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## HATH GOD SAID? Part One

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I'm sure many of you are happy to see in your bulletin that today we get to start talking about suffering and death. "OH BOY, let's go to church and talk about *suffering* and *death!*" Not exactly cheerful, is it? And yet, if we are to understand this present world, we must understand what the Bible has to say about suffering and about death. After all, we have just recently finished talking about God's finished creation, a creation which He pronounced to be "very good." There was no suffering, disease, death, poverty, famine--nothing of the sort. The universe was in perfect balance, sustained in such a way that suffering and death were impossible; yet there very clearly is suffering and death today. Why is that so?

Sir Richard Dawkins, one of the leading evolutionists and anti-religious atheists (I say "anti-religious" in the sense that he actively opposes religion), has this to say about suffering and death:

The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are being slowly devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst and disease.... The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.<sup>1</sup>

Is this the "very good" world that God created? If so, He must not be a "very good" God! Can we then trust a God whose "very good" world is so lamentably full of evil?

Sadly, for many people, the answer to that question is *no*. They see the evil of this present world, this "pitiless indifference," and find it incompatible with a loving God, and therefore they come to the conclusion that God must not exist.

However, there is a very large oversight in this conclusion, and that is that *good does exist* in this world, and *we can tell the difference between good and evil*. In fact, it is the very goodness that is intrinsic in the universe that allows us to recognize evil. If there is no God, no innate sense of what is right, then how can there be any evil or any wrong? How can I call any action of any man evil if there is no backdrop of good according to which that man *ought* to act?

For example, famed movie director Roman Polanski was recently caught in Switzerland. There has been a warrant out for his arrest for decades, since he fled before his sentencing on charges that he had drugged and molested a thirteen year old girl. Now, I can only recognize such an act as evil and outrageous if I know that a man should never behave like that. I have to have an *innate* sense of right and wrong--and I do, and so do you. We can sear our conscience given enough time and enough bad choices; but we are born knowing that certain things are right and certain things are wrong. Without

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawkins, "God's Utility Function," *Scientific American* (vol. 273, November 1995), p. 85. Quoted in Henry Morris, "The Fall, the Curse, and Evolution." Available at <http://www.icr.org/articles/view/837/309/>.

God, though, there is no right and therefore *there is no wrong*. We may say we don't like or approve of certain actions, but when we do, we are strictly acting on opinions. This is precisely the view of modern man, and if you don't believe me, do an internet search with the words "definition of evil."

Consider that quote from Dawkins again. Even within the quote wherein he states that "there is...no good and no evil," he makes a moral recognition that the suffering in this world is "beyond decent contemplation." In other words, it is *not good!*

Strictly speaking, then, the modern man, devoid of God, has *no basis* of determining right from wrong other than his own feelings or opinions. Anything else is foisted upon him by society; and if a man doesn't agree with the standards of society, then obeying them is actually a violation of his own free will and sovereignty. There is no end to the justification of evil deeds that can arise from this line of thinking.

We see that the problem of evil is real, and we see that it poses an unavoidable dilemma for the atheist. The problem of evil can only be unraveled and understood in the light of Scripture. If the Bible tells us that God created a "very good" universe, then there must be an explanation for why it is not "very good" as we find it today and throughout human history.

Before we look at Scripture, I'm going to propose a definition of evil that I think will help us grasp the concept of evil as taught in the Bible:

*Evil is a temporary state allowed by God (although never experienced by God) in order to give man the ability to make real, substantial choices of his own free will and to allow man to see what life would be without God.*

That is my definition of evil. This definition as such is not found within the pages of Scripture, but I believe it is a scriptural definition nonetheless.

God has made a perfect creation, with a perfect man and woman under a single imperative:

*And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Gen. 1:16-17)*

The tree itself was not evil; all that God created was good. The command may just as well have been, "Don't leave the garden," or "Don't pick this flower." God could have given any command, but His singular command centered on this one tree--"Do not eat of this tree, or dying, you will die!" The Hebrew actually carries that idea: "Dying, you shall die."

This command gave man and woman a real, actual, substantial choice. They could see themselves as creatures of a Creator, or they could assert their autonomy. In submission to this command, they could show real love, based on a real choice, to their Creator. Francis Schaeffer says,

It is perfectly true that in making man as he did God made the possibility of evil. But the bare possibility of evil is not the actualizing of it. And in making that possibility, God validated choice and validated man as man--a being significant in history. If he had left him without

choice, you could speak forever of man being man, man being significant, but it would only be meaningless words.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus was asked a question in Matthew 22:36-38:

*Master, which is the great commandment in the law?*

*Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.*

*This is the first and great commandment.*

How do we show love for God? Is it enough to say emotionally, “I love You, God”? Let’s go back to the book of Deuteronomy and look at chapter 6, verses 4-6:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart:*

The central issue here is not an outward show of keeping the commandments, but an inward love for God. That is, and always been, the issue!

I have two children. They may say to me, “I love you, Daddy,” and they often do say so. But if, while they are saying they love me, they are willfully disobeying, then I would have reason to question that love; their actions would contradict their words.

So it is with man and his Creator. We are not equals with God. We can have fellowship with God as parent to child, but we must remember that He has office that we must respect.

God put this same choice that we have, to love and obey Him, before the man and the woman. They could obey and enjoy life--an abundant life, the fullness of life that is promised to us in Jesus--or they could assert their autonomy and suffer death, the fullness of death, which is separation from God. Death properly understood is just that--separation from God. This is a theological topic to which we will return.

We can clearly understand man’s purpose in creation in light of this command. God created man to love and fellowship with Him. The modern man, devoid of God, does not know why he is here on this earth, the product of blind chance in the flow of time. The one who understands Scripture knows why he is here: to love and obey God. In that love and obedience, man finds his only fulfillment. All other pursuits turn to dust: pursuit of wealth, power, collectivism, debauchery, hedonism. These leave a man unfulfilled.

The whole book of Ecclesiastes is written from the perspective of a man who had the best of everything he could possibly have, devoid of God. His found that all these pursuits are vanity, or emptiness. Nothing brought satisfaction. At the end of the book, he says, “*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man*” (Ecc. 12:13).

With this in mind, let us explore Genesis chapter 3.

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2 Francis Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 72.

*Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?*

In Genesis 3, we are confronted with something that may sorely test the limits of our faith: a talking serpent. Indeed, this has been a stumbling block for many, many people, for how can a serpent talk? This is clearly outside of the natural order. *And that is just the point!* The idea of a talking serpent is absolutely, positively outside of the natural order. It is not fitting that a “beast of the field” should be conversant. If this passage were left to stand on its own, we would understandably be puzzled. This is clearly a point of contact between the natural world and the supernatural.

The Bible, as we said last week, does not contain exhaustive truth, but rather the truth we need. Whatever it says is completely true, but it does not tell us everything about a given subject. We would like to know more about the supernatural, perhaps, but God has given us enough information about the supernatural. We can know what we need to know. The remainder of Scripture is not silent as to the nature of this serpent. As biblical revelation unfolds, we have a better picture of the true nature of the serpent. It is significant that in Hebrew, this is not just “a serpent” but rather “The Serpent.” The Bible gives an increasing amount of information regarding this serpent; and at the very end of the Bible, his true identity is clearly spelled out:

*And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him (Rev. 12:9).*

*And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years (Rev. 20:2).*

The book of Revelation makes it abundantly clear that the serpent is Satan. There is more than enough evidence to make the connection throughout the Bible, but lest there be any doubt, the connection is made plain here.

“Oh, come on, Brother Jeff! Do you really expect me to believe that the serpent was Satan?” I will put my evidence before you. In the Bible, there are two instances of Satanic possession of an individual. Not demon possession, mind you, but actual Satanic possession, in which Satan himself breaches the spirit of an individual and resides in a body. In addition to the possession of the serpent, we find Satan possessing Judas Iscariot in the final events leading up to Christ’s crucifixion:

*Then entered Satan into Judas surnamed Iscariot, being of the number of the twelve (Luke 22:3).*

Another example has yet to occur. It is prophesied that in the time of distress known as the Great Tribulation, the dragon, already identified as the serpent, Satan, will possess the anti-Christ and empower him to fight against God.

*And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him? (Rev. 13:4).*

We see that Satan does not delegate these important missions; he takes them on personally.

The world scoffs at the notion of Satan, but the Bible makes it clear that he is real, that he is a creation of God, and that he is the enemy of God by his own choice. His desire is to be like God, which is impossible for a finite being since God is infinite. Satan is self-deceived, believing that a finite creature can be infinite in scope and majesty and power like God. Isaiah 14 gives us a glimpse of this self-deceit by revealing Satan's inmost thoughts--that he could be higher than the other angels, and in fact could be like the Most High.

Jesus believed in the reality Satan. He said, "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven" in Luke 10:18. The apostle Paul also makes reference to him, notably as the "prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2) and "the god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4).

And so in Genesis 3, we find this serpent, Satan, in the garden. He believes in his heart that he can be like God. It is this very promise of god-likeness that he is about to offer the woman; but first, he must break down her defenses.

In contrast to the serpent, who has delusions of grandeur within his rebellious, self-deceived heart, we find the innocent woman. She has experienced only goodness, and she lives in the abundance of life, free from sorrow, suffering, pain, and death. She has received only goodness and love from God, her creator, and Adam, her companion and friend. The serpent's problem is internal; but the woman's temptation is to be external.

She is addressed by the serpent, which is extraordinary in and of itself; but she did not seem startled from the account we have. I'm sure those early days of creation were full of wonder and discovery for the first man and woman, and perhaps she thought she had come across something she simply hadn't found before.

And so the serpent begins to break down the woman's innocence with a seemingly simple question: "Yea, hath God said...?" Did God really say such and such? How do you know God said it? Do you believe God said that? *Is this truly God's Word to you?* There are implications in this question: maybe Adam didn't get the message right; maybe Adam just made that up. Maybe you can't totally trust Adam, or even God Himself.

This is the question before every man, woman, and child today. *Satan's primary mode of operation is to plant seeds of doubt in the minds and hearts of human beings.* Is that really God's Word to you? How do you know? Maybe the writers didn't get it right; maybe some sloppy copyists messed it up along the way. Maybe they just made it up themselves in the first place. Maybe Moses didn't write anything, but people who lived centuries after him made up some books and said that Moses wrote them to give them credibility. Maybe it's just so full of errors that we can't trust it. Maybe it never was God's Word at all, but just a clever trick made up to give the writers power over the simple minded who would believe it.

Now, folks, it's not wrong to doubt. Satan has an entire world-system at his disposal, and *the first purpose of that world system is to breed doubt about God and His Word.* There are many, many professors at our universities who see it as their job to destroy the faith of Christians. There are well-funded TV documentaries that seek to discredit the validity of God's Word. There are endless books that mock and blaspheme God and His Word. The Internet is rife with arguments and mockery of God's

Word. The important thing to remember is that when the doubts come, run to God, not to the world! *The world does not have the answers.* The world has arguments that may sound convincing at first, but those arguments cannot stand scrutiny. The worldly are, in fact, blind to the truth, according to 2 Cor. 4:4:

*In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.*

Look to the Lord for an honest answer, and you'll get it. Matthew 7:7-8 is just one of many passages in which the Lord promises His own personal guidance:

*Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you:*

*For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.*

The next time I preach we will examine the woman's reaction to this question, "Yea, hath God said...?"