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A GOOD GOD IN A WICKED WORLD: CONSIDERING THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

by
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INTRODUCTION

Elie Wiesel trusted in God. As a boy, he believed that Yahweh cared deeply for him and his people. All that changed in the grueling death camps of Nazi Germany. Elie was a Jew. Subjected to the horrific atrocities of Auschwitz, his faith was shattered as his God seemed to sit idly by while countless victims suffered through the darkest evils imaginable at the hands of wicked men. In the preface to his memoir Wiesel writes:

> In the beginning there was faith—which is childish; trust—which is vain; and illusion—which is dangerous. We believed in God, trusted in man, and lived with the illusion that every one of us has been entrusted with a sacred spark from the Shekhinah's flame; that every one of us carries in his eyes and in his soul a reflection of God's image. *That* was the source if not the cause of all our ordeals.[2]

How could a good God exist in a world filled with such mindless cruelty? In the face of crippling evil, many have concluded with Wiesel that God is dead. If there truly was a good and powerful God, he would never permit such suffering and pain. Therefore, since evil exists, God does not.

The problem of evil is not a new one. In fact, it has been the cause of countless articles, lectures, and debates for centuries. Due to the prevalence and influence of evil, this is a problem that cannot be ignored. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to address the problem of evil from a Christian worldview. The first section will endeavor to delineate the problem, and the second section will seek to present a viable solution, viz., that God is good in decreeing evil because it results in his greatest glory and subsequently, his children's greatest good.

THE PROBLEM

The intention of this section is to bring the ambiguous problem of evil into full view by establishing the problem's nature, complexity, and

[1]It is our privilege this year to feature a student article by an M.Div. student at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. Mr. Moreno submitted this article and won runner-up standing in the student paper contest at the Midwest Regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society that met in Wheaton, IL, on March 10–11, 2017.

[2]*Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), x–xi.

validity. A complete picture of the problem will lay the foundation for the discussion and set the course for an adequate response.

The Nature of the Problem

Before any plausible solution to the problem of evil is identified, it is imperative that the nature of the problem be clearly defined and delineated. Historically, critics have presented the problem of evil using both deductive and inductive reasoning.

The Deductive Problem

In his book, *The Miracle of Theism*, J. L. Mackie contends that the existence of the God described in the Scriptures is not merely implausible, but is logically impossible.[3] Through deductive reasoning, he seeks to provide conclusive evidence that traditional theism is logically contradictory. His deductive problem can be summarized with the four following propositions:

- God exists.
- God is omnipotent.
- God is omnibenevolent.
- Evil exists.

Conceding that none of the statements above explicitly contradict each other, Mackie inserts two corollary premises into the equation in order to bolster his position:

> If we add the at least initially plausible premisses [*sic*] that good is opposed to evil in such a way that a being who is wholly good eliminates evil as far as he can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do, then we do have a contradiction. A wholly good omnipotent being would eliminate evil completely; if there really are evils, then there cannot be any such being.[4]

With his new insertions, the modified propositions looks like this:

- God exists.
- God is omnipotent (i.e., there is no limit to what God can do).
- God is omnibenevolent (i.e., God eliminates evil as far as he can).
- Evil exists.

It is at this point that a clear contradiction comes to the fore. If God has the desire *and* ability to eliminate evil entirely, then it follows that God

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[3]According to Mackie, "This problem seems to show not merely that traditional theism lacks rational support, but rather that it is positively irrational, in that some of its central doctrines are, as a set, inconsistent with one another" (*The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982], 150).

[4]Ibid.

and evil *cannot* coexist. Therefore, through the undeniable presence of evil, Mackie believes that he has successfully exposed the internal contradiction within the worldview of the traditional theist. In a universe like ours, God cannot exist.

Although the deductive problem of evil seems compelling, it contains a fatal flaw, viz., the validity of Mackie's "plausible premisses [*sic*]."[5] It is undeniable that if all theists affirmed his premises, then the theist's worldview would be irreconcilably contradictory. However, the assertions that God's omnipotence affords him the contra-causal freedom to do *anything at all* and that his omnibenevolence compels him to eliminate every trace of evil are not positions held by responsible biblical scholars. As this paper will demonstrate, a biblical understanding of the attributes ascribed to God creates no internal contradiction within the theist's worldview. Therefore, the deductive case against God falls flat.[6]

The Inductive Problem

Recognizing the deficiencies of the deductive problem, many critics have utilized an inductive method for their case against the existence of God in an evil world. This strategy adjusts the reality of God's existence from *impossible* to *improbable*. Although this position cannot generate a definitive contradiction within theism, it utilizes the evidence to assert that in a world like ours the God of the Bible is highly unlikely. This position is considerably easier for the critic to sustain due to its softened agenda.

Where the deductive method focuses on the *presence* of evil generally, the inductive method considers the *kinds* of evil specifically. The strength of the argument rests on the presence of *gratuitous* evil. It is argued that if a good God permits evil, then evil must be for a good purpose. Thus, in the face of numerous examples of meaningless evils (e.g., molestation, rape, infanticide, genocide, etc.), a Christian God is unlikely. William L. Rowe, a prominent atheist and philosopher, presents the inductive argument with the following syllogism:

- There exist horrendous evils that an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would have no justifying reason to permit.
- An all-powerful, all knowing, perfectly good being would not permit an evil unless he had a justifying reason to permit it.
- God does not exist.[7]

In light of this argument, Rowe concludes that "the facts about evil in our world provide good reason to think that God does not exist."[8]

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[5]Ibid.

[6]Alvin C. Plantinga is widely credited for exposing the deficiencies of the deductive problem of evil. See *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

[7]*God and the Problem of Evil* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 126.

[8]Ibid., 136.

Responding to arguments like this, Tim Keller notes that the weakness of the inductive argument is the assertion that the evil that *appears* to be pointless *is* pointless.[9] Due to the finiteness of mankind, and the incomprehensibility of God and his ways (Rom 11:33), this is a premise that cannot be substantiated.[10] Ironically, the accusation of *actual* gratuitous evil goes beyond verifiable fact and is thus founded on "a blind faith of the highest order."[11] As meaningless as particular evils may seem, it cannot be proven that the appearance represents the reality. Although the inductive problem raises legitimate concerns, this method cannot be regarded as compelling proof against the existence of God.

The Complexity of the Problem

Grappling with the problem of evil is a notoriously dubious endeavor due in part to the complexity of the problem. Therefore, if any viable solutions are to be reached, the specific kind of evil must be recognized and defined, and the theological system in which that evil resides must be identified.

Two Kinds of Evil

The first step toward a profitable discussion of the problem of evil is to identify the *kind* of evil under consideration. The two categories of evil in the universe are identified as moral and natural. The former is the sin that mankind commits (e.g., murder, rape, neglect, deceit, etc.). The latter is the amoral events and circumstances that come about in nature that cause suffering or pain for God's creatures (e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes, drought, etc.). In Genesis 3:17–19, Moses presents natural evil as the *result* of moral evil. Due to Adam's rebellion and disobedience in the garden, all nature bears the weight of the curse (Rom 8:19–22). John Frame writes:

> Scripture…gives us an explicit answer to the problem of natural evil. Natural evil is a curse brought on the world because of moral evil. It functions as punishment to the wicked and as a means of discipline for those who are righteous by God's grace. It also reminds us of the cosmic dimensions of sin and redemption. Sin brought death to the human race, but also to the universe over which man was to rule."[12]

In light of the clear teachings in the Scriptures, the presence of natural

[9] *The Reason for God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 23.

[10] Nash correctly notes, "Given the limitations of human knowledge, it is hard to see how any human being could actually *know* that some particular evil is totally senseless and purposeless. It seems, then, that the most any human can know is that some evils appear gratuitous" (*Faith & Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* [Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1988], 218).

[11] Tim Keller, *Reason for God,* 24.

[12] *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 157.

evil presents no *logical* problem for the Christian. Therefore, this paper will focus primarily on the problem of *moral* evil.

Various Theological Systems

Another factor that contributes to the complexity of the problem is the variety of disparate theological systems present within theism. With every system, the problem takes on a unique shape. As Feinberg observes, "The traditional formulation of the problem is too simplistic. There is not just one problem of evil, but rather many different problems."[13]

Each system has its own unique set of problems. Therefore, before a solution can be formulated, a theological system must first be established. For the sake of this discussion, it will be helpful to define the meaning and implications of four of God's attributes, viz., his omniscience, omnisapience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence.

God's Omniscience

Omniscience ascribes to God an infinite and perfect knowledge of all things both actual and possible.[14] Moreover, he knows all events because he sovereignly ordained them. Nothing happens outside of God's knowledge, decree, and divine sanction. Not only does he *see* the future, he *designs* it, working everything out "to the council of his will" (Eph 1:11). Thus, it necessarily follows that nothing exists or operates outside of God's purview.[15] Not only does God decree the good (Eph 2:10), he also decrees the bad (Prov 16:4).

Many theists reject this understanding of God's sovereign omniscience, concluding that it makes God responsible for evil and casts doubt on his goodness and love.[16] In an effort to resolve this tension and absolve God of any wrongdoing, some have sought to adjust the meaning of omniscience, effectively emptying it of all its significance. A fitting example of this is reflected in the writings of Harold S. Kushner. In his popular book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People,* he concludes that "God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even he cannot bring that about. It is difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims."[17] In an effort to maintain God's goodness and love, Kushner compromises God's knowledge and power. According to Kushner's theological

[13] *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 777–78.

[14] It should be noted that although God knows all possibilities, he never sees them as potential actualities.

[15] "Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?" (Lam 3:37–38).

[16] See the section titled "How Can God Decree What is Evil?" for the author's response to this accusation.

[17] *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Anchor Books, 1981), 62.

system, God is not responsible for evil because God is powerless to prevent it, restrain it, or end it.[18] Although this position resolves the problem of evil, it does so at great and terrible cost. As Wayne Grudem effectively cautions:

> If evil came into the world in spite of the fact that God did not intend it and did not want it to be there, then what guarantee do we have that there will not be more and more evil that he does not intend and that he does not want? And what guarantee do we have that he will be able to use it for his purposes, or even that he can triumph over it? Surely this is an undesirable alternative position.[19]

To a lesser degree, the Arminian system is also guilty of stripping God of his knowledge and power by its position on human free will.[20] In this system, God cedes his sovereign authority to his image-bearers by giving man the freedom to make his own decisions and choose his own path. In his divine wisdom, God determined that creating free beings with the potential for evil was of greater value than creating a perfect world filled with preprogrammed automatons. In this system, evil originates in the free choices of man and for that reason God is not responsible for it.[21] Although this explanation harmonizes the existence of God and evil, it does so at the expense of God's sovereignty and should therefore be abandoned.

Rather than creating trouble for the believer, a proper understanding of God's sovereignty should bring profound confidence and peace. For even in the face of the greatest of evils, the Christian can be assured that God remains in control. As powerful and dominant as evil may appear, it can never step outside the bounds of God's sovereign design. Perhaps the clearest display of this is witnessed in John's prophecy contained in the book of Revelation. Within this book, John describes some of the vilest evils imaginable wreaking havoc upon the earth. Yet in spite of their commanding authority and extensive influence, John is clear that God reigns supreme. For every evil John describes is limited by God in its scope (e.g., Rev 9:1–21) and in its duration (e.g., Rev 17:1–18:24).

God's Onmisapience

God's wisdom is directly tied to his knowledge. Possessing a full and perfect understanding of all facts both actual and possible, in infinite wisdom God applies the greatest means in order to bring about the highest ends.[22] The necessary implication of God's wisdom is that our

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[18]This errant system of thought is commonly referred to as "Open Theism."

[19]*Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 328–29.

[20]The Arminian interpretation of man's freedom is commonly described as contracausal, non-determinist, or libertarian free will.

[21]This theodicy, labeled the "free-will" defense, is presented most clearly in Alvin Plantinga's book *God, Freedom, and Evil.*

[22]Mark A. Snoeberger, "Systematic Theology I" (course notes, Detroit Baptist

world, with all of its evils and imperfections, is the best of all possible worlds.[23] This is a presupposition that is foundational to any discussion of the problem of evil. As Van Til notes, "It goes without saying that this self-sufficient God, who controls all things and knows all things because he controls them, can use the best means to attain his end. But what are the best means? They are those that God sees fit to use."[24] Although it may not be apparent to finite man, it must be affirmed that this world is the best possible means of accomplishing the greatest possible ends. The character and infinite wisdom of the Creator demand this conclusion.

God's Omnipotence

As noted above, J. L. Mackie defines omnipotence as the limitless power of God. It is upon this definition that his deductive argument rests. Yet is his definition biblically valid? Although there are several passages in Scripture that seem to suggest that God's power is unlimited (e.g., Job 42:1–2; Matt 19:26), the Bible explicitly states that God cannot do *everything*.[25] Instead, "God can do all things *consistent with his nature and purpose*."[26] God can only do that which he wants to do. The scope of his power is not limited by any external restraints (Dan 4:35), but rather by his own nature. God walks in conformity with his laws and standards not because he is subservient to them but because they are a reflection of his being (Lev 19:2).

As it relates to the problem of evil, one of the things that God *cannot* do is actualize contradictions.[27] He cannot, for example, create a square circle or make two plus two equal five, for such a contradiction would be in violation of his nature. Understanding God's omnipotence within these parameters sets the course for addressing the faulty assumption that "a wholly good omnipotent being would eliminate evil completely."[28] As Feinberg argues, when presented with the decision of

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Theological Seminary, Fall 2016), 106.

[23]Van Til writes; "Because of his self-contained and necessary knowledge he can, when he chooses, create a universe, and create this universe just as he wants to create it. This is, therefore, 'the best of possible worlds.' God's wisdom is displayed in it" (*An Introduction to Systematic Theology,* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007], 237).

[24]*Introduction to Systematic Theology,* 237.

[25]For example, he cannot deny himself (2 Tim 2:13), tell a lie (Heb 6:18), or be tempted to sin (Jas 1:13). The reason he cannot do these things is not because he is deficient or inept, but because he will not act against his nature.

[26]Rolland McCune, *Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity,* 3 vols. (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009–2010), 1:218, emphasis added.

[27]Feinberg believes that limiting God's omnipotence to exclude the logically nonsensical is the essential component to resolving the problem of evil. In this paragraph, I rely heavily upon his strategy to theodicy building. For a concise presentation of his four-part strategy, see *No One Like Him,* 781–82.

[28]Mackie, *Miracle of Theism,* 150.

creating a world like ours *or* a world without evil, "God had to choose between actualizing one of two good things. The two goods are mutually contradictory, so God couldn't do both.... *If he removes evil, he cannot also create the best of all possible worlds*."[29] Since evil exists, the logical conclusion is that it plays a vital role in the existence of the best possible world.[30] Thus, a world without evil would be a world that is less than best.[31] Since God cannot create both a world without evil *and* the best of all possible worlds (i.e., actualize a contradiction), Feinberg rightly concludes that "he is not guilty for failing to do both."[32]

God's Omnibenevolence

The final term to be defined is omnibenevolence. As demonstrated above, in order for the Christian worldview to be a logical contradiction, it must be proven that the goodness of God necessitates the eradication of all evil. If this can be demonstrated, then the presence of evil would nullify the goodness of an omnipotent deity. According to this interpretation, a God that is capable of removing evil yet unwilling to do so is himself evil.

As compelling as the argument appears, it contains a deficient interpretation of the goodness of God. For although God in his goodness is *opposed* to evil, it does not necessarily follow that he must *eliminate* evil. Good parents seek to protect their children from as much pain and suffering as possible, but never at the expense of their child's own welfare. No good parent would refuse necessary medical care for his child in an effort to spare him the pain of the surgeon's scalpel, nor would he neglect corrective discipline simply to make the child's life more comfortable. As will be illustrated in due course, God in his infinite wisdom uses even the darkest of evil for the good of his children and the glory of his name (Rom 8:28).

The Validity of the Problem

One final facet to consider before formulating a response is the validity of the problem. When confronted with the problem of evil, a commonly cited objection is that the atheist has no right to use evil to disprove God's existence since, according to his own worldview, evil cannot exist. Objective moral evil requires an objective moral law, and an objective moral law necessitates an objective moral lawgiver.[33] Since

[29]*No One Like Him,* 781, emphasis added.

[30]As demonstrated in the previous section, the wisdom of God demands this conclusion.

[31]This is not to say that the best possible world does not include the eventual eradication of evil (see Rev 21:1–4), but rather the best possible world cannot include the absence of evil from world history.

[32]*No One Like Him,* 782.

[33]It is this line of reasoning that has led theistic apologists like Gregory Koukl to the conclusion that "the existence of evil is actually evidence *for* the existence of God,

the atheistic worldview rejects objective moralism, it must also reject objective evil. Thus, with no basis or mechanism for identifying evil, it is argued that the atheist's groundless accusations require no serious consideration. Pointing to the contradictions within the atheist's own worldview (i.e., his belief in *relative* moralism and *objective* evil), this objection[34] endeavors to end the discussion before it begins.

Although this defense is insightful,[35] it does not resolve the tension within the theistic worldview and is therefore not a viable response to the problem. The burden of proof for the theist is not primarily to expose the inconsistencies of opposing worldviews, but rather to give an account for the apparent inconsistencies within his own. As helpful as this observation is, it simply proves that the presence of evil is a problem for the theist *and* the atheist alike. The responsible atheist raises a valid argument *if* he limits the problem to that of the *theist's* internally inconsistent worldview. For example, if the atheist rests his defense against the existence of God on *his* belief in the objective reality of evil, then his argument is self-contradictory and therefore invalid. However, if he presents his argument against God by entering, for the sake of argument, into the theists' worldview and contending that *their* belief in God and evil is logically inconsistent, then his complaint is valid. Therefore, any worldview that affirms the simultaneous existence of God and evil must give an account for the apparent contradiction that arises.

AN ANSWER

The purpose of this section is to present a viable theodicy.[36] However, before embarking upon this endeavor, it will be helpful to temper expectations by briefly considering the parameters and limitations of any conclusions that are drawn.

The Parameters of the Answer

A complete and acceptable answer to the problem need only demonstrate that the presence of evil in the universe creates no internal contradictions within a given theological system. A satisfactory solution is not required to alleviate every tension caused by evil or to provide the

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not against it" (*Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing your Christian Convictions* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009], 84).

[34]Labeled by Frame as the "Ad Hominem Defense" (*Apologetics,* 171).

[35]The famous Christian apologist C. S. Lewis identifies this observation as a crucial turning point in his own personal journey from atheism to Christianity (*Mere Christianity: What One Must Believe to Be a Christian* [New York: MacMillan, 1960], 45–46).

[36]Theodicy is defined as "a response to the problem of evil in the world that attempts logically, relevantly and consistently to defend God as simultaneously omnipotent, all-loving and just despite the reality of evil" (Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999], 112–13).

specific reasons for every instance of evil. The Christian's answer need only prove that all his theological beliefs are sufficiently harmonized.

The Limitations of the Answer

An additional consideration preliminary to formulating a theodicy is the recognition of its limitations. The answer to the problem is limited by mankind's finiteness and inferiority.

Mankind's Finiteness: Is This a Problem that *Can* be Solved?

Due to mankind's physical and cognitive limitations, he is incapable of fully comprehending an infinite God (Ps 139:6). For this reason, many see the quest for theodicy as a futile and foolish endeavor. It is beyond the scope of man's ability, it is argued, to understand an incomprehensible God whose judgments are unsearchable, and whose ways inscrutable (Rom 11:33). Humanity's responsibility is simply to hold all antinomies in faith, without attempting to resolve the contradictions. Due to man's limitations, the presence of evil is a problem that cannot be solved in the mind of man.

While it is crucial that man come to terms with his finite qualities in theodicy building, his limitations do not disqualify him from the task entirely: though God is *incomprehensible*, he is not *inapprehensible*. Although God cannot be known exhaustively, he can be known truly by finite creatures (Jer 9:23–24). Additionally, it is man's responsibility to pursue a deeper understanding of the mind, ways, and judgments of God that have been revealed in the Scriptures (Deut 29:29).

Mankind's Inferiority: Is This a Problem that *Should* be Solved?

A second limitation to consider is man's positional subordination to an autonomous and sovereign God. Even if the problem of evil is a question that *can* be answered, it is needful to consider if it is one that *should* be answered. When Job demanded an explanation from God for the evils in his life, instead of providing an answer, God responded with a barrage of questions of his own (Job 38–41). In the face of God's overwhelming glory, Job humbly cried, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know…. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:3, 6).[37]

Is it ever man's place to question the attributes of God even if those attributes seem to contradict the experience of pain, suffering and evil? Does man have the authority to investigate the veracity of God's love, power, and wisdom in the face of evil? Does God really need man to rush to his defense in order to appease his critics? For these reasons, many believe that man has no right to pose questions like these, and

[37]All Scripture quotations are taken from the 2011 edition of ESV.

would do well to stop asking questions and simply trust that the Judge of all the earth will do right (Gen 18:24).

The warning is valid. When dealing with a topic that seeks to defend God to man, it is vital that it be placed in a proper perspective. Concerning man's subordination to God, there are a number of implications that must be considered. First, God does not *need* man to defend him like a defendant needs an attorney. Second, God is not *obligated* to justify his deeds to his creation. Whenever antinomies arise in theology that the finite mind cannot resolve, it must be affirmed that a resolution is possible even if solely in the mind of God. The presence of evil is a problem for man, but *not* a problem for God. Finally, mankind never has the authority to accuse God or level any complaint against him. As Frame warns, "When we put ourselves in the proud position of demanding an answer then we can expect a rebuke from God like the [rebuke] he gave to Job."[38]

In spite of these limitations and pitfalls, formulating a biblical defense for the problem of evil is necessary not only so that the believer can contend for the faith (Jude 1:3) and make a defense for the hope that is in him (1 Peter 3:15), but also so that the orthodox Christian can identify and "protest against those solutions of this great problem which destroy either the nature of sin or the nature of God."[39] It is with this in mind that we now turn to the most viable answer to the problem of evil.

A Viable Answer

This section will present the defense that the author believes to be the most viable solution to the problem of evil. It is accepted as the best option for three primary reasons. First, it provides a coherent explanation for the problem of evil within a biblical worldview. Second, it does not compromise any biblical doctrines or soften any of God's attributes in order to retain its logical coherence, and third, it contains clear biblical support. Since this solution is a modification of the greater-good defense, it will be helpful to briefly examine the greater-good defense before the position affirmed by the author is considered.

The Greater-Good Defense

At the heart of the greater-good defense is the premise that God is justified in permitting evil because it results in the greater good of his people. Not only does good often come out of evil, but many goods are dependent upon evil for their expression. For example, man would never experience courage without conflict, compassion without distress, mercy without offense, or perseverance without hardship. In light of this, God remains good in permitting evil because he uses it for good.[40]

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[38]*Apologetics,* 176.

[39]Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 158.

[40]Frame notes, "It is essential to realize that even though God does bring evil into

As R. C. Sproul concludes, "God's sovereignty stands over evil, and he is able to bring good out of evil and to use evil for his holy purposes."[41]

Although this defense does not relieve all tensions, it is not without biblical support. The life of Joseph is a fitting example. He was mistreated by his brothers, torn from his family, sold into slavery, falsely accused, and thrown into prison. Yet at the end of his story, Joseph sees that God, in his infinite goodness, used the evils in his life to bring about the salvation of thousands from famine (Gen 50:20). Perhaps the clearest example of good coming through evil is demonstrated in the greatest atrocity in history, viz., the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This wicked act of sinful men was not gratuitous, but was the means by which God would bring about the salvation of his elect (Acts 2:23).

The greater-good defense provides a theodicy that is both internally coherent and biblically based; however, it is not without its issues. First, this defense appears to rely upon the erroneous ethic of consequentialism.[42] For if God is justified in causing evil solely on the basis of its positive results, then the necessary implication is that the ends can justify the means. This, however, is an ethic that cannot comport with the teachings in Scripture (e.g., Rom 6:1–2). Second, the greater-good defense tends to build its case on an anthropocentric focus for God's eternal plans and purposes. Although man's greatest pleasure is found in God (Ps 16:11), and he benefits from God's plans, it is arrogant and fallacious to hold that the center of God's activity in the universe is the welfare and happiness of man. Robert Reymond aptly notes:

> We have not penetrated God's purpose sufficiently if we conclude that *we* are the center of God's purpose or that his purpose terminates finally upon us by accomplishing *our* glorification. Rather, our glorification is only the means to a higher, indeed, the *highest* end conceivable—"that God's Son might be the Firstborn among many brothers" (Rom 8:29), and all to the praise of God's glorious grace (Eph 1:6, 10, 12, 14; 2:7).[43]

In spite of these issues, the greater-good defense should not be rejected completely. It is possible to salvage this position by altering the result of evil from the anthropocentric good of man to the theocentric glory of God.[44] This revised defense, identified as *The Greatest-Glory Defense*,[45]

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the world, he does it for a good reason. Therefore, he does not *do* evil in bringing evil to pass" (*Apologetics,* 154).

[41] *The Invisible Hand: Do All Things Really Work for Good?* (Dallas: Word, 1996), 167.

[42] Consequentialism is the ethic that holds the position that "what makes an action morally right is its consequences"(*None Like Him,* 783). It is for this reason that Feinberg rejects the greater-good defense.

[43] *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 377.

[44] Acknowledging the man-centered tendency of the greater-good defense, Frame notes that the response is a viable one "if instead of rejecting the greater-good defense we simply understand it theocentrically. That is, one good is greater than another when it is more conducive to the glory of God" (*Apologetics,* 184).

[45] This label coined by the author is used to distinguish it from the greater-good

will be the focus of the following section.

The Greatest-Glory Defense

The solution proposed by the author is best understood as a modified greater-good defense. Although both responses contain a similar line of reasoning, the point of divergence is the *content* of the good that is produced from evil. Instead of focusing the positive results of evil solely upon the happiness and welfare of mankind, this defense sees a greater purpose at work, namely, the glory of God. Thus God uses evil to communicate the fullest manifestation of himself to his image-bearers. Hodge observes that "there could be no manifestation of [God's] mercy without misery or of his grace and justice if there were no sin. As the heavens declare the glory of God, so he has devised the plan of redemption 'to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God' (Eph 3:10)."[46] Thus evil is a necessary means by which God reveals aspects of himself to his creation. Without evil, mankind would know nothing of God's patience, forgiveness, mercy, and grace.[47]

A fitting biblical example is seen in the eleventh chapter of John's gospel. In this narrative, Jesus is informed that his friend Lazarus is fatally ill. Upon receiving the report, Jesus makes it clear that Lazarus's illness is neither an accident nor a tragedy. Instead, "it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God might be glorified through it" (John 11:4). In this passage, Jesus uses the death of his beloved friend to display his glory to grieving sisters, doubting Jews, and ignorant apostles.[48] Throughout biblical history, God glorifies himself though his victory over evil, and his punishment of it (either at the cross or in the lake of fire).[49]

Although it is difficult to comprehend how a world with evil could be God's greatest means of receiving glory, it is not hard to imagine how a world *without* evil would diminish his glory. For example, if Adam as humanity's representative would have passed the test in the

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defense. The reason for the superlative "greatest" (contra "greater") is based on the author's understanding of God's omnisapience. Since God only uses the best means to accomplish his highest ends, it necessarily follows that everything that happens is not merely for God's *greater* glory, but for his *greatest* glory.

[46]*Systematic Theology,* 161.

[47]That is not to say that without evil God would not possess these attributes and characteristics, but rather that without evil there would be no avenue through which they could be expressed.

[48]Another fitting example is found just two chapters earlier in John 9. In this passage Jesus reveals that the blindness of a beggar, with all its ensuing evils, was decreed by God so that "the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3).

[49]Hodge rightly concludes that sin "is permitted so that the justice of God may be known in its punishment, and his grace in its forgiveness. And the universe, without the knowledge of these attributes, would be like the earth without the light of the sun" (*Systematic Theology,* 161).

garden then his confirmed holiness, being imputed to all his progeny, would guarantee a world for humanity that is free from sin and death. In a world like this, *Adam's* obedience and imputed righteousness would be man's hope and assurance. *He* would be the Savior of mankind. Consequently, man's praise would go to the first Adam instead of the second Adam. Reymond argues that had Adam been confirmed in holiness through his obedience, "God would then have been required eternally to share his glory with the creature, and his own beloved Son would have been denied the mediatorial role which led to his messianic lordship over men and to his Father's glory which followed."[50] With this in view, the conclusion is clear: God decreed the fall and all of its ensuing evils for the glory of his name.

LINGERING CONCERNS

In an effort to present the greatest-glory defense with sharper clarity, this section will seek to address three objections that may be levied against it. Although this defense may encounter countless additional objections, the three selected seem to be the most pertinent to the discussion.

How Is God Good?

One accusation that could arise from the greatest-glory defense is that it strips God of his goodness. If God decrees evil primarily for the sake of his own glory, and not the good of his people, then it is difficult to see how God can retain his benevolence by any meaningful sense of the word. Such a self-centered God as this does not comport with the God of love who promises to work everything together for the good of his children (Rom 8:28).

Although the concern is legitimate, the charge is flawed because it stands on a false dichotomy. For the Bible is clear that God's passion for his own glory is not at the expense of mankind's happiness, but is the means by which greatest joy, happiness, and satisfaction can be found.[51] It is readily acknowledged that God uses evil for the good of his children; however, that good is not the terminus of God's purposes, but rather an ancillary implication of a far greater end, namely, God's glory. Therefore God retains his goodness because of the immense benefit his children enjoy as God acts in his own self-interest.

Do the Ends Justify the Means?

Second, it can be charged that the greatest-glory defense, like the greater-good defense, rests on the fallacious ethic of consequentialism

[50]*New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith,* 377.

[51]For a helpful discussion of this point, see John Piper and Jonathan Edwards, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards, with the Complete Text of the End for Which God Created the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998).

and should therefore be rejected. If God can hold men responsible for evil *irrespective* of its noble result (e.g., 2 Sam 6:5–7), how then is he pardoned in decreeing evil *on the basis* of its noble result? Is this not a glaring and troubling inconsistency on God's part?

The accusation is compelling, but misguided. In order for this charge to stick, it must be demonstrated that in *decreeing* evil, God is *doing* evil. However, a biblical understanding of God's wisdom demands that both God's ends *and* his means are right. Decreeing evil is not an evil act coincidentally redeemed by a favorable outcome (i.e., consequentialism), instead decreeing evil, as painful as it may be, is *good.*[52]

In order to clarify this point, an analogy may prove helpful. A good medical surgeon regularly inflicts pain on his patients with his surgical equipment. However, his pokes and cuts are not considered *evil* means, but *necessary* means. Similarly, the evils that God decrees for his children are the *necessary* means for their greatest ends. Thus, even in the face of hardship, God's people can "count it all joy" (Jas 1:2).

How Can God Decree What Is Evil?

Perhaps the most significant objection to the greatest-glory defense is that it is built upon a faulty view of God's sovereignty that effectively renders him the cause and author of evil. If God sovereignly determines everything that happens he is consequently responsible for every evil that exists. To many, a God who decrees evil cannot be trusted, should not be worshiped, and cannot be good. For this reason, it can be argued that the greatest-glory defense is not a valid theodicy because it rests upon a dangerously erroneous view of God.

Before addressing this difficult issue, it should be noted that this objection moves beyond the scope of theodicy. As it has previously been established, in order for a theodicy to be credible, it need only prove internal consistency *within its own theological system.* The greatest-glory defense successfully accomplishes this requirement. The objection currently under consideration moves beyond the coherence of the defense to the validity of its theological system. That being said, this is a legitimate concern that is both raised and dealt with in Scripture.

In the book of Habakkuk, the prophet raises this very complaint before God himself. Upon hearing of God's plan to use the Chaldeans to punish Judah for her wickedness (Hab 1:5–11), Habakkuk cries out, "You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?"(Hab 1:13) The reason for the prophet's concern was that God's plan to use evil did not comport with his understanding of God's righteous character.

God responds by calling the prophet to faith and patience (2:2–4).

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[52]Sproul rightly concludes, "Ultimately it must be good that there is evil or evil would not exist" (*Invisible Hand,* 167).

Through a series of devastating "woes," God makes it clear to Habakkuk that he will deal with the invading Chaldeans for their wickedness, arrogance, and idolatry (2:6–20). Although they are acting in accordance with God's decree (Hab 1:6), they do so willingly. Therefore God holds them justly responsible for their sins (Hab 1:11). In his sovereignty, God did not compel or coerce the Chaldeans to sin, and for this reason, he is not responsible for their wickedness. Although this explanation does not release all of the tension, it was sufficient for Habakkuk (Hab 3:17–19), and it should be sufficient for us as well.

CONCLUSION

God is real, and so is evil. To many, that statement is both illogical and self-contradictory. Regrettably, the sincere effort to justify God to man by presenting an acceptable theodicy has historically come at the costly expense of the attributes and character of God. However, without providing all the answers or releasing all the tensions, this paper has endeavored to provide a viable solution to the problem of evil that corresponds with Scripture and is logically coherent. It is the belief of this author that the greatest-glory defense accomplishes these requirements and therefore presents a viable theodicy.