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace,” and whose voice is “like the roar of many waters” (Rev. 1:14–15)—this One is magnifying his grace and his glory beyond all compare, and this is what is at the heart of the greater-glory theodicy that we will explore.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Can you recall some “evil” event that affected your life? How did you respond to it?
2. What is the difference between *moral evil* and *natural evil*?
3. How did evil come about in the world?
4. What do you believe is the greatest evil afflicting our culture today?
5. What is the *problem of evil*? Why is this a unique problem for Christianity?
6. Is the problem of evil more of a problem for God’s omnipotence (all-encompassing power) or his omnibenevolence (all-encompassing goodness)? Explain your answer.
7. The author says that there is more than one problem of evil. Aside from the logical problem of evil as expressed by various philosophers

challenging the existence of God, what other two problems does the author discuss?

8. What is a theodicy?
9. Explain the basic difference between the *free-will defense* and the *greater-good defense*.
10. Why must a biblical theodicy be God-centered instead of man-centered?