

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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## *Evil and God's Goodness*

Bart Ehrman, religious scholar, bitter critic of biblical Christianity and former evangelical, has written, "The God I once believed in was a God who was active in the world. He saved Israelites from slavery; he sent Jesus for the salvation of the world; he answered prayer; he intervened on behalf of his people when they were in desperate need; he was actively involved in my life. But I can't believe in that God anymore, because from what I see around the world, he doesn't intervene." [From Ehrman's book, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*, p. 16.]

The doubts that people such as Bart Ehrman have about God and his relation to suffering and evil stem really from two major causes: (1) They do not accept the proposition that God does indeed have divine rights over his creation. (2) They either do not accept or seek to minimize the extent and the effects of human rebellion against God. In addition, any discussion of evil and suffering ultimately brings up the question of the goodness of God in the first place. But as Kostenberger, Bock and Chatraw argue in their book, *Truth Matters*, "But to come away believing there is no God since God does not appear good (as we define good) assumes an absolute moral framework which, if God were absent, would not be there at all." Good is a moral, ethical term that requires some kind of framework. If there is no transcendent God, there is no absolute moral framework for good. Finally, all of us sense and feel that the world around us is not the way it should be. Rather than discounting God in this situation, perhaps this inborn frustration and complaint about our world reflects a hidden longing that says more about God than we are willing to admit. Consider theologian Alister McGrath's argument: "[This dilemma] is a matter of the heart, rather than the head. Where does this deep-seated intuition that suffering and pain are not right come from? . . . What if this intuition points to something deeper—something built into us that reflects our true nature and identity? What if this revulsion against suffering and pain is a reminder of paradise, on one hand, and an anticipation of the New Jerusalem on the other?" [Quoted in *Truth Matters*, pp. 40-41.]

Let's dig deeper and reflect on an example of horrific evil, which occurred near my hometown of Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 2006: On 2 October 2006, Charles Carl Roberts entered a one-room Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania and took ten girls hostage. He had dismissed all the boys of the school and barricaded the doors with wooden planks he had brought in his truck. According to news reports, one of the Amish girls, Marian Fisher, offered to lay her life down for her friends, the other nine girls, saying, "Shoot me and leave the other ones loose." Roberts shot her first and then killed the other nine, ending the horror by killing himself as well. The irony of this murdering spree by Roberts was that the Amish are pacifists, who abhor violence and lead separatistic lives. Presumably, Roberts chose this school because it was in the middle of this community, with no protection or guards. Who would have ever thought that this

could happen in an Amish school? How do we process such evil? Do we as Christians have an answer to offer the world for such evil? Where was God in all this?

- First, a comment about the response of the Amish to the mass murder of their children. The Amish reached out to the Roberts family in love, bringing comfort to his wife and three children, even providing them with a fund from the money given to the families of the Amish children. They forgave Roberts and evidenced no bitterness toward his wife. It is difficult to imagine a more powerful example of the love of Jesus Christ than that offered by the Amish people of Lancaster County. It was supernatural and stands in such stark contrast to everything we see in our culture, so filled with revenge, bitterness and dysfunction. When one looks at the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, the Amish manifested those eight character traits in how they responded to this evil. They were indeed “the light” and the “salt” Jesus talks about at the end of the Beatitudes. It was truly one of the most remarkable things I have seen in my entire life. Horror and inexplicable evil became an opportunity for expressions of love and grace!
- Second, does our theology as Christians have an answer to such evil? As Christians, we shun statements such as “God caused this event,” and instead choose verbs such as “God permitted or allowed this to happen.” This seems wise because without question, God had the power and authority to stop Roberts from his rampage, but He chose not to do so. To provide a precise answer as to why God chose not to intervene is impossible. But, we do know this: Ultimately, suffering and evil are resolved in Jesus Christ. Let me explain.
  1. God is present with His people when suffering and evil are perpetrated upon them. Hebrews 4:15 and Hebrews 2:18 both state that Jesus was in all ways like us [as a human], yet without sin. He also says in the Great Commission in Matthew 28 that He is with us until the end of the age. God’s attributes of omniscience and omnipresence both establish the presence of God, even when there is evil. He is not an absentee landlord. He intervenes and He is present in His world, especially with His people.
  2. God identifies with His people when there is suffering and evil. From Isaiah 52:13 through 53:12, we learn that Jesus identifies with His people physically (see 52:14 and 53:7), emotionally (see 53:3 and 10), and psychologically (see 53:3, 6). In addition, Jesus knew loneliness and abandonment unlike any other human being. He knew the separation from His father and the abandonment by His disciples. There is an old hymn of the church, “No one understands like Jesus.” This is so true! There is no other world religion that has God identifying with His people when they suffer or are the victims of evil.
  3. God resolves evil and suffering in Jesus Christ. According to Isaiah 53:9, Jesus received willingly the evil, guilt and sin of the world as He was dying on the cross. In addition, 53:4-6 and 8 explain that God the Father punished Jesus because of that evil, guilt and sin. Finally, the mysterious exchange of redemption occurred at Calvary. God put our sin, guilt and evil on Jesus, so that He could then place His righteousness on us through faith. This is the heart of the gospel: Our sin is placed on Jesus and

His righteousness is placed on us—all by faith (see 53:11-12, 8). In other words, God became the victim of monstrous evil (the cross) in order to eliminate evil from this world. That is how God is doing it! He resolves the problem of evil and suffering in Jesus Christ! This profound truth does not answer all our questions in the presence of evil or suffering, but this profound truth does provide the ultimate answer: In Jesus, evil and suffering are resolved, and when He returns, both will be forever banished from this planet. The New Heaven and New Earth (e.g., Isaiah 65, Revelation 21-22) will know no evil or suffering—all because of Jesus. Truly, no one understands like Jesus.

See “Breakpoint” (11 October 2006), Gene Edward Veith, *Tabletalk* (June 2006), pp. 62-63, Andreas Kostenberger, Darrell Bock and Josh Chatraw, *Truth Matters: Confident Faith in Confusing World*, pp. 19, 34-41.