

Synopsis by David Matthew of

GOD CAN'T

How to believe in God and love after tragedy, abuse and other evils

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[Introductory note by D. Matthew:

Oord set out his views on providence in 2015 in *The Uncontrolling Love of God: an open and relational account of providence* (IVP Academic). Realising that its scholarly approach might be beyond the average reader, he wrote *God Can't* to make his proposals available to a wider readership. In so doing, he angled it particularly towards how people can maintain trust in God after suffering severe pain, abuse or tragedy. At the end of each chapter are questions to focus the reader's thinking.]

Numbers in brackets are page numbers.

A Solution to Evil

A mass shooting tragedy in Las Vegas left 51 dead and 851 injured, many of them seriously. Where was God in this? If he is all-powerful, why didn't he prevent it?

Some Christians said, 'There is a higher purpose in this.' Others appealed to mystery: 'God's ways are beyond us.' Or, 'We don't know why he didn't prevent it, but we do know he opposes evil, and that he is present for all who are hurting.' If that is true, why didn't he intervene?

This book is for people at the receiving end of evil events, who wonder where God was when they needed him. It takes an approach that some will consider unusual, and some will not like it much. But it's vital that we look honestly at the grim realities life sometimes brings. Four friends, all Christians, illustrate the type of situation I have in mind:

- Teri (female) was sexually abused by her male Sunday School teacher. He had taught her that God was *the* authority, so she concluded that God was orchestrating the abuse.
- James frequently suffered severe depression. Medication, prayer and fasting failed to cure it, and he eventually shot himself. His family ask why God didn't step in to prevent the suicide. If God has a plan for everybody, was this part of his plan for James?
- Maria and her husband wanted children, but she had a series of miscarriages. Fellow-Christians said it was demonic interference. An elder said it was God's way of making her a more mature believer and building her character. She came to resent God and despise church.
- Teenager Rashad's father developed cancer. In spite of much prayer, fasting, anointing with oil etc. he died one month later. Explanations included 'Who are we to question God?' 'His ways are not our ways.' 'Give thanks in all circumstances.' 'Everything happens for a reason.' 'God is in control.' Rashad lost confidence in a loving God.

The answers given to these sufferers make no sense to us, and nor should they. Most atheists claim the reality of evil as the main reason for their conviction there is no God. Most Christians play the 'mystery' card: we can't understand God's ways.

There's a better way of tackling the problem, based on five ideas about God, creation and evil. This book examines those. It is based on two assumptions:

1. **God loves us all, all the time.** His very nature is love. And we are not to dodge the issues raised in trying to understand evil by saying, 'God's love isn't like ours.' Nor should we allege that his love is 'tough', so that the rape a person suffered is God's loving way of making them stronger. If his love causes or allows evil, it's the kind of love we don't want. No, what God thinks is loving matches our own ideas of what it means to be loving. Love is 'acting intentionally, in response to God and others, to promote overall well-being' (11).
2. **Evil is real.** We are referring to 'genuine evil', the kind that makes the world a worse place than it would otherwise have been. There is no higher purpose in it. God doesn't permit it for some lofty reason.

The five ideas in this book belong together, making up a composite, satisfying picture that can help you towards healing, love and transformation. So please read either none of the book, or all of it!

Chapter 1: God Can't Prevent Evil

God could not have prevented the evils described above. It's not that he *won't*, but that he *can't*.

Saying that in some cases he *allows* evil is no comfort. If he could prevent the horrors, but chooses not to, he doesn't really care for us. Does a loving person allow evil they could prevent? No. Would a loving mother allow an infant to drown if she could stop it happening? 'Perfect love prevents preventable evil' (18). Why should God be any different? Yet Christians often say that God permits rape, genocide, torture, child abuse etc. If he *could* control the perpetrators, but doesn't, we should blame him for the atrocities they commit. We can't worship or trust such a God.

Claire suffered sexual abuse from family members and friends. She didn't blame God for it, but wondered why he allowed it. If he is both powerful and loving, why didn't he intervene to prevent it? She read *The Uncontrolling Love Of God* and came to see that God could not have prevented it singlehandedly, because 'the God of uncontrolling love cannot control creatures' (20).

Jesus is the ultimate portrayal of God. Would he have stood by and allowed Claire to be molested if he had been physically present with her at the time? Clearly not. So the God he reveals to us would also have prevented the molestation if he had been able to do so.

Saying 'God can't...' does not make him a wimp. Scripture itself indicates that there are things he can't do. He can't lie; he can't be tempted; he can't grow tired. And, most important, 'he cannot deny himself' (2 Tim 2:13). So he has limitations. He can't stop existing. He can't change the past. Fundamentally, he can't oppose his own nature.

So what *is* God's nature? Some hold that we don't know, but most would agree that he has revealed enough to enable us to get a broad picture of what he is like. The Bible, in particular, gives us such a picture, and it shows us that God is loving. Indeed, as John puts it, 'God *is* love'. And love is 'to act intentionally, in response to God and others, to promote overall well-being'. God always works for the good, because he is love.

God's love is *inherently* uncontrolling. It does 'not force itself on others', as Paul puts it (1 Cor 13:5). It does not control. 'Because God always loves and God's love is uncontrolling, God cannot control. The God who can't control others or circumstances can't prevent evil singlehandedly' (26). In saying this, we are not limiting God; what limits him is his own nature. The constraints come, not from outside, but from who he essentially is.

It's not that God *could* control others, but chooses not to. His love takes logical precedence over his will. He *can't* control them. 'Divine love always self-gives and others-empowers' (27). The limits to divine power come from God's nature of love. This is called *essential kenosis*. 'Essential' means that self-giving, others-empowering love is part of his *essence*, his fundamental nature.

In 1995 two men bombed a building in Oklahoma City, USA. 168 died and many were injured. The two men were sentenced for their crime. But so was a third man who, while he took no active part in the bombing, knew what his friends planned and did nothing to stop it. That is just. And we would be justified in blaming God if, when able to stop evil, he failed to do so.

God is 'a universal spirit, present to all creation' (30). He does not have a localised body; he is incorporeal. Jesus said, 'God is spirit' (John 4:24). This means he does not have a body with which to physically block evil or rescue creatures. You or I could jump to prevent a child from getting knocked down by a car, but God cannot. 'A bodiless, universal spirit cannot do what embodied creatures sometimes can. Despite having no body, God is present and active in all situations. Divine power is direct but persuasive, widespread but wooing, causal but uncontrolling. God's loving activity makes a difference without imposing control or using a divine body' (33).

God continually *influences* everything, but controls nothing. He has not created us as robots. His action is mostly subtle and understated. The Bible, to the surprise of many, never says that he alone makes something happen. He can influence creatures, who may then cooperate with him to see good things happening.

A four-year-old boy got a brain tumour. Christian friends offered an explanation: 'God gave Henry the tumour because it pleased him to do so.' His mother disagreed, believing that God was opposed to the tumour all through, but that God battled and lost.

Paul Young's *The Shack* nearly gets it right. He puts into God's mouth words that are true regarding the tragedy at the heart of the story. But the book stops short of asking the key question: why didn't God *prevent* the tragedy? In the book, too, there is frequent appeal to 'mystery'. Mac, the hero, is encouraged by God to believe in love, yet God questions his ability to understand divine love. That kind of mystery makes no sense.

In not controlling us, it's not that God does nothing. There is a middle way between control and absence: the way of love. 'Loving fathers and mothers guide, instruct, persuade, call, correct, convince, encourage, nudge, teach, warn, and more. None of those activities involve control' (40). We call all these 'nurture', and that's the way God acts towards his creatures. 'God acts like a wooing suitor asking for a partner's hand and a spouse pursuing a lifetime of mutual love' (42).

My friend Janyne suffered sexual abuse. Eventually she went to a cliff to commit suicide. She turned from it at the last minute. She realised that she could make choices, and that God was not controlling, but that he prompted her towards turning from the cliff edge.

This, then, is the first point of the five: **God can't prevent evil singlehandedly.**

Chapter 2: God Feels Our Pain

The second point is that God feels our pain. He is not aloof or indifferent to our suffering as survivors of evil; he empathises fully with us.

An empathiser is a fellow-sufferer who understands. This is far more than just pity. God follows 'the crimson rule': that we should *feel* with others as we would have them feel with us.' Another term is 'compassion', meaning 'to suffer with', like the Good Samaritan, who was 'moved with compassion'. People who are hurting often don't need explanations or solutions; they just want to know someone feels what they feel.

Our own ability to empathise is limited, but God's knows no such limits. He is the 'God of all consolation' (1 Cor 1:3). He feels our pain and is, in that respect, vulnerable. This stands in contrast to five popular alternative views, in which God is:

1. *A brick wall.* He is present in our suffering, but totally unaffected. He is impersonal and uncaring.
2. *Eye in the sky.* Having made the universe, he has left it running and has backed off, uninterested. This is deism.
3. *CEO of the universe.* He just has the big picture in mind, and can't bother with the details of our lives.
4. *Micro-manager.* He determines absolutely everything. He is all-controlling. Freedom is an illusion.
5. *Clean freak.* His holiness keeps him from associating with sinners like us.

'These views stifle and scar' (56). We reject them all; God is full of love and empathy, whatever our situation. Some people can get along with Jesus but find God off-putting. But God is like Jesus! Look at his compassion in the story of the Prodigal Son.

In past centuries it was common for theologians to believe that God was impassible: not touched by feelings at all. In the last 100 years that has changed, and most now accept the 'suffering God'. But the problem of evil is not solved by believing in a God who *just* empathises. If you run to a car that has overturned, empathy with the driver is not enough; you need to help him get out. If God can singlehandedly control to prevent evil, but simply empathises with the victim, he is no help at all.

We can believe that God always empathises, even though we feel his love only sometimes. When we do feel it, it is not with our five senses, but with what Wesley called 'spiritual sensations'. And its frequency will vary depending on our personality type. But we can take steps to help us in that direction. There are six of these:

1. *The ministry of human presence.* Talking to a counsellor, therapist or understanding friend—people who naturally have, or have developed, relational capacities.
2. *A community of care.* A church family should provide this (but often fails to do so, sadly).
3. *Mindfulness, meditation and prayer.* Sometimes called 'centering', it is an intentional focusing on God. It can include consciously and symbolically breathing in God and breathing out love. Some people go on retreats to monasteries.
4. *Experiences in nature.* Many become more aware of God's presence and love out in the wilds, away from city life. One can peer at the details on a pebble, or stare into a star-filled sky.
5. *Visual art, music and movies.* Through these means we can be 'overcome by beauty' (69).
6. *The love of a child.* This is no surprise, since God is our Father and we are his children, and our human parent-child relationships echo this and the love it expresses.

This is the second point of the five: **God feels our pain.** Knowing that, even when our problems persist, can enable us to feel secure in his love for us.

Chapter 3: God Works to Heal

Carlos, aged 42, was diagnosed with lung cancer. His Christian family all prayed, and an aunt said the reason he was not getting better was because he wasn't exercising enough faith. She pointed to the Bible stories that emphasise faith as a key to healing. That made him feel guilty, as well as ill, as he was exercising as much faith as he knew how to.

God is constantly working to heal our sicknesses, our scars and our hurts. He responds to evil by working to make things better, whether emotional, physical, relational or spiritual. But there are many common myths surrounding the issue of healing, and we need to expose them as such.

Some deny healing altogether. They explain away the few cases where it does appear to happen, and point to the vast number where it doesn't. And they rightly ask why, if God can heal anyone at any time, he doesn't do it more. Some people undoubtedly get healed, but that only raises a further issue: the problem of selective healing.

Other take the opposite view: that God always heals. They point to Bible cases and current ones. They say it always happens in foreign countries where there isn't the spiritual cynicism prevalent in the West. If you question their position, they accuse you of denying the Bible's authority. And if they claim that God miraculously healed them, you are left feeling inferior, wondering why he didn't heal you. They might put that down to demons, or to your lack of faith, or they appeal to a mysterious divine plan, or say that your troubles are God's punishment.

In my twenties I embarked on a healing ministry after reading a book by John Wimber. Eventually I had to admit that it wasn't working. A few were healed, but mostly of minor ailments. Most were not healed at all. And I realised that other healers weren't doing any better. Cessationists told me it was because God no longer healed today: 'the Doctor is on holiday' (83). But that didn't explain the few healings that clearly do occur.

I then began ending each prayer for healing with 'If it's your will'. But I was uncomfortable, because surely a loving God always wants to see health and wholeness? And if that's the case, why do we even need to ask? Wouldn't he just get on and do it? And why ask, too, if it's *not* his will to heal? 'We need a plausible explanation for why healing sometimes happens but often does not' (84).

The greatest confusion can come, not from the pain of a moment, but from the long-term trauma it produces. Service personnel suffering PTSD are a case in point. Rarely is this healed fully, even after many years. Why, if God loves and can heal singlehandedly?

Bart Ehrman was a leading evangelical biblical scholar who lost his faith because the Bible didn't offer a satisfactory answer to such questions. Believers played the 'mystery card' to answer him, but that never satisfies. If God cures cancer, why do millions still die of it? 'We who believe in God need a theory of divine healing that makes sense' (87).

There are four steps to arriving at such a position:

1. God's love for all means God works for the well-being of *all* creation.

'The first step toward making sense of healing is to believe God is always present to all creation and always loves to the utmost. God is omnipresent and omniscient' (88). It makes no sense to call on him to 'intervene' when he is present and acting for good all the time.

2. God works alongside people and creation.

Not that he only works indirectly; he works directly, too, but 'he is never the *only* cause in any situation' (89). We live in a related universe, and other forces—good, bad or indifferent—affect what happens. In the case of healing, God works alongside healthcare professionals, their actions and prescriptions. He works alongside pastors, counsellors, social workers etc., including Alcoholics Anonymous. And, of course, through loving friends and family.

He also works alongside *us*. Our habits, thoughts, life-patterns and choices have huge influence. Internally, he works alongside our cells, organs, blood, muscles and other bodily entities, which can play key roles in the healing God wants to do.

3. God cannot heal singlehandedly.

He does not heal by absolute fiat. If he can, and does, how come we see so little of it? No; 'healing requires cooperation, because God always expresses uncontrolling love' (92). This solves the problem of 'selective miracles'. 'If God always works to heal but cannot control anyone or anything, it's not God's fault when healing does not occur' (93). 'When creatures fail to cooperate or the conditions are not right, God's work to heal is frustrated' (93). Teamwork is involved, at some level, in *every* case of healing.

This explains Jesus' statements about the role of faith. 'When Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well," he's saying, "You've cooperated with God's healing love." And when Matthew says Jesus "did not do many miracles (in Nazareth) because of their lack of faith" (Mat 13:58), that's saying, "Some people *do not* cooperate with God's healing efforts"' (94)

But this does *not* mean that everyone who is not healed failed to cooperate. In fact, rarely should we blame the suffering person. But we *can* blame, say, the man with liver problems who continues to drink excessively. Not everyone who cooperates is healed, however. Some causes within us and in our environment, and some people around us, are not positive. 'The teenager with cancer may pray, but his cancerous cells may not respond to God's direct influence and the medicines physicians administer' (95).

Prayer is a cooperative activity that God uses. It alters circumstances in our bodies and the world that may provide new opportunities for God to bring healing.

4. Love extends beyond death.

'There is a future life free from our current bodies and physical conditions that resist God's work' (97). The Bible witnesses to this, and so do the many accounts of near-death experiences today. Some believe the Bible teaches a disembodied state for our ongoing consciousness in which we relate with God and others, while another view suggests we take on 'spiritual bodies' when we die. But in both views, God's loving presence sustains us, and the sickness, tears, pain and trauma will be no more. That will be 'healing' indeed!

Tied to the above four steps are some common myths and realities. Here are fifteen of them [straight quote from the book, p103-106]:

1. *Myth:* God healed long ago but doesn't any longer.
Reality: God always works to heal; this was true in the past and true in the present.
2. *Myth:* God may not heal until we beg or pray hard enough.
Reality: God works to heal even before we ask.
3. *Myth:* To heal, God supernaturally intervenes in our lives.
Reality: God is always already present and doesn't need to "come into" our lives or circumstances.
4. *Myth:* We should add, "If it's your will" to prayers asking God to heal.
Reality: It's always God's will to heal, so this add-on phrase is unnecessary.
5. *Myth:* Our pain, suffering, and abuse are part of God's preordained plan.
Reality: God's plan does not include causing or allowing evil.
6. *Myth:* God only loves sometimes and is only present in some places.
Reality: God always loves everyone and is always present working to heal.
7. *Myth:* God is the only cause of healing.
Reality: Creaturely causes — whether small or large — also play a role in healing.
8. *Myth:* God can heal singlehandedly.
Reality: God cannot heal singlehandedly, because doing so would require God to control creatures or creation. God's love is inherently uncontrolling.
9. *Myth:* There is natural healing, healing by doctors, and divine healing.
Reality: All healing involves God and creaturely causes.
10. *Myth:* God selects whom to heal and who will suffer.
Reality: God wants to heal everyone, but creaturely conditions or lack of cooperation frustrate God's efforts.
11. *Myth:* Those not healed did not have enough faith.
Reality: Those not healed often have plenty of faith, but their bodies or other factors prevent healing.
12. *Myth:* God controls cells, organs, and larger entities in our bodies and the environment.
Reality: God expresses uncontrolling love to all creation, great and small.
13. *Myth:* Our prayers for healing don't make any difference.
Reality: Our prayers alter the circumstances and may open up possibilities for God's healing.
14. *Myth:* There is no hope for those whose healing is thwarted by actors, factors, and circumstances.
Reality: There is hope, but some healing must wait until after our bodies die.
15. *Myth:* God only heals in heaven.
Reality: God works to heal in this life. When we, our bodies, or others cooperate, or the conditions are right, we are healed now.

This, then, is the third point of the five: **God works to heal.**

Chapter 4: God Squeezes Good From Bad

Joni Eareckson Tada is well known in evangelical circles. When a teenager, she dived into the sea in a shallow spot and was paralysed from the neck down. She has shown great resilience and productiveness, writing over 40 books, producing music, and painting with her mouth.

Joni's experience raises the question: 'If good comes from suffering and God wants what's good, is suffering God's will?' (109). She herself believes what happened to her was God's plan. He is against paralysis, but permitted it in her case with some future good in mind. She also believes, on the basis of Hebrews 12:6, that because as a teenager she

was living an immoral life, her paralysis was God's punishment. 'In Joni's view, God permits what he hates and punishes those he loves' (111). Does that make sense? In view of what we have been considering, no. We can admire Joni's life while disagreeing with her view of God. It is true that great good has come from her since her accident, and she has become a woman of fine character, but we don't need to believe that her suffering was part of God's master-plan.

Our fourth point is that 'God squeezes good out of the evil God didn't want in the first place' (113). He responds to evil by working with creation for good.

Joseph suffered greatly at the hands of his vicious brothers. Looking back on it later, he said, 'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives' (Genesis 50:20). The word 'intended' can give the impression that God orchestrated the evil events that happened. A better, and equally valid translation is, 'You wanted to harm me, but God *used* it for good.' With Joseph's cooperation, God brought good out of the evil he didn't want.

The 'intended' has echoes of a common phrase: 'Everything happens for a reason'. This suggests that God has a mysterious reason for some tragic event. It effectively means that even evil is God's will. Kate Bowler had this said to her many times when she developed bowel cancer. According to her book, her 'advisers' were in three categories:

1. *The minimisers*. They said she shouldn't be upset with the cancer, because she's just passing through, bound for the afterlife—home in heaven.
2. *The teachers*. They said God allows evil to teach us lessons, like the need for patience, or greater faith.
3. *The solutions people*. They said she herself was the key to the situation: attitude governs destiny.

None of these are satisfactory responses to evil being experienced here and now. Nor is the approach that says we should be thankful *for* our suffering. Should we thank God for torture, rape and genocide? Clearly not, but we can give thanks *in* our painful circumstances (1 Thes 5:18). Some, however, point to Ephesians 5:20, where we are urged to 'always give thanks to God the Father *for* everything.' The Greek word *huper* here means 'on behalf of' or 'for the benefit of'. Here, we can take it to mean that our thankfulness benefits the whole. Appreciation makes everything better! But we can't realistically be thankful for, say, the accidental death of a child.

Should we believe, with Joni Eareckson, that God causes or allows evil in order to punish us?

Some OT passages say God blesses the righteous and punishes the unrighteous, and there are various ways of interpreting these. But the story of Job takes a very different view. He was as righteous as they get, and remained so throughout his terrible sufferings. Satan caused his sorrows; it was never God's punishment. 'Bad things happen to good people' is the basic message.

The NT has little to say on the punishment of sinners. But Joni E holds to Hebrews 12:6, which says, 'The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he *punishes* everyone he accepts as a son.' The context (v4-11) is parental 'discipline', and that is to teach, correct or train. Good discipline does not mistreat, abuse or humiliate. It directs the learner towards better practices, as does a fitness trainer, life coach or tutor. It is positive. The NIV has 'chastens' instead of 'punishes'. They are not the same. To chasten is to correct, not to punish.

The Hebrews verse is quoting Proverbs 3:11-12, where the context is a father and 'the son he delights in'. It's hard to imagine a good parent *delighting* in punishing his child. God's discipline, likewise, is never abusive. Parents who imitate an abusive God become abusive parents.

While the idea that God punishes is largely absent from the NT, many passages describe the negative consequences of sin and evil. 'The wages of sin is death.' There are warnings of 'the wrath to come'. Many think that God decides whether or when the hammer should fall, or whether, instead, to save the person from destruction. This is a fickle God.

Instead, we should recognise that 'there are *natural* negative consequences to sin and evil' (130). So, 'rather than believe devastation and heartache are supernatural punishments, we should believe they're the natural negative consequences of refusing to cooperate with God's love' (130). This is part of the cause-and-effect universe we live in.

But ‘sometimes nobody causes the suffering we experience. No one sinned. No one’s to blame. We suffer as victims of natural disasters, random sickness, or plain bad luck. Accidents and forces of nature make our lives miserable or kill us. Calamity happens’ (131). The God of uncontrolling love did not send these as punishments. Nor did he cause them at all.

Some, however, insist that God allows—if not sends—such tragedies in order to build our character. Joni E takes this view, and she has certainly developed a fine Christian character as she has coped with her situation. ‘I believe God uses suffering to mature us. And God responds to evil by helping us and others in positive ways. But I don’t think God causes or allows suffering and evil for this purpose’ (133). Much suffering does *not* lead to character-growth; it can kill, depress or stunt.

The concentration camps of the Holocaust were an evil that did not build character. Elie Wiesel, in his book, describes the hanging of a young boy who, being light and emaciated, did not die instantly but took half an hour. When someone asked where God was in this, the reply was, ‘Hanging here from this gallows.’ In other words, God was dead. The situation called for atheism. The Holocaust, far from building character, caused many to become atheists.

This is the fourth point of the five: **God works to squeeze good from the evil he didn’t want in the first place.**

Chapter 5: God Needs Our Cooperation

Some Christians give up trying to comprehend the problem of evil and settle for just doing all they can to work against evil and alleviate suffering wherever possible. That is commendable, but avoids facing the underlying issue. Also, ‘It’s hard to feel motivated to solve problems an allegedly omnipotent God could solve alone’ (142).

Some believe God *invites* us to cooperate with him in combatting evil. But it’s more accurate to say that God *needs* us to do it; he cannot achieve the desired positive outcomes without us. There is an ‘indispensable love synergy’ here: we work with God in order for love to reign. What we do matters!

By contrast, three views lead people to conclude their lives really don’t matter:

1. The ‘no God’ view, i.e. atheism.

Most come to it in reaction against conventional ideas about God. Many can’t believe that, if a loving and omnipotent God exists, he would allow the horrors they experience. Others can’t believe he would operate through evolution with its predation and death. Yet others can’t accept that God would send people to hell for eternity.

Atheists may say they want to make a positive difference in the world, but without an ultimate reference-point—God—they have no way of knowing what ‘positive’ means. All it can mean is what currently seems right to them and their group.

2. The ‘all God’ view, i.e. a sovereign, all-controlling God.

For them, free will is an illusion. God is the cause of everything, including murder, rape, torture etc. Their lives don’t really matter, because the script has already been written and finalised. All is predestined. Steve Jobs, at the age of 13, turned away from God and church on these grounds.

3. The conventional view of God.

This is the most common. Many Christians hold that God is ‘beyond’ or transcendent, but has decided to love us and be involved with us. He *could* control, but has decided to give us free will and invite our cooperation. And when necessary, coercion remains an option for him to fall back on.

On this view, our lives are entirely in God’s hand. ‘God took her home,’ they say when a person dies. The downside is that a controlling God must either cause or allow evil. If he is both loving and powerful, why doesn’t

he stop it? ‘Victims of abuse and tragedy can’t believe the conventional God loves them’ (147). Christians with this view typically blame evil on wrongdoers, but that still doesn’t explain God’s failure to prevent it. ‘Trying to alleviate evil the conventional God allowed would seem to run contrary to God’s purposes’ (147).

‘The conventional view describes a God who can override what we do at any time, or can accomplish alone what we fail to do. It’s hard to believe our lives truly matter if God has that kind of power, even if God doesn’t always use it’ (148). And people with this view tend to hold that God ‘condescended’ to be with his creation. Essentially, he is aloof and unconnected, and his power logically precedes his love. He is like the boss of a big company who pretends his minions matter, and invites their opinions, but really does as he wants. He is a dictator. We don’t really matter.

The view that God needs us is easily misunderstood. He certainly doesn’t need us in order to exist. Nor does he need us in order to act. But, as a God who always loves, and because love is uncontrolling, he needs our love responses, expressed in our action in line with his purposes.

God acts first in each moment and makes synergy possible. Some theologians have called this ‘prevenient grace’. He is engaging with us every moment, not just now and then, seeking our collaboration. The Bible makes this need for cooperation clear, though many miss it, assuming that God acts totally independently.

Some try to make sense of evil using Romans 8:28. It is variously translated.

- The AV has ‘We know that *all things work together for good* to them that love God...’ It doesn’t say how; it’s a mystery.
- The NASB has ‘We know that *God causes all things to work together for good* to those who love God...’ Here, God is stated to be the cause, hinting at the ‘all God’ view; he presumably causes every evil, even if it turns out for good.
- The NIV has ‘We know that *in all things God works for the good* of those who love him...’ This doesn’t say God is the cause; it says he works *in* things, with good in mind. That leaves room for other causes, either good or ill, to be at work alongside him. The NIV shares with the other two the statement that this working is ‘to those who love God’, implying that he helps only those who first love him and not everyone.
- The RSV is better. It has ‘We know that in everything God works for good *with those who love him...*’ Note the ‘with’. He works *with* those who love. We can all choose love. We contribute, and what we do matters.

The ways we might cooperate with God are endless, and will vary according to our circumstances. We act as his hands and feet (as in Teresa of Avila’s famous poem). ‘Like a mind influencing a body without controlling it, God influences us’ (157). Prayer doesn’t look to God to do all the work. Nor is it all up to us. ‘Prayer can align us with God’s will while opening new avenues for God to work in us and the world’ (158).

‘The logic of uncontrolling love changes the way we think about the afterlife’ (159). Many Christians say that God alone decides our destiny, some going to heaven, others being consigned to hell. A person’s sin may affect that, or whether they ‘accepted Christ’. But none of that is essential; in the end, it’s up to God. And he alone sets the criteria by which he decides; he is answerable to no-one.

An alternative is universalism. It assumes that it is God’s prerogative to bring everyone to heaven. He can control, so he will see that it gets done. On that basis, our choices now, and what we have done, don’t matter. A third option is annihilation as an alternative to eternal torment. God alone decides who to spare and who to annihilate.

‘In these afterlife scenarios, our actions don’t *ultimately* matter. They may tilt God’s decision one way or another, but they don’t have to. The Judge with the ability to control can singlehandedly save us, condemn us, or annihilate us’ (161).

An alternative view is what we could call the ‘relentless love’ approach: that ‘God always loves and seeks our love responses. When we and others cooperate, we enjoy well-being. When we do not, we suffer. Let’s call this the “relentless love” view of the afterlife’ (161). It extends the logic of uncontrolling love everlastingly. Let’s compare this with the views in Rob Bell’s famous book, *Love Wins*.

Bell sees 'hell' as the situation brought about naturally if we refuse to cooperate with God's love. 'God himself would not singly condemn anyone to everlasting torment' (162). I agree. In fact I would say that God *can't*. Uncontrolling love cannot force anyone into hell—or indeed into heaven.

Bell is not clear on what 'love wins' means. Is it a guarantee, or just a hope, that God's love will ultimately persuade all? The 'relentless love' view, by contrast, guarantees that love wins, in several ways. God will not, and cannot, stop loving us, now and after death. Those who respond to it will enjoy eternal bliss in the life to come. And God will never cease his loving call, even to those who, after death, have still not yet responded positively to it. 'God never sends anyone to hell, never annihilates, and never gives up calling us to embrace love. God's love is relentless' (163).

'Love is always uncontrolling. Because God's love is relentless, however, we have good reason to *hope* all creatures eventually cooperate with God. It's reasonable to think the God who never gives up and whose love is universal will eventually convince all creatures and redeem all creation. After all, love always hopes and never gives up (1 Cor. 13:7)!' (164).

Some readers will resist this book's message, on the basis of a variety of theological convictions that we have touched on earlier. Some will be fearful. We should not be fearful of God, who is love. He does not cause or allow evil, and he doesn't punish. It is liberating indeed to be free of that fear, which binds many Christians. Myself, I fear that I may make wrong and foolish choices. And I fear that others will do the same. Both have natural negative consequences.

I tend to be fearful in threatening times. God is not controlling, so 'divine protection through control is a myth' (168). He does work to protect, of course, but never unilaterally. Creatures always play a role. We should always be ready to cooperate with God in that 'indispensable love synergy'. Our lives matter; we have a key role to play in God's purposes, and that is a very affirming truth. It can liberate us from low self-esteem.

'For the last several years, my life has been difficult. I was laid off unjustly from a job I loved as professor of theology. Before this injustice, I endured trials, criticism, lies, and more. My story became national news, and the emotional toll was enormous' (173). My family have suffered through it all, too. But in everything I have learnt how to empathise better with others who are suffering. I'm sometimes down, but I'm alive and kicking!

This is the fifth and final point: **God needs our cooperation.**

Postscript

In the year before my twentieth birthday, six important people in my life died, all of them prematurely. As I tried to see how God fitted into it all, it became one factor that drove me to a period of atheism. Studies in theology, philosophy and science in the following years, plus my deep intuitions about love, brought me back to believing that God exists.

Eventually I came to appreciate him as the God of uncontrolling love, and in this I found peace and a workable approach to life. I have written this book to help others who are struggling in similar ways, especially those who have undergone deep suffering and have wondered where God is in it all.