

YOU AND I IN THE DOCK: HELPING CHURCH MEMBERS FULLY PROCESS THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Practical Theology/Christian Formation Interest Group

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Introduction

If God is both great and good, why is there so much pain and suffering in the world? This is the classic question that is at the heart of what is called *theodicy*—the attempt to understand the problem of evil. More specifically, theodicy is the attempt of those who believe in God to justify their theistic (God affirming) belief despite the fact that the presence of so much pain and suffering in the world would seem to argue against it.¹

The problem of evil is something that, I have found, not a few church members and university students struggle with. I want to point out straightaway that the Bible itself doesn't provide us with a theodicy. Instead, passages such as Psalm 131 encourage us to maintain our trust in God despite our inability to, at present, understand all the mysteries in the world. This poignant passage reads thusly:

My heart is not proud, LORD, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. ^{2} But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content. ^{3} Israel, put your hope in the LORD both now and forevermore. (Ps 131:1-3)

With this passage in mind, the purpose of this essay is not to prove anything with respect to the problem of evil, but to put forward some ideas church leaders might use to help their

¹ See Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 88.

parishioners keep hoping in God in the face of it.² Put differently, my goal in this paper is not to provide a philosophical solution to the problem of evil, but to try to clarify how the self-revelation of God presented in the scriptures provides church members with what they need to keep trusting in and cooperating with what he is up to in the world, despite the presence of so much pain and suffering in it.

Some Biblical Explanations for the Problem of Evil

In a chapter devoted to the doctrine of God within his theological primer titled *Christianity 101*, Gilbert Bilezikian addresses the problem of evil. In sum, Bilezikian's theodicy asserts that a Christian answer to this question must begin by taking into account what the Bible has to say about:

- *the reality of the devil* (he opposes God in this world so that God's will is not being done on earth as it is in heaven);³
- *the dynamic of human freedom* (the presence of evil in the world is also explained in Scripture as the result of humans abusing the freedom granted to them by God);⁴

² See the helpful distinction Keller makes between a theodicy that must prove to the skeptic the existence of God and the defense which merely explains why "these two statements—'There's a good, omnipotent God.' and 'There is evil in the world.'—are not a direct contradiction." See *ibid.*, 95–96.

³ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Christianity 101*: (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1993), 40. Likewise, Gregory Boyd argues for the need to take Satan seriously. In his book, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, Boyd puts forward what he refers to as a "warfare theodicy." According to Boyd, the problem of evil must take into account that "God genuinely strives against rebellious creatures. According to Scripture, the head of this rebellion is a powerful fallen angel named Satan. Under him are a myriad of other spiritual beings . . . The world is literally caught up in a spiritual war between God and Satan." Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 15.

⁴ *Ibid.* The argument presented by Bilezikian is known as the "free will" theodicy. For more on this argument both pro and con, see Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 90–93. For his part, Boyd, too, places blame on the human misuse of their God-given freedom, but builds it into his warfare theodicy. He writes: "When Adam and Eve fell, they surrendered to Satan the authority over the earth that they and their descendants were supposed to have. Once established as 'ruler' and 'god' of the world (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2 Cor 4:4), Satan immediately began to exercise his own dominion over the earth." (Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 312.) Moreover, Boyd also encourages us to note how the story of the fall (in Genesis 3) portrays God cursing the earth in such a way as to suggest that, henceforth, creation as a whole will be adversely affected. Boyd comments about this reality thusly: "God created the world such that when morally responsible agents fall, everything they are morally responsible for will become adversely affected. . . . Thus, there is no contradiction in saying that God cursed the earth because of Adam's sin and that Satan and his legions also plague the earth because of Adam's sin." (See Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 313.) Timothy Keller also suggests that the fall described in Genesis 3 impacted the world as a whole and, thus, became the source of both moral evil (i.e., the pain and

- *the true nature of God's greatness* (God's sovereignty doesn't require him to micromanage or control every decision made by human beings),⁵ and
- *the true nature of God's goodness* (although God abhors evil, he sometimes utilizes it for beneficial purposes).⁶

But, then, Bilezikian seems to throw his readers a curve ball when goes on to make the following observation:

Undeniably, human abuse of God-given freedom opened the way for evil to appear in a world created good. But as shocking as it may sound, since it was God who created the world into which evil would emerge, his responsibility is also involved. Had God not created the world, there would have been no evil. The real question is: Why did God proceed with creation, knowing that it would become ravaged with evil and that countless numbers of his creatures would doom themselves to eternal death? Or, put differently: Why did God create free will, knowing that it would become self-destructive? . . . Many sincere people cannot believe in God or in his goodness because he knowingly created a world that held the high risk of generating evil and inflicting unspeakable suffering upon itself.⁷

Wow! We might wonder at this point whose side Bilezikian is on! Furthermore, he goes on to make this even more bold assertion:

So, while acknowledging the fact that human responsibility was definitely involved in the existence of evil, we must honestly face the issue that God bears his share of responsibility for going ahead with the creation of a world that he knew to be corruptible."⁸

God in the Dock

The phrase "God in the Dock" alludes to a thusly-titled essay penned by C. S. Lewis in which he made the following observation:

The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge:

suffering which human beings inflict upon each other by means of such acts as suicide bombings and drive-by shootings) and natural evil (the pain and suffering that occurs as result of natural disasters such as tornados, earthquakes, and tsunamis). See Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 177.

⁵ Bilezikian, 41.

⁶ Ibid., 42-43.

⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁸ Ibid.

God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defence (*sic*) for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock.⁹

My point is that, having put God in the dock (or on trial), so to speak, Bilezikian then proceeds, rather ironically, to argue on his behalf as a legal advocate might. What we might call his "defense brief" puts forward two main arguments. One of which seems to focus on the question of *God's culpability for the fall*, and the other on the fact of *God's responsible behavior after the fall*. As these arguments are considered, we'll also pay attention to how pastor/professor Gregory Boyd (think of him as Bilezikian's co-counsel) also speaks to the matter before us.

The Defense Brief, Part 1: God's Culpability for the Fall

Put simply, the first main argument presented by Bilezikian and Boyd focuses on the question of whether the indictment against God is justified in the first place. In the process, they address three main issues which I have summarized below:

Why God Created Humans as Free Moral Agents

Human beings created in the image of a God who creates in freedom will *necessarily* possess the capacity to make free decisions; this was an act of love, of self-giving; it was an ennobling act on God's part to, in freedom, create image-bearers with freedom.¹⁰

Also noteworthy is the fact that Gregory Boyd takes another, though similar tack in his defense of God. Boyd puts forward the idea that God's *goal* or *desire* was to create creatures with whom he could have a personal, love relationship. For such a relationship to be real and genuine, Boyd insists, it requires a freedom on the part of the creature to love and trust the creator (or not to).¹¹

⁹ See C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 268.

¹⁰ Bilezikian, *Christianity 101*, 45.

¹¹ Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 55, emphasis added.

So, while Bilezikian suggests that, given his nature as a lover, God had no choice but to create, and, because of his own freedom, to create his image-bearers with freedom, Boyd argues that doing so was *necessary* for God to achieve his desired goal: an eternal love and trust-based relationship between a triune God and those who bear his image. Both approaches have the effect of arguing, essentially, that *God had no real choice but to do what he did: create human beings in freedom, with freedom.*

So, as God's defense attorneys, both Bilezikian and Boyd stipulate to the fact that it was indeed God's having created human beings in freedom, with freedom, that made evil possible. At the same time, they insist that God's creative activity wasn't performed in a capricious manner, or with anything other than a loving, benevolent motive in place. Their collective argument seems to be: *How could God have done otherwise?*

God's Creative Activity: Risky Rather than Evil

Moreover, both Bilezikian and Boyd make the assertion that we human beings should not be so quick to presume that God knew in advance that the fall would inevitably occur. While I don't want to get too deep into the weeds here, I suppose it is necessary to point out that a significant feature of Boyd's (and Bilezikian's) proposal is that *God didn't know for sure that the fall would occur, only that it might.* Both Bilezikian and Boyd hold to an open view of the future from God's perspective: because of the phenomenon of human freedom,

the future is partly comprised of possibilities. And since God knows all things perfectly—just as they are, and not otherwise—God knows the future as partly comprised of possibilities. . . . The open view of the future thus affirms that in creating the world God faced the possibility, but not the certainty, that free creatures would choose to oppose him to the extent that they have. This view thereby allows us to consistently affirm that God entered into a somewhat risky endeavor in creating the world.¹²

¹² Ibid., 91–92.

While Bilezikian is also an advocate of open theism—i.e., the open view of the future—the way he makes the case for it in *Christianity 101* is slightly different. For Bilezikian, the issue is not so much that God *can't* possess an exhaustive knowledge of the future, but that he *chooses not to*. According to Bilezikian, if God foreknows that something will occur, then there's a sense in which it's foreordained or predetermined. Therefore, God in his sovereignty has placed some limits on his foreknowledge so as to protect the ability of humans to make genuinely free decisions.¹³

The point both Bilezikian and Boyd are making is that we can't really blame God for creating a world he knew in advance would become infected with evil. Even from God's perspective, the world he created was full of possibilities, not already realized actualities. Though God's sovereignty is such that he can and is guiding human history toward its predetermined *telos* (goal), this doesn't mean that every human choice is foreknown and thus foreordained.

God Considered the Prize Worth the Cost

Having argued that there is no way for such things as love and goodness to be present in God's creation without there also being an alternative,¹⁴ Boyd goes on to suggest that God came to the conclusion that the invaluable prize he was aiming for was simply worth the risk.

Portraying God's decision to create the world as a grand "gamble," Boyd asserts that,

the Lord nevertheless regards the reward of created beings joining him in everlasting, triune celebration as worth whatever losses he and his creation might experience along the way. In other words, God deems the risk involved in creation as being *on the whole* worth it. In creating the world God judged that the quality of the prize was worth the possible, and perhaps even inevitable, pain the venture might cause him and others.¹⁵

¹³ Bilezikian, 29.

¹⁴ See Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 169–73.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 176–77.

The Lingering Question

Despite the truly vigorous defense for their client that Bilezikian and Boyd have thus far presented, they go on to boldly address a question they apparently feel may still be lingering in the minds of many jury members: *In hindsight, isn't it possible to view God's risky decision to create humans (and angels) in freedom, with freedom, an incredibly irresponsible act, given the way things turned out?* This brings us to the second principal argument presented by Bilezikian and Boyd in their defense brief.

The Defense Brief, Part 2: God's Responsible Behavior After the Fall

Actually, the second part of the defense brief presented in this case is a succinct but powerful response to the lingering question presented above. Bilezikian points out to the jury how willing God has been to personally pay the costs that have accrued from his having created humans and angels in freedom, with freedom. The essence of his argument is that it's inappropriate to accuse God of being irresponsible in his creative activity precisely because he has so “lovingly and servant-like, accepted that responsibility and assumed it upon himself.”¹⁶

With passages such as Philippians 2:5–11 and Hebrew 2:14–18 in mind, Bilezikian writes:

The God who created the freedom that would turn against him in pride and rebellion also took it upon himself to come into the world as a baby and to grow up as a servant, perfectly subjected to the Father and submitted to humans to the point of dying at their hand. The God who created beings who chose evil and brought into the world sin, suffering, and death, also took it upon himself to defeat sin through the righteousness of the Son, to bear our suffering on the cross, and to overcome death in the victory of the resurrection. At infinite cost to himself, God initiated a redemptive program that required his own identification with humans at their lowest point. As a result, God is able to offer those who

¹⁶ Bilezikian, 46. Likewise, N. T. Wright observes that “The Gospels thus tell the story, centrally and crucially, which stands unique in the world's great literature, the world's religious theories and visions: the story of the Creator God taking responsibility for what has happened to creation, bearing the weight of its problems on his own shoulders.” N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 94.

submit to him access to new personhood in Christ, inclusion in God’s new community, and deliverance from the eternal consequences of evil.¹⁷

Bilezikian’s point seems to be this: *How could we ever use the words “irresponsible” and “God” in the same sentence?*

The Defense Brief, Part 3: *God’s Message to Job*

Bilezikian and Boyd also make use of the biblical story of Job in their defense of God in the face of human pain and suffering. The book of Job is one of several wisdom writings included in the Old Testament along with the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs (Song of Solomon). Job’s focus is on the sudden, severe, and sustained suffering experienced by its title character even though he is introduced at the very beginning of the work as an especially righteous, God-fearing man (Job 1:1). The question arises: *Why would God allow someone as righteous as Job to experience such horrific suffering?*¹⁸

Approaching the Job story as a biblical theodicy,¹⁹ some interpreters have suggested that it “seeks to justify the arbitrary dispensation of injustice by God for His private ends.”²⁰ In other words, this perspective maintains that, whether we like it or not, the purpose of the book of Job is to function as a bald declaration of God’s sovereign right to do whatever he wants with the people he created.

Another move some interpreters make is to suggest that the story’s purpose is to function as a cathartic (or psychological aid). The message of the book is simply that *ambiguity happens!*

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ In my book, *Pursuing Moral Faithfulness*, I discuss the manner in which the story of Job illustrates the phenomenon of “purposeful ambiguity”—God’s use of ambiguity in our lives to drive us to our knees and into a more theologically real relationship with him. (See Gary Tyra, *Pursuing Moral Faithfulness: Ethics and Christian Discipleship* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015], 258–68.) Some of my interaction here with Bilezikian and Boyd regarding “the message of the book of Job” is adapted from that discussion.

¹⁹ David Wolfers, *Deep Things Out of Darkness: The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 68. See also Robert Davidson, *The Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1964), 166–68; Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 929.

²⁰ Wolfers, 68.

According to this view, the question of undeserved suffering that's at the heart of the work is never fully answered. And yet, the reader experiences a strange and ironic comfort as he or she identifies with Job and the bold maintenance of his integrity against all accusers, human and divine. Thus, one proponent of this perspective asserts: "all the hero can do, if he is visited as Job was, is to persevere in the pride of his conviction, to appeal to God against God, and if he is as fortunate as Job, hear his questionings echo into nothingness in the infinite mystery and the glory."²¹ Put simply, though the story of Job provides no real answer to the question of the problem of evil, reading it and identifying with Job provides some psychological comfort: we're not alone in our suffering!

In contrast to the two views just presented, the conclusion which both Bilezikian and Boyd come to in their respective treatments of this important biblical story is that its ultimate message is that Job must recognize that he lives in a complex and combative world in which things happen that are not directly caused by God.²² Thus, all of the primary human characters in the story (Job and his three friends) were wrong in their diagnosis of Job's dilemma. Contrary to the insistence of Job's three friends, he wasn't suffering because of some secret, unconfessed sin in his life (see Job 4:1-9). Contrary to Job's own insistence, he wasn't suffering because God was acting in an arbitrary and unjust manner toward him (see Job 34:5). Instead, say Boyd and Bilezikian, Job was suffering simply because *crud happens!* More specifically, because of the way we humans misused our moral freedom, we are now living in a temporary war zone in which Satan can and does do things that are not necessarily willed by God.

²¹ See Richard B. Sewall, "The Book of Job" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Book of Job* ed. Paul S. Sanders (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1968), 34.

²² See Boyd, *God at War*, 52, 165-166.

According to this perspective, the best God can do at the end of the book is reassure Job that he knows of his suffering and is grieved by it. Though God's ultimate victory is assured, there's a sense in which, in the meantime, God and Job are in this difficult dilemma together.²³ Boyd asserts that the message of the book is that "[t]he cosmos is far more complex and combative than either Job or his friends assumed in their simplistic theologies,"²⁴ and that "[p]eace comes to Job only when he learns that, though his suffering is a mystery, he can and must nevertheless humbly trust God. His suffering is not God's fault, and God is not against him. God's character is trustworthy."²⁵

It must be acknowledged that Bilezikian and Boyd have put forward a hearty defense of God in the face of evil. There's a sense in which I hope they are correct. And yet, I'm also aware that they might not be, and that some Christians will struggle with certain aspects of their three-part defense brief. For at least some readers of this paper, a few still-lingering questions might be: *What if we are not open theists who believe that God has placed limits on his foreknowledge? What if God's creating humans and angels in freedom, with freedom, was not really a gamble as Boyd suggests? What if there's another way to understand the message of Job, one that doesn't let God off the hook for human suffering quite so easily?*

Bilezikian and Boyd in the Dock

Let's make our way now, so to speak, to the jury room where, in real life, a jury goes to form a verdict with respect to the case before it. Ideally, a jury's verdict is arrived at as its members reflect together on the evidence and arguments presented during the trial, and then engage in a discursive (conversational) process of deliberation. Essentially, the jury is weighing

²³ Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 224.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

²⁵ See Bilezikian, 45; Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 226.

the merits of the cases that have been presented to them. Just how convincing were the arguments put forward by the prosecution and then the defense?

In this case, however, the jury-room conversation is one-way. I will conclude the first half of this essay by briefly summarizing my take on several key arguments put forward by Bilezikian and Boyd on God's behalf. Then, in second half of the paper, I will put forward a slightly yet significantly nuanced version of their freewill/warfare theodicy—one I believe can do an even better job of helping church members fully process the problem of evil.

In a forthcoming work tentatively titled *The Dark Side of Discipleship: Why and How the New Testament Encourages Christians to Deal with the Devil* (Cascade Books/Wipf and Stock), I go into much more detail than I will here. In this essay it must suffice for me to indicate that: (a) for reasons that are philosophical, theological, and biblical in nature, I'm reluctant to embrace the open view of the future which Bilezikian and Boyd's theodicy relies upon; (b) I'm concerned that the interpretation of the story of Job put forward by Boyd and Bilezikian may be guilty of essentially misconstruing some passages in the book's introduction and conclusion which, it seems to me, suggest that there was a providential, transformational *purpose* behind Job's suffering, and that God was using Satan to bring this purpose to pass; and (3) I can't help but wonder about the possibility of a more nuanced understanding of God's creative impulse that, while retaining the laudable emphasis Bilezikian and Boyd place on the relational nature of God, will at the same time allow for an understanding of his sovereignty, foreknowledge, and end-game that the scriptures as a whole seem to bear witness to.

My Suggestion: Two Subtle but Highly Significant Shifts in Focus

In a nutshell, I am suggesting that, as compelling as the romantic understanding of God's creative impulse is, perhaps it should not be focused on to the exclusion of other possible

motivations. And that we should also take into consideration some of the other *attributes* of God besides his loving and freedom-giving nature. It is my contention that a more nuanced understanding of *God's creative impulse* and his *nature* are game-changers in our discussion of how God ended up creating a world in which the devil could acquire authority and introduce so much moral and natural evil in it.

Toward a More Nuanced Understanding of *God's Creative Impulse*

We have seen how Bilezikian points out the remarkable degree to which God assumed responsibility for the problem of evil by assuming human flesh and suffering and dying for humankind in such a way as to defeat the devil's stranglehold on his image-bearers. Once again, this allusion to God's incarnational, self-emptying, self-limiting redemptive behavior is evocative of Hebrews 2:14–18, a pertinent passage Boyd also refers to numerous times in his books *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy*, and *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict*. The first two verses of this passage read thusly:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—^{15} and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. (Heb 2:14-15)

I will point out here that this poignant pericope begins with the words: “Since the children.” (Heb 2:14). It is God's *children* Christ has gone to great lengths to rescue from the merciless tyranny of the evil one. This portrayal of God sounds less romantic than it does parental, right? Think about it: God's creative activity had him making possible the existence of sentient creatures whose free decisions would impact him, other creatures, and, ultimately all of creation. Put differently, God ended up generating creatures who possessed the potential to both bless his heart and break it. And then he remained faithful to these creatures even as they rebelled against

him. Sound familiar? Does the image of the father in the story of the lost son (Lk 15:11–32) come to mind?

What if God’s creative impulse was not exclusively romantic in nature, but parental as well? What if his goal in creating human image-bearers can be understood not only as a spiritual bride but also as a forever family made up of spiritual daughters and sons who could enter into the eternal dance of mutual love and respect enjoyed by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Isn’t that what the eternal state (kingdom of God) will essentially involve (see Rev 21:1-7)? And shouldn’t we take into account the many passages in the New Testament that refer to Christ’s followers as “children of God,”²⁶ “sons and daughters,”²⁷ and “heirs?”²⁸

These are some important questions. This subtle shift in the way we view God’s creative impulse—from romantic partner to responsible parent—carries with it two dramatic implications for how we understand his creative activity.

Parenting, by Definition, Involves Give and Take

It’s because I believe this shift in focus from the “Creator as romantic partner” to the “Creator as responsible parent” is a game-changer in the discussion of the problem of evil that I want to explore the correlation between God’s parenting and our own a bit more. To begin, I’m struck by the *self-encumbering* that God’s parenting, and that engaged in by responsible humans, can’t help but result in. Surely, this self-encumbering can’t have taken God by surprise.

There is no way for a responsible, loving person to enter into a relationship with another sentient being and not be *inconvenienced*, *limited*, or *encumbered* by it to some degree.²⁹ Once a

²⁶ Matt 5:9; Jn 1:12; 11:52; Rom 8:14, 19, 21; Gal 3:26; Phil 2:15; 1 Jn 3:1, 2, 10; 5:2, 19.

²⁷ 2 Cor 6:18; Gal 4:6; Heb 2:10; 12:8.

²⁸ Rom 8:17; Gal 3:29; Eph 3:6; Tit 3:7; 1 Pet 3:7.

²⁹ I’m reminded of this quote by C. S. Lewis: “There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that

genuine interactive relationship with another human being is entered into, it's no longer a simple matter of fulfilling one's own wishes, meeting one's own needs, and seeking one's own welfare. Now there is another person in our world whose wishes, needs, and welfare must be considered and, at times, even prioritized. Ask any young couple who have just brought a newborn home from the hospital about whether their life is the same now as it was just 24 hours ago!

Put simply, to choose to bring another person into the world who possesses an independent mind and will is not *liable* to change your life; it's *guaranteed* to! When thoughtful humans reproduce, they do so *knowing* their progeny will bring them some pain as well as joy. They cannot help but be *aware* that with parenting comes some self-encumbering that is an *inevitability* rather than a mere possibility. Surely God possessed this awareness. *If so, his creative activity really wasn't a risk-taking endeavor after all, and there is no necessity for a revised understanding of God's foreknowledge.* We don't have to embrace an open theism in order to possess a highly relational understanding of God. His decision to create human image-bearers in freedom, with freedom, guaranteed that our relationship with him would be one of give and take.

Furthermore, conceiving of God as a responsible parent points us toward yet another theological truth—one that can't help but impact our thinking about the problem of evil.

God's End-Game Requires that His Heart Be Broken!

To reiterate, my assertion is that God's creative activity entailed some dramatic *self-encumbering* he had to have known in advance would occur. And yet, God created us human image-bearers anyway. Why? I contend that the answer lies in God's *end-game, which I suggest*

casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.” C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: HarperOne, 2017), 155–56.

*is best conceived of as a forever family made up of progeny who have been enabled by grace to love, trust, and honor their creator (and one another) fully and forever.*³⁰ It's a simple vision really, and yet breathtakingly beautiful.

It was also quite costly. Indeed, it's the costly nature of this divine dream that makes its realization relevant to a discussion of the problem of evil.

The apostle John made clear that our love for God (and others) is *made possible* by a genuine experience of God's prior love for us (1 John 4:19). And how was God's love perfectly evidenced to us? The apostle Paul insists that the way we humans become fully and adequately aware of divine love is through the cross-work of Christ (Rom 5:8). In other words, our becoming fully aware of God's magnificent, eternal love for us required the incarnation, suffering, and death of God's eternal Son on our behalf *while we were still in rebellion against him!*

Here's my point: evidently, the amazing gift of God creating us—his bringing us into existence, giving us the gift of life—wasn't enough to inspire or inculcate within us human beings the kind of complete love, trust, and faithfulness that will last for eternity. Apparently, it's necessary for God's image-bearers to experience more than *creation* in order to love, trust, and honor their creator the way he deserves. We need to experience *redemption* as well—God's coming after us, reconciling us to himself through the death of his much-loved son. Put simply, *it's only by witnessing and experiencing the amazing, loving act of redemption, which cost God so dearly, that our hearts can now be filled with an amazing ability to love, trust, and honor him (and one another) the way he deserves: fully and forever (see 2 Cor 5:14–15; 1 Thess 4:17)!*

So, the game-changing questions I'm posing are these:

³⁰ See 2 Pet 1:10–11; Rev 1:6; 21:1–4, 7; see also Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 4:17; Eph 3:20–21; 1 Tim 1:15–17; 2 Tim 2:10; 1 Jn 2:25; 3:14–15.

- *What if the presence of evil in our world wasn't simply an unfortunate outcome of God's creative activity as Boyd's divine risk-taking rhetoric might suggest?*
- *What if God always knew that giving his human image-bearers the gift of temporal life wasn't enough, by itself, to inspire them as free moral agents to choose to love, trust, and honor him (and one another) fully and forever?*
- *What if God always knew that it would take the sacrificial death of his Son to fully communicate to his image bearers just how much he loves them, and to inculcate within them the capacity to love, trust, and honor him (and one another) the way he deserves (fully and forever)?*

As we are pondering these “what if” questions we must keep in mind that the scenario I’m suggesting finds some support from Revelation 13:8 which speaks of Christ as the sacrificial lamb “slain from the creation of the world” (see 2 Tim 1:9; Heb 9:26; 1 Pet 1:18–20; Jn 17:24)!

So, it appears that God—the ultimate parent—created human beings as free moral agents knowing full well that his heart: (a) would be broken by our rebellion against his loving lordship; (b) would be broken by the death of his Son on our behalf; and (c) would be broken by the fact that some of his image-bearers would use their free moral agency in such a way as to never allow themselves to be enabled to love, trust, and honor their creator (and one another) in the way he deserves? Maybe when we humans refer to God as a Father, we’re not projecting onto him an aspect of our reality. Maybe, instead, the phenomenon of responsible human parents making the decision to procreate despite the guarantee that doing so will involve some significant self-encumbering and heartache (as well as joy) is a reflection of God’s archetypal reality as an eternal, loving, self-giving Father. If this is granted, then it would seem to be possible to possess a highly relational understanding of our creator without having to revise the biblical portrayal of his foreknowledge in order to do so.

Toward a Fuller Understanding of God’s Nature and What He’s Up to in the World

This second suggested shift in focus I’m proposing is related to the first. We need to keep in mind that responsible human parents not only love on their kids; they discipline them as well.

In fact, the reason why they discipline their kids is precisely because they love them. According to the Epistle to the Hebrews, the loving administration of some needed discipline is yet another point of similarity between human parenting and that engaged in by God. To the beleaguered recipients of this letter, its author wrote:

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ^{8} If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ^{9} Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ^{10} They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. (Heb 12:7–10)

According to this verse, high on God’s parenting agenda is the disciplining of his progeny so that they might know and embody one of his divine attributes in particular—one that a multitude of biblical passages refers to—his being innately holy, and wholly committed to justice.³¹ So important is this attribute to who God is and what he’s about that Hebrews 12:14–28 goes on to say that our learning to share (embody in ourselves) God’s holiness is critical to our ability to “see the Lord” (i.e., experience him forever)!

Once again, I sincerely appreciate the arguments Bilezikian and Boyd have put forward in God’s defense. But, as we’ve seen, their focus is primarily on the benevolent rather than capricious motive for God’s creative activity. I contend that, to fully process the problem of evil, we must focus not only on the impact that God’s *self-giving love* had upon his *creative impulse*,

³¹ Some biblical passages which indicate that *holiness* should be considered an attribute of God include: Lev 1:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8; Josh 24:19; 1 Sam 2:2; 6:20; Ps 71:22; 77:13; 78:41; 89:7; 99:5, 9; Is 5:16; 29:23; 43:3; 48:17; 54:5; 55:5; 60:9; Jer 51:5; Hos 11:9, 12; Hab 1:12; 3:3; Rev 4:8; 2 Cor 7:1; Eph 4:24; Heb 12:10; 1 Pet 1:16. Some biblical passages which indicate that *justice* should be considered a cardinal virtue possessed by God include: Deut 32:4; Ps 9:16; 11:7; 33:5; 36:6; 45:6; 50:6; 89:14; 97:2; 99:4; 101:1; 103:6; Pr 8:20; 28:5; Isa 5:16; 30:18; 33:5; 51:4; 61:8; Mic 3:8; Zeph 3:5; Lk 11:42; 18:7; Acts 17:31; Rom 12:1; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 6:14–18; Rev 19:11.

but also on the significance of his *holiness and commitment to justice* for *what he's up to in this world, and the one to come*.

God's Justice and the World He Created

Because the divine reality out of which all other realities derive is holy and just, some have suggested that the environment in which we human beings find ourselves is best thought of as a “moral universe.”³² Such a world (Greek: *kosmos*) has baked into it not just a cosmic *awareness* of holiness and justice, and not just a cosmic *preference* for holiness and justice, but a cosmic *requirement* for holiness and justice (see Lev 19:1–2; Mic 6:8; 1 Pet 1:15–16; Mt 23:23). Another way to put this is that, precisely because holiness/justice is a primary attribute/virtue of the one who formed all creation, holiness/justice can be thought of as integral to the very fabric of the moral universe in which we exist. This metaphysical reality explains why God can't simply wink at sin, but must address it. It's not only about his glory, or his being true to himself; it's also about *sustaining the cosmos*. For God, the sustainer of the universe, to wink at evil would be to allow a metaphysical cancer to go unaddressed. The future of the cosmos requires God to deal decisively with sin and injustice, even if the perpetrators of it are his kids, as the story of the fall related in Genesis 3 so dramatically indicates.³³ Tim Keller provides some inferential support for what I'm proposing when he writes:

The devastating loss of *shalom* through sin is described in Genesis 3. We are told that as soon as we abandoned living for and enjoying God as our highest good—the entire created world became broken. Human beings are so integral to the fabric of things that when human beings turned from God the entire warp and woof of the world unraveled. . . . In Romans 8, Paul says that the entire world is now ‘in bondage to decay’ and ‘subject to futility’ and will not be put right until we are put right.³⁴

³² For example, see Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 158, 160; Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 32.

³³ What I am proposing here is in some respects similar to the “natural law” theodicy promoted by C. S. Lewis. See Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 2015.

³⁴ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 170.

On the one hand, we're given to believe that, because of human sin, our world is broken and must be put right. On the other, we must also keep in mind that our creator can't simply wink at sin but must address it in a holy and just manner. These two observations prompt the questions: *What was God thinking when he situated what he knew in advance to be fallible human image-bearers in a moral universe where the demand for justice is part of its warp and woof? Does his doing so suggest that his creative activity was in fact irresponsible at best or capricious at worst, or is there a sense in which God's endowing his progeny with free moral agency and then placing them in a world that requires justice was, from the beginning, part of his plan?*

God's Justice and the Old Testament Narrative

It's this metaphysical connection between God's justice and his creation that lies behind the contention of N. T. Wright in his book *Evil and the Justice of God* that God's response to what happened in the garden (Gen 3) is what the rest of the biblical story is all about. Wright defines the problem of evil or *theodicy* as an "explanation of the justice of God in the face of counterevidence."³⁵ In other words, at the heart of the problem of evil is the question: *How can we consider God just when there's so much injustice in the world he created?*³⁶ Essentially ignoring the question of evil's origin,³⁷ Wright's focus is on God's holy and just response to it. The justification of God in the face of evil, according to Wright, is the consistently *just* way the Bible portrays him responding to it.

Thus, Wright contends that in the Old Testament we find a series of narratives which show God judging rather than winking at evil, even when it's his own people who are responsible for it (e.g., Isa 5:1–30; 59:1–8; Ezek 9:8–9)! Sadly, these narratives make it apparent

³⁵ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 45.

³⁶ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 64–66.

³⁷ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 45, 71–72; 136, 141.

that his own people are not any less capable of the primary sins of idolatry, immorality, and injustice than those not in a covenant relationship with him. However, there is some good news. The Old Testament portion of the story culminates with the prophetic promise of a future act of divine redemption that will not only heal God's people of their propensity toward pride, selfishness, and rebellion (Isa 53), but will make possible a new creation—essentially, a restoration of the health and wholeness of Eden (Isa 55). This is what the Old Testament is about, says Wright. “It’s written *to tell the story of what God has done, is doing and will do about evil.*”³⁸

God’s Justice and the Cross of Christ

Proceeding into the New Testament, we read that the aforementioned act of divine redemption has finally occurred by means of the cross-work of Christ. *Jesus’ passion needs to be understood as evidence of not only the full extent of God’s love for his image-bearers, but his commitment to cosmic justice as well!* Wright explains:

The story of Gethsemane and of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth present themselves in the New Testament as the strange, dark conclusion to the story of what God does about evil, of what happens to God’s justice when it takes human flesh, when it gets its feet muddy in the garden and its hands bloody on the cross. The multiple ambiguities of God’s actions in the world come together in the story of Jesus.³⁹

I am sometimes asked by students: “Why did Christ have to die? Why couldn’t God just forgive our sin?” Thus, it might be helpful here for the connection between God’s justice and Christ’s suffering and death on the cross to be clarified even more. Here’s an attempt to do this.

We have already adduced that for God, the sustainer of the universe, to wink at evil would be to allow a metaphysical cancer to go unaddressed. This simply cannot happen. We

³⁸ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 45, emphasis original.

³⁹ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 74.

must keep this insight in mind when considering those New Testament passages which indicate that the death of Jesus on the cross possessed an *atoning* significance (Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17; 1 Jn 2:2; 1 Jn 4:10), and those which stipulate a firm connection between Christ’s death and “our sins” (Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 15:3; Gal 1:4; Col 2:13; 1 Pet 2:24; 1 Jn 1:9; 2:2; 3:5; 4:10; Rev 1:4–6). Thus, one way of understanding its atoning significance is that Jesus’ death on the cross had the effect of satisfying a spiritual, perhaps even metaphysical, requirement for *justice*. This idea is supported by Romans 3:25–26 where we find Paul asserting that the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross made it possible for God to forgive guilty sinners and yet remain holy and just himself.⁴⁰ This critical passage reads:

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—^{26} he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Rom 3:25–26)

Timothy Keller puts it this way: “On the cross neither justice nor mercy loses out—both are fulfilled at once. Jesus’ death was necessary if God was going to take justice seriously and still love us.”⁴¹ The implication is that some sort of a requirement for justice, perhaps one that’s built into the fabric of the moral universe God created, was satisfied through Christ’s action on behalf of sinful humanity.⁴²

The finally realized good news is that the vicarious suffering of Yahweh’s servant foretold by the prophet Isaiah (Isa 53:4–6, 10–12) found its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth. As a

⁴⁰ Gregory Boyd seems to provide some implicit support for this idea when he suggests that God, in his sovereignty, can create what amounts to a “metaphysical necessity” that even he must abide by. See Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 354.

⁴¹ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 196.

⁴² Though there are other ways the apostolic authors referred to the experience of salvation—e.g., *redemption* (Mark 10:45; 1 Pet. 1:18-19); *reconciliation* (2 Cor 5:18-20); *adoption* (Rom 8:14-17; Gal 4:4-7; Eph 1:5); *spiritual healing* (1 Pet. 2:24); and *liberation* (Col 2:15; Heb 2:14–15)—at the heart of all of these various metaphors is the dynamic of atonement.

result, a healing of the human heart can now occur (1 Pet 2:24). This means that it's not only possible for fallen human beings to have their sins forgiven, but for them to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, to live righteously (in a holy manner) before God (Rom 8:1–17). All of this, Wright argues, is part of the biblical story, which, in turn, is about God's response to the problem of evil! Ultimately, the cross of Christ, forgiveness of sins and in-filling of the Spirit is about God's end-game!

God's Justice and the Restoration of Creation

This is precisely why Wright proceeds to point out that the biblical record of God's response to evil doesn't end with Christ's death on the cross, as *crucial* as that was. Wright goes on to argue for a connection between Paul's discussion of the justification of God at the personal level in the atonement (in Romans 3:25–26) with his discussion of the future liberation of creation as a whole (in Roman 8:19–27; see also Eph 1:7–10; Col 1:19–20).⁴³ In doing so, he suggests that

unless creation as a whole is put to rights, it might look as though God the Creator had blundered or was weak and incapable, or was actually unjust. No, declares Paul: the renewal of creation, the birth of the new world from the laboring womb of the old, will demonstrate that God is in the right. Romans 8 is the deepest New Testament answer to the "problem of evil," to the question of God's justice.⁴⁴

So, how can we consider God just in the face of so much injustice currently at work in the world he created? The answer lies in the notion of God's end-game. The creator is not done with the world yet! A restored creation, in which righteous dwells, is even now in the works (2 Pet 3:13)!

13. ⁴³ See also George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, 450, 612–

⁴⁴ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 117–18.

God's Justice and the Future Day of Reckoning

What's more, the New Testament also contains numerous references to a future day of reckoning or judgment in which every person will have to give an account before a holy God for how they've lived their lives.⁴⁵ In this way too, God's commitment to justice in an unjust world is evidenced. Tim Keller explains:

Many people complain that they cannot believe in a God who judges and punishes people. But if there is no Judgment Day, what about all the enormous amount of injustice that has been and is being perpetrated? If there is no Judgment Day, then there are only two things to do—lose all hope or turn to vengeance. Either it means that the tyranny and oppression that have been so dominant over the ages will never be redressed, and in the end it will make no difference whether you live a life of justice and kindness or a life of cruelty and selfishness, or it means that, since there is no Judgment Day we will need to take up our weapons and go and hunt down the evildoers now. We will have to take justice into our own hands. We will have to be the judges, if there is no Judge.⁴⁶

Likewise, N. T. Wright makes this fundamental observation: “the ultimate answer to the problem of evil is to be found in God's creation of a new world, new heavens and new earth, with redeemed, renewed human beings ruling over it and bringing to it God's wise, healing order.”⁴⁷ Then, Wright goes on to insist:

This does not require that all human beings will come to repent and share the joy of God's new world, wonderful though that would be. Indeed throughout the New Testament we are constantly warned that the choices we make in this life, especially the choices about what sort of a person we might become, are real and have lasting consequences which God himself will honor. But we do not have the choice to sulk in such a way as to prevent God's party going ahead without us. We have the right, like the older brother [in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son—Lk 15:11–31], to sit it out; God has the right to come and reason with us; but the fatted calf is going to be eaten whether we join in or not. Those who accept God's invitation to God's party on God's terms will indeed celebrate the feast of deliverance from evil.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ For example, see Acts 17:31; Rom 2:5–11; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Cor 5:9–10; 1 Tim 5:24–25; 2 Tim 4:1; Heb 6:1–2; 9:27–28; 10:26–31; 1 Pet 1:17; 2 Pet 2:4, 9; 3:7; 1 Jn 4:17; Jude 1:6; Rev 6:10; 11:18; 14:7; 20:11–15.

⁴⁶ Keller, *Walking with God*, 116.

⁴⁷ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 146.

⁴⁸ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 146–47.

Without meaning to take anything away from Wright, I believe I hear in these words the influence of another famous British thinker, C. S. Lewis, who spoke of the fate of the steadfastly unrepentant in several of his books, especially *The Problem of Pain* and *The Great Divorce*. This is significant because Lewis, while reluctantly arguing for the morality of hell,⁴⁹ also suggested that its purpose is not retribution but isolation (i.e., quarantine). Indeed, he famously suggested that people aren't really sent to hell; they're there of their own choosing. It's a state of self-exile. While the suffering in hell is real and terrible, its doors are locked from the inside.⁵⁰

Such a view of the final judgment and eternal state, while taking seriously the notion that sin, evil, and injustice constitute a spiritual, metaphysical malignancy that God simply must deal with for the sake of the cosmos, has the potential to mitigate the claim that any form of eternal punishment is both unloving and unjust. A proponent of a view similar to Lewis's explains:

People are not in hell for the reasons of punishment. People are in hell under their own free will, eternally separated from God because they cannot will freely as God's will. This state of exile is however, one of eternal pain and sorrow. . . . identical to the traditional concept of hell except for one facet; the primary motivation for hell is not retributive. If hell is instead a place of exile, then hell is no longer incompatible with God's love [and justice].⁵¹

Some of the best theological minds of the contemporary era suggest that our continuing to believe that the creator is loving and just isn't something we must do despite the fact that there will someday be a day of reckoning during which every image-bearer will give an account for

⁴⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperOne, 2015, 119–21, 130.

⁵⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 130. It should be noted that Keller seems to follow Lewis on this point. See Tim Keller, "The Importance of Hell," *Redeemer Churches and Ministries* (August 2009), https://www.redeemer.com/redeemer-report/article/the_importance_of_hell.

⁵¹ See Anonymous, "Deconstructing the Traditional Hell," *Matthew2262's Blog* (October 2012), <https://matthew2262.wordpress.com/2012/10/14/deconstructing-the-traditional-hell/>. For a more detailed discussion of how what is referred to as the "quarantine model" of hell can be understood as demonstrating love for the damned, see Eleonore Stump "Dante's Hell, Aquinas' Moral Theory, and the Love of God," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 16, no. 2 [1986]: 196–97.) For more on the notion that maintaining the existence of the damned is a more loving action than their annihilation, see James S. Spiegel, "Annihilation, Everlasting Torment, and Divine Justice," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, August 18, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2015.1077469>.

what they did with the freedom they were endowed with, but precisely because this reckoning will occur. Why? Because this, too, is part of God's response to the problem of evil!⁵²

God's Justice and His End-Game

What we have seen so far is that it's possible to argue that perhaps the best defense of God in the face of evil is the consistently just and righteous manner the Bible portrays him responding to it. But, having dared to go where angels fear to tread, I'll go ahead and pose a most provocative question: *Was the biblical story, which seems to be all about God's response to evil, a result of the fall or the reason for it?* While Wright essentially ignores this big, bold query, I feel the need to address it, suggesting a possible connection between God's justice and his end-game.

To review, God's grand goal is a forever family made up of progeny who have been so impacted by their experience of redemption that they are now capable of loving, trusting, and honoring their creator (and one another) fully and forever. But think about it: *How can we love, trust, and honor God fully and forever if we're not fully aware of who he is and what he's about? Doesn't God's end-game require that we possess a profound understanding of not only his mercy and grace, but his holiness and commitment to justice as well? Isn't it true that there's simply no way for God's image-bearers to adequately know who their creator is and what he's about without watching how he responds to the problem of evil?*

Put differently, it might be argued that it's not possible to genuinely share in God's holiness/justice without a sufficient understanding of what holiness is and isn't. Since such an

⁵² The astute reader will wonder if the quarantine or self-exile model of hell might leave the door open, so to speak, to the possibility that someone quarantined from the rest of creation might at some point repent, experience a spiritual healing, unlock the door, and be restored to God and the rest of creation. Though the scriptures as a whole seem reluctant to suggest that this ever has or will occur (cf. 1 Pet 4:6), and many theologians argue that the nature of sin is to eventually turn the human soul into a black hole which engages in an eternal swallowing of itself, we must always keep in mind God's goodness as well as his holiness, thus maintaining some theological humility in the face of mystery.

understanding would seem to require our observing God’s rigorous response to evil and injustice as reflected in the biblical story, it stands to reason that *the process of creatures with free will learning to share in their creator’s innate holiness and commitment to justice essentially required that the problem of evil become a thing.*⁵³

Put differently, yet again, what if it were the case that for his freedom-wielding but naïve image-bearers to properly value the end-game their creator had in mind (an eternal state in which righteousness dwells), they had to experience a dreadful alternative, a provisional existence in which unrighteousness is pervasive (cf. 2 Pet 3:13)? Could it be that in order for God’s progeny to value his eternal kingdom enough to make it the main aim of their entire being, they had to first experience a world ruled over by an anti-truth, anti-life, anti-God angelic usurper?

C. S. Lewis famously argued: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”⁵⁴ I’ve already suggested that God might have allowed the fall to occur in order to inculcate within his image-bearers the capacity to love, trust, and honor him (and one another) fully and forever. What I’m suggesting now is that we can find in this Lewis quote some support for yet another bold notion. For God’s image-bearers to become sufficiently appreciative of the main event—the new, eternal age in which righteousness dwells—they simply had to experience a provisional world which, though filled with much beauty and many wonderful blessings, could never satisfy the desperate longings of their hearts. How does God help innocent, naïve creatures, not ready for eternity, know they were made for it? How does a heavenly father adequately inculcate within his progeny a passion for the holiness and justice he knows is critical to their immortal

⁵³ A variation of this argument can be found in C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 38–39.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 136–37.

existence? It was only by allowing the fall to occur, and then having his image-bearers observe his consistently holy and righteous response to the evil and injustice it caused, that their hearts could be adequately *aroused*, not only toward him, but also toward what his end-game entails: an eternity spent existing in and presiding over a world made right!.

Please note: I'm not insisting that this must be the case. It's possible that Bilezikian and Boyd have it right: that God created human beings in freedom with freedom, not knowing for sure that they would misuse their moral freedom and empower Satan to affect human history in a manner that's virtually, if not literally, in God's face.

Or, it could be that the two shifts in focus I've proposed are game-changers because they enable an alternative to the theodicy of Bilezikian and Boyd—an alternative that makes it possible for God's people to reconcile the presence of evil in our world with a more biblically-faithful understanding of the creator's foreknowledge and sovereignty, and the most likely meaning of the story of Job. In support of the nuanced defense brief I've proffered, I will cite a three passages from Paul's pen, which, though brief, are nevertheless pregnant with problem-of-evil-processing significance:

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁽⁴⁾ perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Rom 5:3-4)

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Rom 8:18)

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. (2 Cor 4:17)

Ultimately, what I'm suggesting is that we are back to the book of Job and its message that God will, like responsible human parents, sometimes “play rough” with his kids. Our creator/heavenly Father is not only great and good, but infinitely, inscrutably wise as well (see

Rom 11:33–36). God is God and we are not. God is God, therefore we don't have to be. God is God, and we can trust him, as scary as this is to do when we're walking through valleys dark.⁵⁵

The call of the psalmist is not for us, as unweaned children, to clamor for the breast, screaming and squirming, insisting on palatable answers to all our theological and philosophical questions before we will honor God. The call is for us, as those with weaned souls, to keep trusting in Yahweh, the God of the Bible, even in the face of mystery.

And yet, I realize that merely posing the philosophical/theological possibility presented above might strike some readers as a gross trivialization of the real pain and suffering that evil creates. I trust that the next few pages will demonstrate that this is not my intent. Instead, behind the ensuing discussion is a very practical question. *Could it be that God's end-game requires that we not only understand God's holiness and justice, and value an eternity earmarked by it, but go on to become the kind of Christ-followers who eagerly cooperate here and now with what our creator is up to in the world with respect to the problem of evil?*

God's Justice and His Church

The survey of the biblical story presented above included observations about what God has done and will do about the problem of evil. A question I've yet to address is: *What is God currently doing about it?* The answer to this question is this: the Bible as a whole makes it quite clear that

⁵⁵ Besides, as C. S. Lewis points out, it doesn't do any real good to decide to disagree with God's decision to create in freedom, with freedom. He writes: "Perhaps we feel inclined to disagree with Him. But there is a difficulty about disagreeing with God. He is the source from which all your reasoning power comes: you could not be right and He wrong any more than a stream can rise higher than its own source. When you are arguing against Him you are arguing against the very power that makes you able to argue at all: it is like cutting off the branch you are sitting on. If God thinks this state of war in the universe a price worth paying for free will—that is, for making a live world in which creatures can do real good or harm and something of real importance can happen, instead of a toy which only moves when He pulls the strings—then we may take it is worth paying." See Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 48.

our holy and just God expects his people, in every era, to pursue holiness and justice in his name!⁵⁶

Once again, N. T. Wright is of some assistance here. He reminds us that the Bible indicates very clearly that creation was always “designed to function through the stewardship of God’s image-bearing creatures—the human race,” and that the purpose of the lamb being slain (Rev 5:9–10) was not simply to defeat the dragon, but to do so by ransoming “people from every nation in order to make them a royal priesthood, serving God and *reigning on the earth*.”⁵⁷ Moreover, despite the fact that the Bible speaks of a renovation of the present creation in passages such as Isaiah 65:17, Matthew 24:35, 2 Peter 3:10, and Revelation 21:1, passages such as Matthew 25:21, 23, 34 and Luke 16:10–12 suggest that some continuity exists between our actions/character in this age and our activities/responsibilities in the next.⁵⁸ If nothing else, we, ourselves, are that continuity (see 2 Cor 5:17)! Therefore, if we are going to fulfill the crucial role God has called us to play in the age to come (see Matt 25:21), we can and must begin to embody now the values and realities of the coming kingdom. It’s with this thought in mind that Wright continues:

This theme, so frequent in the New Testament and so widely ignored in Christian theology, is part of the solution to the problem. It isn’t that the cross has won the victory, so there’s nothing more to be done. Rather, the cross has won the victory as a result of which there are now redeemed human beings getting ready to act as God’s wise agents, his stewards, constantly worshipping their Creator and constantly, as a result, being equipped to reflect his image into his creation, to bring his wise and healing order to the world, putting the world to rights under his just and gentle rule. A truly biblical ecclesiology [doctrine of the church] should

⁵⁶ Some biblical passages which indicate that God expects his people to pursue *holiness* include: Lev 11:44–45; 20:7, 26; Eph 1:1, 4, 2:21; 5:25–27; Col 1:22; 3:12–14; 1 Thess 3:13; 4:4, 7; 1 Tim 2:8; 2 Tim 1:9; 2:21; Tit 1:8; Heb 2:11; 3:1; 10:14; 11:4; 12:14; 1 Pet 1:15–16; 2:5, 9; 2 Pet 3:11; Rev 22:11. Some biblical passages which indicate that God expects his people to pursue *justice* include: Lev 19:15; Deut 16:20; Ps 11:7; 112:5; Pr 29:7; Isa 1:17; 56:1; 59:1–8; Jer 9:23–24; 21:12; Hos 12:6; Amos 5:14–15; 21–24; Mic 6:8; Zech 7:8–10; Matt 23:23; Lk 11:42; 2 Cor 7:11.

⁵⁷ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 138–39, emphasis original.

⁵⁸ For more on how some biblical passages emphasize the continuity between the “old and new orders,” and others the discontinuity (see 2 Peter 3:10–13), see Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 654–55.

focus not so much on the fact that the church is the community of the saved but that the church is the community of those who, being redeemed through the cross, are now to be a kingdom and priests to serve God and to reign on the earth. Our fear of triumphalism on the one hand, and on the other hand our flattening out of our final destiny into talk merely of “going to heaven,” have combined to rob us of this central biblical theme. But until we put it back where it belongs we won’t see how the New Testament ultimately offers a solution to the problem of evil.⁵⁹

This is a hugely significant statement, which presents us with a bold idea. Perhaps instead of spending our time *exclusively* devoted to celebrating our own salvation and endeavoring to help others experience eternal salvation as well, Christ’s followers should *also* band together as communities of salt and light, learning how to bring to bear upon a fallen, unjust, evil-filled world, the victory of God—the life-giving realities of God’s kingdom come and coming.

I have written elsewhere of the need to avoid a false antithesis that many churches have fallen prey to: the idea that they *have to choose between the great commission and the great commandment—i.e., between disciple making and social action/creation care*.⁶⁰ Instead, we can and should see *both* of these ministry endeavors working together to make disciples for Jesus—disciples made through gospel proclamation *and* demonstration for gospel proclamation *and* demonstration.⁶¹ Though some contemporary missiologists and church leaders have suggested that the mission of God (*missio Dei*) is all about such things as justice and peacemaking, and actually excludes any evangelistic activity on the part of the church,⁶² Lesslie Newbigin, widely recognized as the founder of the missional church movement,⁶³ once offered this word of warning:

The concept of *missio Dei* has sometimes been interpreted so as to suggest that action for justice and peace as the possibilities are discerned within a given historical situation *is* the fulfillment of God’s mission, and that the questions of

⁵⁹ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 139.

⁶⁰ See Tyra, *A Missional Orthodoxy: Theology and Ministry in a Post-Christian Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 310–17. Support for this assertion can be found in Hastings, *Missional God*, 99, 149–63.

⁶¹ Tyra, *A Missional Orthodoxy*, 317.

⁶² For more on this, see Wright, *The Mission of God*, 63.

⁶³ See Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church*, 36–38.

baptism and church membership are marginal or irrelevant. That way leads very quickly to disillusion and often to cynical despair.⁶⁴

Appreciative of the insights provided by both Wright and Newbigin, I've put forward an ecclesial model I refer to as the "Great Co-Missional Church." The local church should see itself as a disciple-making community of believers that's committed to a faithful fulfilling of the Great Commission (Mt 28:18–20; Mk 16:15–16), while at the same time being careful to obey the Great Commandment (Mt 22:34–40), and engaging in creation care (Gen 1:28).⁶⁵

Some tacit support for this ecclesial model is provided by Wright in his book *Surprised by Hope*. Though diligent in this work to warn against an unbalanced ministry focus on helping people get ready to go to heaven, Wright never dismisses evangelism out of hand. He does contend, however, that an engagement in evangelism (disciple-making) that takes the concept of new creation seriously will result in a new convert who

knows from the start that he or she is part of God's kingdom project, which stretches out beyond "me and my salvation" to embrace, or rather to be embraced by, God's worldwide purposes. Along with conversion there will then go, at least in principle, the call to find out where in the total project one can make one's own contribution.⁶⁶

It's in his subsequent work, *Evil and the Justice of God*, that Wright refers to the "total project" as "God's project of justice within a world of injustice," arguing that the big picture of what God is up to in the world, and wants his people to be up to here and now, ultimately relates to the problem of evil.⁶⁷ Wright is right about there being a dynamic connection between the Bible's theology of atonement and the new creation. Both are about the problem of evil—moral

⁶⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 138.

⁶⁵ See Tyra, *A Missional Orthodoxy*, 314–15. For a thoughtful discussion of the "authority" of both the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, and how that back of them both is the Great Communication—"the revelation of the identity of God, of God's action in the world and Gods' saving purpose for all creation,"—see Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 59–60.

⁶⁶ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 229.

⁶⁷ Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 73.

and natural. Both are about healing—souls and creation. Making disciples and pursuing justice here and now in anticipation of the age to come are both part of God's *total project*. We can and should be involved in both. God's end-game requires this too!

You and I in the Dock!

Bilezikian and Boyd are to be commended for helping us recognize that God's creating his human image-bearers in freedom, with freedom wasn't done in a capricious, irresponsible manner; and for reminding us of how responsible God was in his personally owning the problem of evil after humanity's fall. At the same time, this paper has suggested that a shift in focus from God as romantic lover to God as responsible parent renders a revised understanding of divine foreknowledge unnecessary, and results in an understanding of God's end-game that is not only profoundly inspirational but critically transformational as well. Which is a good thing since, as the previous section of this essay indicated, the presence of evil in our world isn't simply a theological conundrum to be solved; it is a problem to be owned, and not just by God, but by his people as well.

According to Romans 16:20, God will ultimately crush Satan's head *under the feet of those who make up his church!* With this in mind, I'm suggesting that, instead of continually complaining about the presence of evil in our world, those of us who own the moniker "Christian" should keep trusting God and seize the opportunity to actively and aggressively cooperate with him and his efforts to overcome the evil which his image-bearers have unleashed into the good world he created. As the old saying goes, we can either spend our days cursing the darkness or we can begin lighting some candles. In the end, it's not God who's in the dock, but us!

Conclusion

I do not know of any sincere Christ-follower who doesn't want to someday hear Jesus say to them: "Well done, good and *faithful* servant" (Matt 25:21)! But what if, in addition to our avoiding sin, attending church, sharing our faith, and giving to missions, a truly faithful Christian discipleship is, in Christ's eyes, earmarked by a serious engagement in God's justice project (Matt 23:23)? What if, with God's help, we might actually alleviate or even avert someone's suffering in this still-fallen world? While it is true that God can use suffering for good in people's lives, our default must always be to try to reduce suffering in this world rather than ignore it.⁶⁸

It is my hope that being reminded of the role that Satan and we humans have played in the problem of evil, what God's end-game has always been, and what he has done, is doing, and will do about the evil and injustice that currently casts such dark shadows in our world, has enabled at least some of the readers of this paper to not only keep trusting him in the face of mystery, but to dedicate themselves to the lighting of some candles as well. A commitment to becoming personally involved in God's justice project is, I suggest, what earmarks church members who have been enabled to *fully* process the problem of evil.

⁶⁸ See Pr 21:13; 24:11–12; 31:9; Mt 25:31–46; Lk 10:25–37; Jas 2:14–17; 1 Jn 3:18.