

Why Does God Permit Evil to Exist?—Part Nine

Dr. John Ankerberg and Dr. Norman Geisler

Dr. John Ankerberg: This topic affects all of us and it comes in many forms, but primarily non-Christians sometimes remain non-Christians because they look squarely at evil and they say, “If there is a God, and Christianity is saying that God created everything, if He is good, how could He have created evil?”

Dr. Norman Geisler: I think that was answered in 400 by St. Augustine when he struggled with the same problem. If God is the author of everything and evil is something, then it would seem like God is the author of evil. The fallacy is the second statement. Evil is not a thing. Evil is the lack in something. For example, evil is like a wound in an arm. You never find a totally wounded arm. A totally wounded arm would be no arm at all. Or evil is like rust in a car. You never find a totally rusted car. You could say, “you have never seen mine!” But a totally rusted car would be a brown spot on the pavement. You never find a totally moth-eaten garment. A totally moth-eaten garment is a hanger in a closet. Evil is not a thing; evil is the lack in something else. God created only good things. Romans 14 says everything is good: “There is nothing unclean in itself.” First Timothy 4 says, “God created everything and it is good.” Genesis 1:30-31 says, “God said it is very good” what He had created. So every **thing** is good. Evil is a privation or a lack. It becomes a legitimate question, where does the lack come from.

Ankerberg: That is the next question. If God created everything, how did evil originate?

Geisler: I think the lack originated by one of the good things God created. One of the good things God created was free will. I have never yet seen anybody march: “Down with freedom. Back to bondage. I want to do everything my mother tells me.” You know, it is good to be free. Even the people who say, it is not good to be free, I think it is good to be free to say that it is not good to be free. If they weren’t free to say it, then they would be defeating themselves in the process of saying, “I enjoy the freedom to say that I don’t enjoy freedom to say....” In other words, it is self-defeating to say, “I freely express that freedom is not a good thing,” because all you have to do is to ask the person, “Do you think that was good that you had that freedom to express that?” If he says, “yes,” then, you see, it is good to be free, isn’t it?

Ankerberg: Yeah, but if it is good to be free, then how do we have something bad come out of something good?

Geisler: Because freedom means you can choose one way or the other, and you can choose good or you can choose evil.

Ankerberg: Okay, but Adam is standing there neutral. He has got true freedom but he knows the consequences intellectually. What made him go in that direction?

Geisler: His free choice. You see you have to distinguish between two different things, desire and decision. I sometimes have the **desire** to do something—punch somebody in the nose that cuts me off in traffic—but I **decide** not to. So desire and decision are two different things. Sometimes I decide to do things that I don’t desire. My wife says “take out the garbage.” I don’t desire to do that, but I decide to do it anyway. Desire and decision are two different things. Adam had no desire to sin. He didn’t have that inclination to sin that we

have that we inherited from Adam. But he did have the ability to make a decision. Now if you ask, “why did Adam decide to do it?” then you are asking a meaningless question. It is like asking when did the bachelor stop beating his wife. So when you ask what caused Adam to sin, you are assuming there is some cause behind his freedom that determined his freedom. Well, then he wouldn’t be free if there was some puppet strings behind him pulling. He decided to do it. If you ask why he decided to do it, the answer is because he decided to do it.

Ankerberg: Would he have done it then by mistake because he didn’t know what he was getting into?

Geisler: Well, obviously the consequences of it are bad and the decision was wrong as compared to God’s command. So in that sense it was a mistake. But it is a decision the consequences of which are still with us and that Adam made only because he was free. If he had been a robot, then he couldn’t have made it. B. F. Skinner says everybody is determined, walled in, we are all determined. Well if we were all determined, then something would have had to determine Adam to do that. If something determined him to do it, like this man who killed a bunch of nurses in Chicago a number of years ago, named Speck. They say his Y-chromosomes were messed up. Well, if his Y-chromosomes caused him to do it, then he is not responsible, right? And if something determined Adam to do it, he is not morally responsible. The Bible says that Adam was morally responsible.

Ankerberg: For people who are not Christians, run through this scenario again. You are a theologian, you are a philosopher, tell us how you see what Genesis is saying, how this thing of evil got started.

Geisler: I see that a good God made a good creature. He gave that good creature a good thing called free will. It is not bad to be free. Everybody enjoys their freedom. Free will means the ability to choose good or evil. Man, who was good, with that good thing called free will, choose to do evil. Evil comes as a consequence of a choice of a good creature who had a good power that he misused.

Ankerberg: As a result of that choice you are saying there comes a lack. Evil is a lack.

Geisler: That makes a lack or privation. Some of the lacks in Adam are that his nature became corrupted. The world became corrupted. That has been passed on to you and to me. So the lack is a result of the free choice. It is good to be free. God created the **fact** of freedom and but man performs the **acts** of freedom. God is responsible for giving us the freedom. We are responsible for what we do with it. We can’t blame Henry Ford for all of the accidents that we cause with the cars he mass-produced. And you can’t blame God for creating creatures that are free. What we do with that freedom—we are responsible what we do with it.

Ankerberg: Lot of people say Christian theology is saying, “Because Adam did something, I am hung with it. I can’t do anything else.” What is the relationship, what are the consequences, of Adam doing something that now affects me, and is it fair?

Geisler: St. Augustine put it very succinctly. He said we are born with the necessity to die and the propensity, or inclination, to sin. The consequences are, you and I are going to die. Romans 5 says the cemetery is a testimony of the fact that something is wrong with this world and something is wrong with us. Also, we are born with this inclination to sin. We are not born in neutral. We are not created in neutral. We are born with the propensity to sin. That would be unfair if nothing had been done about it and it weren’t reversible. But

something has been done about it, the cross of Christ, and it is reversible. All we have to do is to receive by faith the power of God to overcome it.

Ankerberg: But, in a sense, what would you say to the guy who comes back and says, “I didn’t have the choice then really. I just got hung with this and the only thing that I have left is to choose to get out of this.”

Geisler: I would say he is right. I’d say he has got it exactly right. Adam made the original choice; Adam was our representative; he was the first one. Romans 5:12 says, “all men sin in Adam.” We were potentially, seminally, present there in Adam, and as our representative, he made the choice for us. And we proved that we would have done the same thing because we make the same choices ourselves. It would be immanently unfair if Adam was not our representative and we had no way to escape from the dilemma.

Ankerberg: I know of a non-Christian man who has a problem right here. He says, “Okay, let’s say that God knows everything. He knew before that happened that it would happen. He knew the consequences are that a real hell, real pain and suffering come as a result of this choice. Then if God is loving, why did He let man start the ballgame?”

Geisler: “It is better to have loved and to have lost than not to have loved at all.” Just because God knew that someone was going to turn it down, doesn’t mean that He wasn’t loving. I think it is more magnanimous on God’s part to offer something, knowing it is going to be refused, than not to have offered it at all. Anybody can give to the people who are going to praise them, but God gave to the people He knew were going to curse Him. Jesus chose twelve people, one He knew would betray and made him treasurer of the group. I think that manifests greater love.

Ankerberg: The problem is the price that the people pay in terms of punishment, if hell is correct. You have got hell forever and ever and ever, everlasting punishment. You have lots of suffering in this world: people who have got cancer, people who are suffering, people who are incapacitated. How on earth can that be better over just the fact that giving men the choice to love Him?

Geisler: There is a very simple solution to all those problems. No pain, no cancer, no hell—Create no free creatures, don’t give anybody any freedom. Then we will get right back to where is the atheist who really wants a God to create only robots? Where are the Madelyn Murray O’Hair’s of this world who really want that no one could be free to express their views? You see if the atheist is right, what he is saying is God should intervene in this world and stamp out all evil. I can tell you how He can do it. Every time an atheist opens his atheist’s mouth to utter his atheist’s thought, God could cram it full of cotton. That would stop a lot of evil right there. Now what atheist really wants that? Every time he would think an atheist thought, God could give him an Excedrin headache number 2. Every time they pick up their atheist fountain pen to write an atheistic idea, God could explode it in their hands. Then what would they say about that kind of God? “That’s not fair, that is not loving, He is manipulating me.”

No, God is so loving that He will allow people to curse Him. C. S. Lewis put it beautifully in his book, *The Great Divorce*. He was an atheist himself once and became a Christian. He said there are really only two kinds of people in the universe. One says to God, “thy will be done in my life.” The other one, God looks at him and says, “thy will be done. Have it your way.” And in a free universe that is all you can have.