

COMMENTS ON EXTREME EVIL

Virgil Warren, PhD

Although the problem of evil is not “easy” to answer, we can understand some things about how a degree of evil could occur in a holy God’s universe. But why an all-powerful God allows extreme evil to happen is more difficult. Scripture itself does not explain why he lets evil operate to the degree it does. Nevertheless, some observations make the issue more understandable.

1. Most importantly, whatever the reason(s), God does not place himself above the horrors of human suffering. It is beyond us how he can stand by and let atrocities take place before his very eyes when he could do something to stop them. We must remember, however, that the Father has not only stood by and let evil people mistreat other evil people and even abuse good people; he stood by and let sinful men crucify his own Son. No wonder Jesus cried out, “*Why have you forsaken me?*” (Matthew 27:46; *etc.*, cp. Psalm 22:1). The human perspective of the dying divine Son is graphically evident in that “cry of dereliction.” That situation is even more difficult when he lets good men do evil, thinking they were doing him service (John 16:2). The crucifixion of Messiah involves both the Father standing by and the Son standing in the pain (John 18:6, *etc.*)—even though Jesus could have called twelve legions of angels to deliver him (Matthew 26:53). Whatever the reason, it is significant enough that deity went through it himself, not asking us to endure anything he was unwilling to suffer. Deity does not play favorites with his own, not even with his own Son, not even with himself.

2. Although we may not understand the rationale for it, we do observe that even in cases of extreme evil God is limiting it. Extreme as it sometimes is, it could be worse. The limit on extreme evil is illustrated in the fact that people pass out when pain becomes too intense. Death may come as divine relief from human suffering. The expression of evil is limited both in degree and length. It tends to hold true that the greater the evil the more short-lived it is. Not only does evil tend to self-destruct, but the rate of its self-destruction is proportionate to its degree. Evil’s self-destruction correlates with how contrary it is to good—to what is truly natural.

3. The more extreme the evil the more obvious its contrast to good. The more evil is allowed to display itself, the more it shows itself for what it is. The greater the evil the more likely we are to reach out for God. The practical fact is that evil prepares the heart for realistically hearing the good news. In no uncertain terms, evil forces us to look beyond the physical, temporal realm. It forces us to acknowledge the need for a benevolent supreme power. Consequently, evil increases the likelihood of our accepting the good news that fellowship with a good God is possible through Christ. Extreme evil increases that likelihood.

4. At least in the case of the righteous, the more extreme the suffering the greater the potential for character development. Virtues like steadfastness and self-control are harder to develop in benevolent circumstances. Evil is not necessary for the definition or development of good, but its presence highlights and enhances the practice of righteousness. The more extreme the evil is, the more pronounced may be the righteousness.

5. Eternal punishment is commensurate with earthly sin. Punishment is proportionate to the degree of evil. “Punishment is commensurate with the crime.” Extreme evil does not “get by” with anything because final judgment eventually pronounces the greater punishment it deserves.

6. Finally, the greater the evil the greater the glory of God. Evil can never win; the harder it tries the greater it fails. The more people are good the more they glorify God by being like him. The more people are evil the more they glorify God by contrast. The more people are evil the more he is glorified in his final triumph over them. Satan and his evil minions are in an inescapable no-win situation.