

‘God, how long do I have to cry out for help before you listen? How many times do I have to yell ... before you come to the rescue? Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day? Anarchy and violence break out, quarrels and fights all over the place. Law and order fall to pieces. Justice is a joke. The wicked have the righteous hamstrung and stand justice on its head (Hab 1:2-4 MSG).’

That was Habakkuk’s first complaint to God. He had good reason to shake his fist at God. Habakkuk was a prophet to Judea around 2600 years ago. He was witnessing the final days of his country. Israel was gone. The Assyrians had conquered and deported all of Israel to Nineveh a hundred years before. Things were bad and the prophet was crying for help.

- The Lord responded ... ‘I am raising up the Babylonians, a cruel and violent people ... ⁷They are notorious for their cruelty and do whatever they like (Hab 1:6-7 NLT).’

This shocks the prophet. Judea was already vassal of Assyria. Rumors of Babylon had spread all the way to Judea. Now the even more evil Babylonians were going to conquer Assyria?

- The prophet complains a second time ... ‘O Lord my God, my Holy One, you who are eternal— surely you do not plan to wipe us out? ... ¹³But you are pure and cannot stand the sight of evil. Will you wink at their treachery? Should you be silent while the wicked swallow up people more righteous than they (Hab 1:12-13 NLT)?’

For thousands of years people have asked questions like ...

- ‘If God exists – and He is a good God – why is there evil?’
- ‘Is God the author of evil?’
- ‘Where did evil come from?’
- ‘Why does he allow suffering and death?’

The existence of evil is visible and concrete, ‘it is one of the most perplexing problems in ... theology.’¹

Today, we are continuing our short series, a skeptic’s guide to faith. These messages are a little different because my audience are those who are skeptical of the Christian faith.

¹ Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979) 135.

- We are supposed to ‘Be merciful to those who doubt (Jd 22 NIV).’ That means listening and helping them past their doubts.
- I encourage you to bring your friends who doubt or who are skeptics.
- Honestly wrestling with the issues enables us to ‘Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1Pe 3:15 NIV).’

Our journey has been to answer some big questions. We started with ...

A Skeptic’s Guide to Faith

How can we trust that Jesus rose from the dead? Then we looked at ...

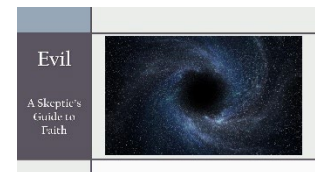
How do we know there is objective truth? Last week examined the question ...

‘How do we know there is an afterlife?’

Today we ask the question ‘If God exists, why is there evil?’

Evil

A Skeptic’s Guide to Faith



(We had a hard time coming up with a picture to symbolize evil. We settled on this photo of a black hole, because evil is the absence of goodness. There is no light in a black hole.)

This question – why is there evil? - builds on last week’s big story because Christianity is the only big story that defeats evil without destroying us. The big story is ...

- Creation – the world was made good.
- Evil – enters through angelic and human rebellion.
- Redemption – God enters the story Himself to defeat evil from within.
- Restoration – God removes evil without removing the people he loves.

We Christians believe that God is not distant from our suffering – he suffers with us and for us.

Jesus said, ‘The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life (Jn 10:10 NLT).’

Evil is around me and within me — but Jesus, the second Adam, has come to defeat it.

The Bible gives two sources for evil: the fallen angels and human free will.

1. Evil Without & Within.

Let's start with the angels.

For many years, a comedian named Flip Wilson made a career off one line, 'the devil made me do it.' He was funny but reduced the horror of evil to a caricature of a red man with horns and a pitchfork whispering in our ear. Real evil exists. Again, Jesus said, 'The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy (Jn 10:10a NLT).'

Fall of angels.

God did not create evil - because then God is not good. God allowed the possibility of evil. We believe the angels were created perfect because seven times we are told in Genesis 1 that what God created was 'good.' The human king of Tyre² symbolizes Satan's fall.

- King of Tyre symbolizes Satan in Ezekiel 28: 'In your great pride you claim, "I am a god!" ... You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and exquisite in beauty. ¹³You were in Eden, the garden of God ... ¹⁴I ordained and anointed you as the mighty angelic guardian ... ¹⁵You were blameless in all you did from the day you were created until the day evil was found in you. ¹⁶... So I banished you in disgrace ... I expelled you, O mighty guardian ... ¹⁷Your heart was filled with pride because of all your beauty. Your wisdom was corrupted by your love of splendor. So I threw you to the ground (Eze 28:2, 12-17 NLT).'

It simply says, 'until evil was found in you (v. 15).'

This happened because they revolted against God.³ They were motivated to surpass God. The consequences were ...

- A third of the angels followed this rebellion (Rev 12:4).
- They lost their holiness and became corrupt in nature (Mt 10:1).
- Some are chained in hell until judgement day (2Pe 2:4).
- Others are free to oppose the work of God (Da 10:12f).
- Their ultimate future is the lake of fire (Mt 25:41).

Because there are a limited number of created angels, we cannot blame demons for all the world's evil. Evil is outside and within me.

Fall of humans (and earth).

I have evil in my own heart. Paul wrote, 'I know that nothing good lives in me ... in my sinful nature (Ro 7:18 NLT).'

(We also have remnants of God's divine nature within us.)

² King of Babylon in Isaiah 14, is similar. 'You said to yourself, "I will ascend to heaven and set my throne above God's stars" ... ¹⁵Instead, you will be brought down to the place of the dead, down to its lowest depths (Is 14:13-15 NLT).'

³ A 'deliberate, self-determined revolt against God', Thiessen, *Systematic Theology*, 136.

Humankind was perfect, but Adam and Eve were given a choice.

- Satan tempted them saying they could ‘Be like God, knowing good and evil (Ge 3:5 NIV).’ Same as Satan’s motive – to be like God.
- Pastoral note: Remember the first commandment is to ‘have no other gods before me (Ex 20:3).’ You can make ‘good things into ultimate things’ and it becomes sin.⁴ Sin is not just breaking rules.

The consequences are we were born with the same sin nature as Adam and Eve. Our very nature is bent towards evil. ‘No one is righteous— not even one ...¹⁸ They have no fear of God at all (Ro 3:10, 18 NLT).’

The potential of evil in our own hearts ought to frighten us.

- Survivor of the Soviet gulag system, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote, ‘The battleline between good and evil runs through the heart of every man.’ — Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (1974)

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Richard’s Testimony

Let’s look at some thoughts about evil. They will not give us a complete picture but will help us understand.

2. Four Thoughts on Evil.

1. The existence of evil points to God.

This is a logical and moral argument. If you call something evil, you are already assuming a standard of good. That standard only makes sense if God exists.

One more time: if you admit that something is evil you are also acknowledging an objective moral law, which points to a lawgiver. Two examples ...

- ‘I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “You shall not covet (Ro 7:7 NIV).”’

⁴ From Soren Kierkegaard (*The Sickness Unto Death*) in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2018) 168.

- ‘My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.’ – C.S. Lewis⁵

Second ...

2. *Love requires freedom, which makes evil possible.*

God could have created people who would not sin, but such limitations would take away the potential of them loving God freely. We would be like robots or slaves.

If you recall last week’s story about a king who loved a poor maiden, that would not be real love, nor would it accomplish God’s plan of loving an equal.

We were created with real freedom because love is impossible without it.⁶ Real freedom includes the possibility of choosing evil.

‘For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don’t use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature (Ga 5:13a NLT).’

God’s perspective is ...

- He could have made us like robots, but robots can’t love.
- He ‘desires relationships with real beings who can make real decisions and have real desires.’⁷
- Therefore, risky love is better than robots without love.

Freedom is a gift that can be misused, but removing freedom would remove love.

Third ... Perhaps God allows evil for some greater purpose.

3. *God allows evil for some greater purpose.*

God allows suffering to grow virtues like perseverance, or faith. These virtues would not exist in a pain-free world.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Joyful Christian* (Simon and Schuster)?

⁶ Norman Geisler, *When Skeptics Ask: A Handbook on Christian Evidences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990) 64.

⁷ Clay Jones, ‘If God Exists, Why Is There Evil?’ in Joseph M. Holden, ed., *The Harvest Handbook of Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2018) 97.

'We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. ⁴ And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. ⁵ And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love (Ro 5:3-5 NLT).'

Dr. Paul Brand, a leading expert on Hansen's disease (leprosy), called pain God's 'creative genius.'⁸ Because lepers cannot feel pain, they hurt themselves doing common tasks.

- For example, Hector is a custodian who has Hansen's disease. He cannot feel if he is damaging his hands when he mops the floor.
- For Dr. Brand, pain is the giver of freedom because it communicates the limits of what we can do before we break.⁹

'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.' – C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*.

We have an incomplete perspective on suffering and evil but ...

- 'For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever (2Co 4:18 NLT).' All our current suffering is nothing compared to the glory of eternity.
- 'Just because evil is not destroyed right now does not mean that it never will be.'¹⁰

Evil is around me and within me — but Jesus, the second Adam, has come to defeat it.

Fourth, here is good news: let's assume that 'evil cannot be destroyed without destroying human freedom.'¹¹ But God had a plan.

4. *God is not indifferent, He Himself suffered for us.*

First, God promises to be with us during our suffering. When evil is raging, God understands and has compassion ...

- Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb (Jn 11:35).
- Suffered on the cross (1Pe 3:18).

⁸ Paul Brand in Philip Yancey, *Where is God When it Hurts?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977), 23.

⁹ 'Pain should be viewed as a communication network. It unites our body, simultaneously guarding parts and knitting them together for the common goal of protecting us', Yancey, *Where is God*, 29.

¹⁰ Geisler, *When Skeptics Ask*, 64.

¹¹ Geisler, *When Skeptics Ask*, 64.

- Promises to wipe away every tear (Re 21:4) and bring us complete joy (Jn 15:11).

Second, we believe that God entered creation to deal with evil.

- Just as sin entered the world through Adam's disobedience, evil is defeated through the obedience of the second Adam.
- 'The Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil (1Jn 3:8 NLT)! Jesus' work is victorious over evil.

He destroyed evil by dying as an innocent man on the cross.

- He took all the punishment evil deserved upon himself.
- His resurrection is the prototype for all of us.
- Paul wrote: 'Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life. ²³But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he comes back. ²⁴After that the end will come ... having destroyed every ruler and authority and power ... ²⁶And the last enemy to be destroyed is death (1Co 15:22-24, 26 NLT).'

There will be restoration of all things. God removes evil without removing the people he loves. Jesus said, 'The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life (Jn 10:10 NLT).' Jesus' death was purposeful – it defeated evil, and enables us to have a rich and joyous future.

Communion.

'While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." ²⁷Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom (Mt 26:26-29 NIV).''

Evil is around me and within me – but Jesus, the second Adam, has come to ultimately defeat it.

- Notice I said ultimately. Right now, a spiritual battle rages for dominion – the war is over, but little skirmishes still rage. God still wants people to love him freely.

Salvation plea.

- 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16 NIV).'

Conclusion.

Let's return to Habakkuk's story to wrap up today's message.

Habakkuk's story is like ours – we must learn to live with evil around and within us.

Habakkuk never receives an answer to the question of evil, but instead God says, 'The righteous will live by his faith ... For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD (Hab 2:4, 14 NIV).'

Habakkuk decides to live by faith: 'Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, ¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! ¹⁹The Sovereign Lord is my strength (Hab 3:17-19 NLT)'

Until that day when Jesus appears to finally restore all things and cast Satan to the Lake of Fire, we are to live in a fallen world by faith.