Did God Create Evil?: Gregory A. Boyd

Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Greg, the problem of evil is something that anybody who wants to believe in God has to deal with. How do you deal with it?

Greg Boyd:

It is the, I think, number one objection to theism. When I was an atheist, and I was for some time before I became a believer, that was the number one objection: how could a world created by an all good, all powerful God be so incredibly screwed up? As I thought through it, the core of my answer to this question has to do with free will, and that God created agents that have their own, what I call say so, we have say in what happens, and it's in the very nature of free will that we can choose good or choose evil. And we sometimes choose evil. And I would argue that all of, every aspect of creation, ultimately that doesn't align with, that doesn't line up with God's benevolent character is a result of some will other than God.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So that sounds slightly different than the traditional free will defense of evil, because you're saying that every evil, because normally you divide between natural evil and moral evil.

Greg Boyd:

Right.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

How do you see natural evil and moral evil?

Greg Boyd:

Well, yeah, that's a classic distinction that's often made; there's natural evil and then there is moral evil, and moral evil is the evil that results from free will.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Natural being whatever occurs in the world; earthquakes, disease.

Greg Boyd:

Right.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

You know, asteroids.

Greg Boyd:

And the traditional approach to those questions is to say that there are certain intrinsic limitations in the nature of creation that God has to sort of work around that cause mudslides and earthquakes and tornadoes and cancers and whatever. And there's some value in that; I'm not altogether against those things. But it seems to me that from the Christian tradition, there's a very different answer. It's the one that I find in Scripture, it's the one that I find pervasive in the early church up to the point of Augustine, St. Augustine. And it's this: that human beings aren't the only free agents in the universe. There are, according to the Bible, and according to the fact of most cultures throughout history, there are angelic beings that also have free will. And just as humans can use their free will for the evil, these angelic beings can use their free will for the evil, they have say so, and some of that say so affects creation itself. And so, from my perspective, the world as we now have it is awry, not only because human beings misuse their free will but because, to some degree, it's been affected, adversely affected, polluted by these angelic powers.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Are you talking about Satan?

Greg Boyd:

Satan, the devil, demons. Yeah. (Laughter)

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

To some that would sound rather anachronistic in today's world.

Greg Boyd:

Yeah, there are a lot of people that don't believe that there are principalities and powers and demons and those sorts of things and I realize that I am going out on a limb by bringing them up. On the other hand, I'll frankly tell you that I don't see that there is an entirely plausible explanation to the problem of evil unless you appeal to the reality of...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

This is a very interesting point, because most defenses against the argument from evil, from an atheistic point of view, skirt around Satan or angelic powers that are causative and come up with a whole list of answers, but to go right into Satan sounds to be brave on your part.

Greg Boyd:
Well, thank you, thank you.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
I'm not saying it's right, I'm saying it's brave.

Greg Boyd:
I wrote a whole book on Satan and the problem of evil. And I'm not saying that appealing to Satan explains all of the issues with regard to the problem of evil, but I do think that there is a fundamental dimension of the problem of evil that can't be adequately addressed any other way, and that has to do with this, what we've called, natural evil. It seems to me that an all-powerful, all-good God could have conceivably created a world that is free of the natural evils that we have today: the malaria, AIDS, earthquakes, mudslides, come on. And I'm not suggesting...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Now that's the atheistic argument.

Greg Boyd:
I know.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
What you are saying, if I'm not wrong, is that unless you bring Satan into the equation, and the angelic powers that followed Satan, unless you do that you cannot defend against the argument from evil from an atheistic point of view.

Greg Boyd:
You can't adequately. I think that...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Well, adequately doesn't...

Greg Boyd:
It doesn't...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Change the point. You cannot do it. That if I told you there was no Satan and you believe there was no Satan, no angelic powers, that it was just free will, you would then have trouble defending the existence of God.

Greg Boyd:
I would.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Without Satan.

Greg Boyd:
I would on the basis of the natural evil. I think that's a tremendous problem. Now the thing is is that I'm not like sort of inventing these as a sort of an ad hoc hypothesis, demons and whatever to explain evil, rather the Christian tradition has, from the start, believed in Satan and demons and...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Oh, I agree with that.

Greg Boyd:
And this warfare thing. And in the New Testament itself you have some of the evil of the world explained in terms of this adversary of God called Satan. I mean, for example, in the Book of Hebrews it says that Satan is the lord of death. Now just follow the logic of this. That death ultimately, at least death as we now experience it, is the result of this being that is hostile to God and has corrupted creation. Now death is, on one level, a very natural thing in our world, second law of thermodynamics, all things tend towards entropy and whatnot, and yet the Bible says that it is also the result of the influence of Satan, which tells me that I am warranted, if I have reasons for believing the New Testament, I'm justified in concluding that the second law of thermodynamics is itself partly the product of this demonic corruption in creation. And, if the second law of thermodynamics is, to some degree, corrupted then what else, why would I think anything else is not corrupted, because that's a pretty fundamental law of physics.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Well, I think what you're saying about the early Christian history, the New Testament regarding the role of Satan is very strong and that modern theologians have been maybe embarrassed to talk about this, so it has become less and less important. But I think you are very correct in bringing this to the fore. Now I have a question for you though.

Greg Boyd:
Sure.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
If Satan is responsible for creating evil and God is responsible for creating Satan, doesn't that make God responsible for creating evil?

Greg Boyd:
No. (Laughter) No.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Where is my logic wrong?

Greg Boyd:
Okay, here's how I'd respond. God's responsible for making us free, for creating spiritual and human beings as free agents. But it's built on the very nature of free will that it means to have free will is that you can choose to go this way or that way. This way being, to be very simplistic, you're good, that way being evil. It's no different than saying if God creates a triangle it's got to have three sides; if God creates a free agent it's got to have two possibilities. So when we choose to go evil that's where evil comes in.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
But forget we, let's talk about Satan, because I want to talk about the natural evil.

Greg Boyd:
Sure.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
So there's an earthquake or there's AIDS and Satan has been involved in causing that, God created Satan, Satan caused that. What you're saying is that because God created Satan with free will that obviates God and that gets God out of responsibility for creating the evil. Boy, that's a thin line you're trying to draw.

Greg Boyd:
But how's it any different than saying that God created human beings with free will and he's not responsible for what we choose.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
I don't think there is any difference.

Greg Boyd:
Oh, okay.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
I'm happy with no difference there. But what I'm saying is is that why are you so worried about having God not create the evil? What's so wrong about that, if it's not part of this whole system? If God is all wise and he's omnipotent and omniscient, you know, he knows people will make a choice, but, I mean, he didn't think out of the trillions of choices that people make there would be a few evils?

Greg Boyd:
Sure. I'm sure that he adequately anticipated the possibility of all evil and he...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
The certainty.

Greg Boyd:
Maybe the inevitability.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
The statistical certainty.

Greg Boyd:
But that doesn't make him responsible for it. It would only make him responsible for it if the risk of evil outweighed the benefit of...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
Okay. That's a different argument, though.

Greg Boyd:
Well, I don't think so, because it all has to do with whether or not God would be responsible for what free agents do because he's the one who made them free. It's really no different than this: if my child, you know, God forbid grows up to be an ax murderer am I responsible? Now it may be that I am responsible...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:
But you're not omniscient. You're not omniscient. You didn't create...

Greg Boyd:
What does that got to do with it.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Because you didn't create him with that possibility. The difference is that God is creating and with knowledge of forethought of what those choices could possibly be.

Greg Boyd:

Could possibly be. But the risk ... I know that bringing a child into the world that this child may grow up to be an ax murderer. And yet the risk is worth it. The alternative is non-existence, or just owning a puppy that has no free will. And I think God sees wisely. We vote yes to God's decision every time we bring a child into the world that while there's risk that the child may turn out evil and may suffer evil, yet it's worth it, because ultimately the gains of free will, mainly love, are worth the risk of the evil that can be brought about with free will. And if we vote yes by bringing children into the world, in fact we vote yes by not committing suicide, we say that life is worth it, despite the evil that can comes from free will, the fact that we vote yes to it means that we are not in a position now to judge God for creating a world that we are agreeing to every day of our life. You see what I'm saying?

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

This debate won't end now.

Greg Boyd:

Finite. Here's God. God is a choice. What kind of world is he going to create? He can create a world where you're guaranteed to have no evil because it's wired into the creation that everyone's going to think all the right thoughts and make all the right decision or whatever, or you can create a world that's got freedom. The advantage of the world that lacks freedom is that you won't have any evil, but you also couldn't have any love. You couldn't have any of the values that we have with free will. To create a world that has free world is to create a world that's risky, a world where beings might choose against God's way, in fact, maybe it's inevitable. But I would argue that it's worth it for God to create that kind of a world, despite its risk, maybe its inevitable evil, it's a good decision, and that we agree with God every time we bring a child into the world and, in fact, every day we keep on living, we don't commit suicide. We're saying life is worth it. And so, I don't think we can say that God is responsible for evil by virtue of creating a world that's free when we agree, every day of our life, that, in fact, it's worth it.