

it is in rebellion to God. Second, He has limited the evil that man can do—our lifetimes are temporary (Gen. 6:3; Psa. 90:12). The wickedness that any man can commit can extend no further than his own lifetime, or the lifetime of the one he has harmed. Third, He will punish the wicked for their rebellion and any harm done to others (Jude 14-15). The Psalmist's plea "let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end" will be fulfilled when God condemns the wicked and delivers His people.

* Epicurus's argument is preserved in a work by Lacantius (ca. AD 240-320) entitled *On the Anger of God* (11.13). The full argument reads:

God. . . either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? or why does He not remove them?

Lacantius was an adviser to the Roman emperor Constantine and he quotes Epicurus to refute his view that the gods were distant, unconcerned, and uninvolved in the affairs of mankind.



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Faithful Sayings

BULLETIN
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Is God to Blame for Human Wickedness? By Kyle Pope

Any concept of God's involvement with His creation must (in some way) answer the problem of God's relationship to evil. 300 years before the time of Christ, the Greek philosopher Epicurus, coined what has come to be known as the *Epicurean Paradox*, which argues that if God can remove evils and doesn't then He must be evil—if He can't remove them then He isn't God.¹ Centuries later the eighteenth century Scottish skeptic David Hume, restated this argument asking of God, "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 10).

In religious discussions this problem has also arisen. John Calvin, the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer, argued that the only answer to this was to view God as the cause of all things. In citing Lamentations 3:38 and Amos 3:6 he argued that "good as well as evil was produced by the command of God" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.17.8). To answer the charge that this would make God the cause of things contrary to His will he said it is "the feebleness of our intellect" that keeps us from understanding how God "wills and wills not the very same thing" (*ibid.*, 1.18.3). Calvin's followers tried to resolve this inconsistency by claiming that the power, wisdom, and goodness of God caused "the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men" and

yet God somehow did it in such a way that human sinfulness comes, “only from the creature [i.e. human beings], and not from God” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, “Of Providence,” 5.4). This did not resolve Calvin’s inconsistency. How can evil be the “command of God” and yet come from man and “not from God”?

What Does the Bible Teach?

The Bible is not a systematic philosophical encyclopedia, but it is the revelation of God to particular people, on specific issues, within given contexts. It reveals what is needed for human beings to “**be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work**” (1 Tim. 3:16-17). Any concept of God’s relationship to evil must be carefully framed by the bounds set within Scripture. This demands some very basic questions:

1. What Is Evil?

In English the noun *evil* is defined very narrowly to mean “profound immorality, wickedness, and depravity, esp. when regarded as a supernatural force” (*New*

Oxford American Dictionary). In Scripture, however, the words translated “evil” are much broader. In the Old Testament the Hebrew verb *ra’á* meant “to be bad, to be evil” (BDB). In the New Testament, the Greek adjective *kakos* can refer to things that are simply “troublesome” or to things that are “wicked” (Thayer). This is where some of the problem lies. Everything that is *evil* (as we use the term) could be said to be “bad,” but not everything “bad” is necessarily *evil* in any moral sense. A toothache, for example, is a *bad thing*. I might even use hyperbole and say “my toothache is *evil*,” but a toothache has nothing to do with “profound immorality” or “depravity.” It is not literally *evil* in any moral sense.

James tells us through the Holy Spirit, “**Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil (Gr. *kakos*), nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed**” (Jas. 1:13-14, NKJV). James is likely using the word *kakos* in the narrow sense of moral “evil” in much the same way we think of it. God feels no allurements to “profound immorality” or “wickedness” nor does He seek to entice us with such things. The Psalmist declares, “**You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil (*ra’*) dwell with You**” (Psa. 5:4). In other texts, however, such as those that troubled Calvin, we must understand the sense differently. Jeremiah, for example, declared that “**out of the mouth of the most High proceedeth**” both “**evil (*ra’*) and good**” (Lam. 3:38, KJV). We might recall that Lamentations is a song of mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem brought on as punishment for the sins of Judah. The NKJV translates this “**woe and well-being**”—this is not *evil* in a moral sense. Amos asked through the Holy Spirit, “**shall there be evil (*ra’*) in a city, and the LORD hath not done it?**” (Amos 3:6, KJV). Amos was reminding the Israelites, who had been promised that they would fall to their enemies if they were unfaithful to God (Deut. 28:15-68), the danger that lay before them if they did not repent. The NKJV properly translates this “**calamity**” rather than “**evil.**” Isaiah, in another text to which Calvin appealed, quoted God in saying, “**I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil (*ra’*): I the LORD do all these things**” (Isa. 45:7, KJV).

How could God *create* moral “evil” and yet at the same time say that He tempts no one with “evil”? Obviously, the sense of each of these passages is broader than the way we understand the word *evil*. In this final passage, the NKJV once again puts it “**calamity**” rather than “**evil.**” To allow something bad to happen is not the same as acting with “profound immorality” or “wickedness.”

2. What Is the Source of Evil?

Scripture makes it clear that although God allows *hardship* or *calamity* He is not the cause of evil in its most narrow sense of “wickedness” or “depravity.” In the same text in which James tells us that God tempts no one, he explains the source of human wickedness—“**each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed**” (Jas. 1:14, NKJV). God has created man with desires that alone are neither good nor evil. All human desires have lawful outlets by which they can be fulfilled. My desire for food can lawfully be fulfilled by working for a living (2 Thess. 3:8). My desire for sexuality may be lawfully fulfilled in lawful marriage (1 Cor. 7:2-4). If I choose to satisfy my desire for food by stealing a loaf of bread, I have taken a natural desire and satisfied it in a sinful way. If I choose to satisfy my desire for sexuality with sex outside of marriage, I have done the same. Scripture calls this choice following “**ungodly lusts**” (Jude 18), or walking according to one’s “**own lusts**” (2 Pet. 3:3; Jude 16), and pursuing things that are the “**desires of the flesh and of the mind**” (Eph. 2:3). The source of this type of *evil* is not God—it is our own refusal to submit to His will for the satisfaction of our desires. The source of all human wickedness can be traced to some unlawful attempt to satisfy desire in a way that is contrary to God’s revealed will.

3. Why Doesn’t God Remove Evil?

The Psalmist declared, “**Oh, let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end, but establish the just; for the righteous God tests the hearts and minds**” (Ps. 7:9). Freedom of choice demands alternatives. Would a mul-

ti-ple-choice test with only one choice for each question really test a student’s knowledge? Why do democratic societies criticize totalitarian regimes that stage mock elections with only one candidate on the ballot? Because choice demands alternatives. This life is a testing ground. As the text declares “**God tests the hearts and minds.**” This life is a test to determine if we will follow our own desires in our own ways or submit to God. It is in this way that God determines if man will “**seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us**” (Acts 17:27).

God is never the cause of evil in its most narrow sense of moral “wickedness,” but He does grant to man a brief period of time in this life in which his choices to follow his own “**ungodly lusts**” can produce “**wickedness**” towards himself or those around him. Is it *evil* on God’s part to allow the opportunity for the *evil* man does to harm others? No, first because He has commanded man not to do evil (2 Kings 17:13; Ezek. 18:32). When man does evil,