

Why Doesn't God Do Away With Evil?

Matthew 4:1-11

February 17, 2002

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In John Updike's novel, Rabbit Run, Harry and Janice, the parents of a newborn baby, find themselves in an argument. Harry leaves in a huff and Janice proceeds to get drunk. In her drunken stupor she tries to give the baby a bath. That's when the horrible happens. Somehow, Janice manages to drown her own child in the bathtub. Harry returns a few hours later, confronted with the unthinkable truth. In the terrible shock of the moment, Harry rolls up his sleeve, pulls the stopper from the tub and groans.¹ How easy to pull the stopper, yet in all His strength, God does nothing. Through the years, I've heard the moan of Harry many times.

If God is good and God is all-powerful, then why do bad things happen? Herein lies the most perplexing problem for Christians. And it is this question at the crossroad of faith that I want to tackle today.

WHAT IS EVIL?

Author Scott Peck says, "My eight year old son gave the best definition of evil I've ever gotten." He said, "Dad, evil is "live" spelled backwards. And in fact, that is exactly what it is. Evil knocks the life right out of us. Evil kills. Evil eliminates. Evil destroys. Evil is that force, residing either inside of us or outside of us, that seeks to destroy our liveliness.

Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." Evil may be hard to define, but it is easy to recognize. You who have struggled through some untimely death of a loved one, some emotional abuse from a family member, some long-term spiritual estrangement from a loving God, know evil up close and personal. I do not have to tell you today about evil; you have met it face-to-face and you know its pain and you struggle to overcome it. It is the rest of us that might need a little convincing.

Some say evil is an illusion. I received my theological education during the Age of Aquarius, when flower children wanted everything to be beautiful. We preached the gospel of Transactional Analysis. "I'm O.K. You're O.K. We are all O.K." If we treated everybody that way, all would be well in the world.

Karl Menninger wrote a book called, Whatever Became of Sin? During that era he noted, interestingly enough, that politicians, preachers, and society in general had practically removed the word *sin* from human language, hoping somehow if we did not speak it, it would not be true. Evil is not eliminated by being silent about it.

We were also the generation who covered up the atrocities of MyLai, Vietnam,

where troops of Charlie Company of the United States Army under the command of Lt. William L. Calley, Jr. gunned down hundreds of innocent children and women, firing as they entered their huts, shooting as villagers ran for safety. Others were herded in groups of 20-30 and then grenades thrown at them. We have seen evil. We have met it face-to-face. It is not an illusion.

Some say evil is a necessity. Would we appreciate health if we never had illness? Could we enjoy a clear day if we never had a cloudy day? Just as the beauty of a Rembrandt painting lies in the shadows, so the dark places of our lives help to shape us and make us better. So some would reason that God created good and evil for our development. "Everything has a reason and evil happens for a purpose."

As a cancer survivor, let me tell you, I would be very angry with God if for one moment I thought God gave me a disease to teach me a lesson. What parent pours boiling water over a child in order to teach them to stay away from the stove? We put parents in jail for that. How dare we put at the feet of God some notion that He brings evil on us in order to teach us a Truth? God help us.

Some say evil is a struggle. *The force, Luke, the force. Listen for the force.* Such is the advise of Obi Wan Kanobi to young Luke Skywalker as he prepares to face Darth Vader—evil personified—in the immensely popular *Star Wars Adventures*.

Is this the story of the universe? Is there a universal star wars going on between the forces of good and evil? It would seem so in the Book of Revelation. Most of us have felt the knots in our stomach as we wrestle like Jacob of old trying to deal with evils within. We know that struggle. Is that the nature of evil? Of course, that even leaves us with questions. Why is an omnipotent God so weak? Why doesn't He just call ten thousand angels to destroy the world and set us free?

Some say evil is our sin. In the creation story, so simple that a child can understand it and so profound that scholars are still struggling to comprehend it, Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. They disobey God in an effort to be like God. We humans have been following their example ever since.

St. Augustine named the problem Original Sin; there is nothing original about it. We get a sense that the nature of the fall was certainly more than just a little stumble on the human path. We err and stray from God's way like lost sheep.

*There is so much bad in the best of us,
And so much good in the worst of us,
That it hardly behooves the rest of us,
To stand in judgment on any of us.*

So God took a gigantic risk in creating human beings. He gave us the freedom of

being good by offering us the option of being bad. Herein lies our delight and our destruction.

WHAT IS GOD DOING ABOUT EVIL?

Where is God in the midst of all this? The question lingers: How can a good God sit in heaven surrounded by cherubims and seraphims and watch the destruction of his very own creation? I suggest that He doesn't! God is not watching from a distance. God is in Christ, redeeming the moment. Here is the way he does it.

God is overcoming evil with good. In Romans 12:21, Paul says, "Be not overcome by evil. But overcome evil with good." When the worst happens among us, the best flows from us. Why is that? Is that just a coincidence? I suggest not. I suggest it is something God-given in us, in human personality, that when the awful happens, the best flows from us. If you look for God on 9/11, look not at planes crashing into buildings and destroying the ordered way of our lives. Look for rescue workers plunging into the abyss at the risk of their own lives. Look at a priest kneeling over a dying person and giving last rites even as his own death is imminent. Look at a flight attendant calling in the face of a terrorist, calling the control tower and giving directions on what is about to happen. Look at millions and millions of people who gave billions of dollars in order that hope could be restored to people's lives. If you want to find God in the midst of evil, look at the good that happens when the best of people come forward.

I call it Gorilla Goodness. We need a lot more of it. What if ordinary people in ordinary neighborhoods started protecting streets and loving neighbors and watching out for children and caring for the environment, and eliminating poverty? What if the good people of the world just said, "STOP IT! THAT IS ENOUGH OF IT!" Through our resources, our hope, our faith, our beliefs and our collective unity, what would happen in this world if we joined hands to stop the evil in the world?

A reporter asked the late Mother Theresa, the lover of the least, where is God when a baby dies in a Calcutta alley? She responded, "*Oh, God is in the gutter with the child, but that's not the question sir. The question is, where are you when a child dies in an alley of Calcutta*" or Nashville, Tennessee? Where are we? Where is God in the midst of evil? God is overcoming evil with good and trusting you and me to embody it.

Where is God in the midst of evil? God is making a good delivery. We pray it every Sunday. *Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* What did you want God to do when you prayed that prayer? What entered your mind? What do you desire from that prayer?

What comes to mind when you hear a good delivery? A good delivery is bringing a newborn child into the world. A tied baseball game at the bottom of the ninth with bases loaded, two outs and the pitcher throws in a strike,— that is a good delivery. A good delivery is a word spoken on a Sunday morning to someone

wading through despair. I pray Sunday after Sunday, *Lord, help me hear your words and not just say my words.* That is a good delivery. What is it you want God to do for you today? Do you want Him to give you new birth, to come through in a crisis, to give some word of hope in the wilderness of temptation? God makes a good delivery every time.

Betty Hutton was a famous movie star and huge box office attraction back in the 40's and 50's. But, Betty Hutton became lost. Family problems, emotional problems, illness, bankruptcy, depression, and alcoholism stole her life away. In her trouble she cried to the Lord and the Lord heard her cry. The Lord delivered her from the forces of wickedness, restored her soul, and called her life back to order, making her a new person. As a new woman, Betty Hutton made a comeback in the theatrical world playing Mrs. Hennigan in the Broadway musical *Annie*. At the first performance, the program notes contained extensive biographical sketches of the cast members—except for Betty Hutton. Under her picture and name were five words, *I'm back, thanks to God.*² Somebody here today needs to experience down in your heart, God's great delivery and write on the biography of your life, *I'm back, thanks to God.*

The same God who delivered Daniel from the lion's den, Joseph from the seduction of Potiphar's wife, and his own Son from temptation in the wilderness, the same omnipotent God is here to deliver you.

God is conquering evil, forever. Someday the streets will be safe and the jails will be empty. Someday our tears will be dry and our pain will be ended. Someday the hospitals will close and the funeral homes will go out of business. Someday Satan will have his last stand and evil will be bound forever. Oh, I believe in Someday! Do you?

The Performing Arts Center at Ohio State University was built with staircases leading to nowhere. When a visitor asked, "Why?" the architect responded, "It is intended to reflect life itself." Well, I have news for you today my friends. I am going somewhere, are you?

*Somewhere the sun is shining!
Somewhere the songbirds dwell,
Hush then your sad repining,
God lives and all is well.*

Somewhere, somewhere, beautiful isle of somewhere. Land of the true, where we live anew. Beautiful isle of somewhere. I believe in somewhere, do you?

So we come back to where we began. How can a good and powerful God put up with evil? By faith I answer, **God has not.** By faith I affirm, **God does not.** By faith I have hope, **God will not.**

God is in Christ, overcoming evil with good.
God is in us, delivering us from the evil one.
God is in eternity where he shall reign forever and ever.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory!

Amen.

NOTES

1. Lewis Smedes, Forgive and Forget (New York: Harper and Row, 1984)
2. James W. Moore, Some Things Are Too Good Not To Be True (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 1994)

