



CHRISTIAN ANSWERS TO HARD QUESTIONS

**HOW DID
EVIL
COME INTO THE WORLD?**

WILLIAM EDGAR

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Christian Interpretations of Genesis 1

Christianity and the Role of Philosophy

Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design

Did Adam Exist?

How Can I Know for Sure?

How Did Evil Come into the World?

The Morality of God in the Old Testament

Should You Believe in God?

Was Jesus Really Born of a Virgin?

Peter A. Lillback and Steven T. Huff, Series Editors

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PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

R&R
P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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ISBN: 978-1-59638-671-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-776-8 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-777-5 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Edgar, William, 1944-

How did evil come into the world? / William Edgar, Westminster Seminary Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. -- 1st ed.

pages cm. -- (Christian answers to hard questions)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59638-671-6 (pbk.)

1. Good and evil--Biblical teaching. 2. Eden. 3. Adam (Biblical figure) 4. Eve (Biblical figure) I. Title.

BS680.G6E34 2014

231'.8--dc23

2013042616

SIMPLY STATED, in our world things are not the way they are supposed to be.¹ One would have to be living in a bubble not to know that. A tsunami wipes out millions of people in the Pacific Ring of Fire. A child dies of leukemia. A famine overwhelms large parts of East Africa. A husband abuses his wife. Warlords prowl the hills of Afghanistan. A gunman enters an elementary school and murders scores of students and teachers. Yet evil does not have to be so dramatic to qualify as evil. Tarring a reputation by gossip, adjusting the figures on one's income tax, glancing lustfully at the opposite sex—these are not the way things are supposed to be either.

Finally, even though everything in us cries out for life, everyone, even the most privileged people, will ultimately have to face death, the great leveler. We sense profoundly that death is not natural or normal, as much as we try to whitewash it. Things are not the way they are supposed to be.

Natural disasters certainly qualify as evil, for they are often horribly destructive. So do famines, whether or not they are perpetrated by corrupt human beings. We will discuss those subjects. Yet surely the most devastating forms of evil come from human causes. Are human beings, then, the ultimate cause of evil? What if there is a God, one who is both good and all-powerful? Would he not somehow be ultimately responsible for evil? If so, how is he then still good? The question is: where does evil come from?

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- + What is the connection between a natural disaster and a human act of terrorism? Despite their differences, why might both indicate that things in the world are “not the way they are supposed to be”?

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- ✦ How would you define *evil*, working from the descriptions in these opening paragraphs?
- ✦ What are some causes of evil? Are there different causes for different kinds of evil? Are there other possible causes that the author did not mention?
- ✦ Where might the ultimate *responsibility* for the existence of evil lie? Why?

THINGS MIGHT HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT

There is no disputing that human beings cause evil. One of the most powerful novels of the twentieth century was Albert Camus's *The Fall*, set in a bar in Amsterdam. In the novel, Jean-Baptiste Clamence confesses his life's story to a stranger. He had been a prominent, respected defense lawyer in Paris. Always on the side of the widow, always ready to help the poor, he had thought of himself as a model human being, well above the average slob. Until one night as he was walking home, crossing the Pont Neuf, he spotted a woman leaning over the bridge. She was about to take her life. He walked right by. He even heard the splash, a struggle, and then . . . nothing. Why hadn't he helped her? Why had he failed to intercede? As the story unfolds, Clamence tells of other occasions when he lost nerve. Here he is now, a broken man, in Amsterdam, telling a complete stranger about his sinfulness. Amsterdam is cold, dark, dreary. Its canals run in circles, just like the circles of Hell in Dante's immortal *Divine Comedy*.

Camus, not necessarily a Christian, had a profound sense that we are in a fallen world and that we are all complicit in the cowardly state that allows and even perpetrates evil. The heart of this evil is deception, including self-deception. All of us are involved. Camus is confessing for all of us. If there were no deception, think what our world would look like. The economy would

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be stable. Spouses would not cheat on each other. Advertising would be honest. The very title of the book, *The Fall*, shows that Camus had some awareness of the abnormality of the world. A fall from what? When did it happen? Why are things so abnormal? Is there a scientific explanation? Does science have anything at all to say about this state of affairs, or do we rely solely on “religious” truth?

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- + How do human beings cause and perpetuate evil? How is our complicity in evil the result of deception?
- + What does the story of Jean-Baptiste Clamence illustrate? In what sense is he “confessing for all of us”?
- + What do you think the world would look like without deception?

What about death itself? In what sense are human beings the cause of their own death? Here we need to draw back the curtain. Though it might seem incredible to us today, the biblical account of how things went wrong provides a convincing explanation for human causality, all the while showing us how the good, all-powerful God of the universe is somehow both in control and nevertheless innocent of the entrance of evil into our world.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- + What new claim is the author making? What does this mean about the ultimate responsibility for evil?

What is evil, anyway? Suffering is usually disagreeable and can be evil when it is caused by something that is wrong. So we

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would not call the sensation of being burned evil if it protects us from the fire. But it would be evil if we caused someone to be burned for malevolent purposes. The ultimate definition of evil is that it is against God. Put the other way, evil is what God is against. On almost every page of Scripture we are told that God opposes evil—indeed, that he is outraged by it. Habbakuk describes him this way: “You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” (Hab. 1:13). “Ah, sinful nation,” God calls Israel, “a people laden with iniquity” (Isa. 1:4). The idea of blaming God for evil is repulsive to the authors of Scripture. “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one” (James 1:13). Indeed, God is “the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (1:17). So then, if God is God, how did evil come into the world?

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ What is the author’s definition of *evil*? How does it compare to your own definition from earlier? How does it encompass the different examples of evil given at the start of the booklet?

The Bible teaches very insistently that there was a before and an after. In the earliest pages of Genesis, we read that God made the world good. Following the grand description of the creation week, the first chapter of Genesis concludes this way: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). The crown of God’s creation is mankind, made after his own image, made male and female (1:26–27). The great calling of humanity is to multiply, to spread over the earth, and to rule over it for God’s sake (1:28–30). Everything was good and right. Adam and Eve were placed in a gorgeous garden and

told to take care of it. In the ancient world, kings and queens often had beautiful gardens around them to signify their royalty.

This account becomes more intriguing. The Lord God placed our first parents, particularly Adam, in a special role. He was to represent the entire human race and set the direction for its future. Why such an arrangement? Because God wanted humanity to be united. To accomplish such a solidarity, he set them in a covenant relation to their head. A covenant is an arrangement whereby God enters into a contract with his people. No analogy is perfect. But it is something like subjects' being united through their king, or tribe members' being united through the chief. In this case, our human fellowship in the covenant is an earthly reflection of the way that God himself relates to the entire creation as its covenant head.

With such an arrangement characterizing humanity through its head, God gave our first parents an opportunity to grow into greater maturity and to become even happier than they were. In doing so, he set the stakes high. For Adam and Eve were responsible not only for their own futures, but for the future of all humanity. God put them to a test, telling them to resist eating of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Everything else was permitted, but not that tree. Take that fruit, and you die (Gen. 2:16–17). Resist, and you grow and grow until you attain eternal life.

Why such a test? For one thing, it was God's way of showing this first couple who was in charge. Though he never ruled them harshly—quite the contrary—the Lord wanted human beings, with all the privileges they received, to remember where those privileges and gifts came from. For another, this was part of God's plan for the future. He wanted to bring mankind from the state of innocence in the garden to a state of fuller maturity, even of consummate bliss. According to the Bible, the way to achieve

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such maturity is both to learn, often through trials, to discern good and evil, and also to know how to resist evil (Deut. 1:39; 30:15; 2 Sam. 14:17; 1 Kings 3:9; etc.). Even Jesus, God’s Son, had to learn good and evil through trials with respect to his humanity (Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:8). Thus, *knowing* good and evil is more than an intellectual concept. It has to do with experience. Adam and Eve already knew the concept of evil: disobeying God would lead to death. But they could develop into a higher state of wisdom and growth only by experiencing and resisting the temptation to “be like God” (Gen. 3:5).

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ What is a *covenant head*? What are the benefits of having a covenant head?
- ✦ Why would God test his creation? What were the benefits of passing the test?
- ✦ What does it mean to know good and evil? How are good and evil known?

GOD’S PURPOSES

This might seem a strange story to us. Why such an apparently arbitrary test? And if the world was created good, how exactly did evil intrude? Why a talking serpent? We do not know all the details here. No doubt the serpent is the voice-piece of the Devil, in which case we must presume a fall in the invisible world. Even though it was originally created good, the invisible angelic world developed trouble sometime before Genesis 3. All we really know is that some angels were considered faithful and others were not (1 Tim. 5:21). For an Israelite reader, the serpent was a lowly, repugnant creature, one that represented the enemies of God himself (Job 26:13; Isa. 27:1). The serpent here is described as “crafty” (Gen. 3:1). The

In our world things are not the way they are supposed to be. If God is perfect, loving, and powerful, why does he allow this world to be so painful and imperfect? Scripture provides satisfying answers to these questions.

“Edgar gives wise counsel in sorting through major issues about evil. Using a biblically grounded worldview, he ably distinguishes evil as an intrusion into a world that God originally created good and shows the inadequacy of modern materialism. He gives hope on the basis of Christ’s work of redemption. He also provides useful guidance about the death and suffering of animals and about science.”

—Vern S. Poythress, Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

Written to equip and strengthen laypeople in their defense of the faith, *Christian Answers to Hard Questions* challenges contemporary opposition to Christianity with concise, practical answers.

Peter A. Lillback and Steven T. Huff, Series Editors

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PR
PUBLISHING
www.prpbooks.com

Cover design by Trinet Internet Solutions, Inc.

APOLOGETICS

ISBN: 978-1-59638-671-6

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