

EVANGEL

The Good News of Jesus Christ



The Master Musician

A famous musician was giving a concert when a cell phone loudly went off. The mood was immediately spoiled, broken.

But the musician was a master of improvisation. First, he more or less echoed the cell phone, alerting the audience to his intention. Then he wove its ring into his piece, turning it this way and that. Still that silly ring, but transformed, deepened. When the musician concluded the piece, which now sounded like a Hans Zimmer masterpiece, the audience was in awe. He had turned something goofy into something glorious.

The problem

I'd like to spend a bit of time with you considering something that's often an issue for those that want to talk about God. It's the "problem of evil." There isn't an age that hasn't wrestled with this question – maybe you have, too.

The question is this: how can there be both evil and a good, all-powerful God? That seems to be a flat out contradiction.

I don't propose to have all the answers. But I'd like to bring forward a perspective you find throughout the Bible: God can work with evil, even turn it into good. You and I often have to sort of work around the bad, isolate it, ignore it. But not God. Like that famous musician, God takes it on, makes it his tool. In fact, that's the wonder we see in the miracle of Christmas.

Long, long ago. . .

It's already hinted at in the beginning of the Bible.

In the beginning, God creates a beautiful world. There are even creatures that not only can enjoy his creation, but even know and love

him. The first humans walk and talk with God.

But so quickly things are spoiled – by sin, by satan. If paradise was a beautiful song, almost immediately dissonant, clashing notes are introduced. All might seem ruined.

But the very day of their sin, God tells Adam and Eve about his plans of salvation. He promises them that someone will be born of a woman to defeat sin and satan.

What surprises me is how quickly this is announced. The very day of their sin. That tells us that evil doesn't leave God with a single awkward moment. It doesn't faze him, it doesn't leave him stymied in the slightest.

Confucious says. . .

Why is there evil? Do you have an answer?

There are some who think these questions about evil are completely misguided. Many eastern religions believe evil is just a matter of perspective. Evolution, too, tells us life and death are intertwined together, both part of the supposed rise of our species.

A friend of mine loves to read Eckhart Tolle – the New Age guru loved by Oprah. In one of his books (*The Power of Now*) he says, "And when you live in complete acceptance of what is – which is the only sane way to live – there is no "good" or "bad" in your life anymore." (p. 178) Like many in the Buddhist tradition, evil is just our (incorrect) way of looking at things.

I don't really know how you can think this. No matter how I look at it, Hitler killing 6 million Jews was just plain evil. We might tell ourselves that death is normal, but anytime it touches someone close to us we sense how unnatural it is.

Evil isn't just a matter of perspective. I know it exists. And I know it ought not to.

Can't buy me love. . .

What do Christians say about evil?

More than a few answers have been given to explain its existence.

I'd like to briefly consider one of the most popular. In fact, it goes back a thousand years or more. It goes like this:

The potential for evil, it is argued, is a necessary part of a world with free-will. In the beginning, God made the greatest of creatures. He gave them the ability to love. And love, by definition, cannot be forced. So God created mankind with free-will. Sadly, man chose to exercise that free-will in the wrong direction.

Don't buy it

I don't know about you, but I'm not satisfied with this kind of explanation. It sounds too philosophical, too logical, if I can put it that way. You'll be hard pressed to find a scripture passage to support it.

The Bible seems to say otherwise. It tells us, for instance, that God simply cannot do evil. But he is no robot, either. In fact, he loves so much that he is called "love." In the next life, the Bible promises man will never be able to sin again. So it is possible to have free-will without the possibility of evil.

Holy Ground

Where does that leave us?

Now I should say it's good to realize that here we tread on holy ground. One of the messages of the book of Job is that we need to recognize we do not have all the answers when it comes to evil. We simply need to learn to trust God. To paraphrase the French philosopher Pascal, God can have his reasons of which God alone knows.

But the Bible is pretty clear evil fits into God's great plans. Just like

dissonant notes can have their place in a great piece of music, so, too, evil serves greater purposes.

God's melody

The Bible also tells us the theme and climax of God's great masterpiece. It's his own glory. That's nothing selfish on God's part. His glory always means glory for all.

You'll find that when God rescues his people, he has more in mind than bringing salvation. God constantly says things like "Then you will know that I am the LORD." Against the backdrop of evil, God will show his stuff. He will make it clear there is a God who does wonders, worthy of worship.

Imposters

Perhaps you're familiar with the Exodus from Egypt. The ten plagues, the parting of the Red Sea. They not only are part of God's deliverance of his people, they also reveal the gods of the Egyptians to be imposters. The Egyptians worshipped the sun god – Re. But God covers the land with darkness. Pharaoh too was divine. But he ends up in the bottom of the sea.

In the book of Ezekiel, we also hear the refrain "Then they will know that I am the LORD." But here it's in a different context.

It's clear at this point that the Israelites themselves are sinners. They serve and worship everything – but the true God. God rightly sends them into exile.

But then God promises to bring them back. He promises to shower his blessings on these unfaithful people. Why? Through his surprising goodness God will humble his people. They will see the blazing glory of his love, his forgiveness, his grace. "Then you will know that I am the LORD."

The God has come down to us

Now turn a few hundred years later, to the time of the New Testament.

Things are quite bad. Sin seems to have conquered all of God's purposes.

But just when you think things are ruined beyond repair, God does the greatest thing yet! He comes as one of us! The evil that wreaks such havoc, the sin that enslaves like nothing else – God comes to take it on and bear it himself! And he had every right to simply leave us in our mess.

Ancient religions had stories about the gods coming to earth. But in none of them did the gods become a baby, then die on a cross, in shame and humiliation. I can imagine Bill Gates helping out a homeless person. But becoming one of them? Living their life, year after year?

And all for our sake. All so we who deserve hell might enjoy the blessings of heaven.

Shirk

The Muslims believe that the incarnation of Christ is heresy. They call it "shirk." It demeans God, they believe. How can the holy God, they argue, be associated with flesh and blood, something so low?

I can appreciate Islam's respect for the holiness, the greatness of God. In our casual world, this is a good reminder. God is far, far above us, the wholly Other.

But that is precisely why the incarnation is so up his alley.

C.S. Lewis noted that the greater a being is, the greater it can love, the greater it can humble itself. You do not ask a horse to identify with a dog; but a human can write a story through a dog's eyes.

That God would come so low is a testimony of just how great our God is. That God would honour his creatures of dust so greatly

proclaims how great his honour ought to be!

Felix who?

In the fifth century, the church father Augustine coined the phrase, "Felix culpa." It's Latin for "Blessed fault." He meant that God allows evil in order to produce a greater good than what is there at first.

Because of our sin, God has become one of us! Against the backdrop of our sin, God has shown, in a way that he could not even in paradise, just how great his love, his humbleness, his faithfulness are. And the Bible says, too, that what lies ahead of those who believe in God, now is greater, deeper, richer, than even what mankind knew at first.

Messed up?

Perhaps you see very concretely the devastation of life in a fallen world. Maybe your life, in two words, seems messed up. Beyond repair.

Look at Christmas. God can make a mess into a masterpiece. He's wiser, humbler, more loving, more powerful, than you ever imagined.

Believe in him, surrender your life to Jesus. And your life, too, will take on the theme of the incarnation. Your sin and evil will be the place where God shows the depths of his power, his goodness, and more. In the end, just like the annoyance of an interrupting cell phone, the destructiveness of sin will be completely eclipsed by the wonders of God.

The last word

Evil is great. I don't want to minimize it in any way. We don't have to.

But look at Christmas, look at the incarnation.

God is greater!

His glory *will* be the last word.

Thanks for reading,

Marc

How well do you know

Someone once said, “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.” Thus, true and sound wisdom lies in knowing God and knowing oneself. In fact, this twofold knowledge is so interrelated we cannot separate it. There is a sort of simultaneous knowing yourself and knowing God. If you truly know God, you immediately know yourself and if you truly know yourself, you immediately know God.

Knowing yourself, however, is not knowing your present excellence, but knowing your original excellence and knowing what that would be like if it had remained unblemished. Moreover, knowing yourself involves knowing just how far you have fallen from your original excellence and how miserable you and all human beings are as a result of this fall. To be quite frank, we are a sorry spectacle of what we were once like and what we would still be if we had not fallen from our original excellence.

A lack of faithfulness

How did this fall take place, you ask? Some think that this fall took place because of gluttony. Perhaps, you remember that God had told Adam and Eve that they could eat from all the trees of the garden

except from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17). Thus, when they decided to eat from this tree anyway, it was because they had a voracious appetite for fruit from this one tree. This is, of course, ridiculous. Others think that the fall took place because of human pride. God had said that Adam and Eve could not eat from this one tree, but they knew better than God and thus arrogantly decided to disobey Him. While this is true, we should go just a little deeper. Ultimately, this fall from our original excellence occurred because of unfaithfulness. It was a failure to treat God as God and to honor and thank Him for who He was and what He had all done from them. Just like unfaithfulness lies at the root of a sexual affair when you are married, so unfaithfulness lies at the root of God’s love relationship with Adam and Eve. And just like all sorts of other sins and misery flow forth out of unfaithfulness in a marriage relationship, so all sorts of other sins and misery flow forth out of Adam and Eve’s unfaithfulness in their love relationship with their God. Unfaithfulness became the root of sins like pride, lack of trust, rebellion, unthankfulness and selfish ambition.

Deprived and depraved

This unfaithfulness not only had consequences for Adam and Eve, but also affected every human being. Because Adam and Eve were guilty of willfully disobeying God’s command, every human being is guilty of breaking this command. Because Adam and Eve lost their original excellence, every human being has lost his or her original excellence. What is more, every human being not only has been deprived of their original excellence, they also have become totally depraved! Imagine a

furnace giving forth flames and sparks. Or imagine water bubbling up from a spring ceaselessly. Well, that is what our human nature is now like. It actually produces in us all sorts of corruption and evil that affects every aspect of our being. We inherited this sinful nature and its guilt from Adam and Eve.

How can this be, you perhaps wonder. Well, some think we inherited this sinful nature biologically through the sexual act of propagation. This would mean that you and I inherit our deprived and depraved nature from the substance of our parents’ flesh and soul. While this may seem plausible to some, it cannot be the case for we do not inherit a renewed Christian nature from our parent’s substance either. Sin and holiness just are not passed on biologically!

Others think our “sinful nature” is spread through imitation. According to them, when Adam and Eve sinned, they did not really pass on a sinful nature to humankind, but only a bad example. Thus, every human being enters into this world free from sin. But because the environment in which we are born is so full of bad examples, children who are born innocent and free from sin soon find themselves following these bad examples and consequently no longer remain innocent and free from sin.

You realize, of course, that this is a pretty optimistic view of human nature. Moreover, it ignores that furnace that keeps giving forth flames and sparks and that water that bubbles up ceaselessly from that spring. Just like it’s not healthy for alcoholics to live in denial, so it’s not healthy for us to live in denial either. We really are people who are quite sick and to cover up this sickness will only make matters worse. In fact, covering it up will make our sickness

yourself?

incurable for when you cover it up you have no hope for a cure! May I ask you: When there really is something wrong with you, what would you rather have: a doctor who says you are sick and you have to do something about it or a doctor who says there's nothing wrong with you? God is like a doctor who says: You are sick, very sick. You are not only deprived of your original excellence, you are totally depraved right to the core of your being. There is nothing in you that is not affected by your sinful nature (Psalm 51:5; Romans 3:10-18).

Well, if our sinful nature is not inherited biologically nor spread through imitation, how is it inherited or passed on? Perhaps, an example will help here. When President Bush declared war on Iraq, the whole United States of America declared war on Iraq. That was because, according to the constitution of the United States, the President acts as the representative head of all Americans. Well, according to the plan of God, God ordained Adam to be the representative head of the whole human race. Consequently, when Adam became unfaithful to God and fell from his original excellence, the whole human race became unfaithful to God and fell from its original excellence. Thus, Adam's guilt is our guilt and Adam's corruption is inherited by all of his posterity. In Him we all became guilty and in him we all became deprived and totally depraved (Romans 5:12, 19).

Gifts of common grace

But you say: What about all the good people still do? Someone once colorfully described some of this goodness as follows.

What then? Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great

equity? Shall we say that the philosophers [i.e. scientists] were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? Shall we say that these men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation [debating] and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they were insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are.

What is true in the area of the arts and sciences is also true in the area of morality. Not everyone is as bad as he can be. Moreover, human beings can still do a lot of civil good. When people are in need, we help them. When a so-called natural disaster hits this world, we write out a cheque to help alleviate the need. So are people really totally depraved?

Yes, they are, i.e. by *nature* they are. In other words, when God allows human beings to excel in the arts and sciences, then this excellence is a gift of God's *grace* to them. He does not owe this to them, but freely gives it. Moreover, when people are still able to do a lot of civil good, this also is a gift of God's *grace*. He restrains that furnace that keeps giving forth flames and sparks and that water that bubbles up ceaselessly from that spring. He does not allow that furnace and that spring to burn or drown us to death with all the filth and corruption it endlessly brings forth. Again, God does not owe this to us, but freely gives this as a gift of *grace*. Thus, when you see that the world is still a

livable world full of creative and productive people, then do not draw the conclusion that is what human beings are like by *nature*. It's not. This is what human beings are like by God's common *grace* given for the sake of society. *Common grace*, because all people in one way or another share in this *grace* given for the sake of society.

Gifts of saving grace

Yet, this common *grace* given for the sake of society does not cleanse or heal our sinful nature nor cleanse or heal society. Thus, it does not enable us to truly know God and ourselves. To be sure, it does enable us to make some true statement about God and ourselves. But these statements do not show us the way to the truth nor enable us to reach it. Someone once described this situation as follows:

They [= those who make these incidental true statements about God and themselves] are like a traveler passing through a field at night who in a momentary lighting flash sees far and wide, but the sight vanishes so swiftly that he is plunged again into the darkness of the night before he can take even a step – let alone be directed on his way by its help.

Thus, if we truly want to know God and ourselves we need more than the gifts of God's common *grace*. We need the gifts of God's saving *grace*. This saving *grace* is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He frees us from the guilt of our sin. His Spirit cleanses us from the power of sin. In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He shows us just how deprived and depraved we are by *nature*. Yet, He also restores us to our original excellence. He does this when we put our faith in Him. Have you? Thanks for reading.

Dick Moes

JESUS CLEANS HIS FATHER'S HOUSE

Bible Story based on John 2:13-25

Jesus was born to do the will of his heavenly Father. Of course, He also obeyed Joseph, his earthly father. From Joseph He learned proper manners and doing chores. But doing the will of his heavenly Father meant bearing the punishment of for sin. Jesus was to conquer death by giving his life.

Doing the will of his heavenly Father became the main job for Jesus. He called twelve men to become his helpers. He went from town to town to make the blind see, to make the lame walk, and make sick people better. As Son of God He was able to show God's love to people who are burdened by sin. As son of man He felt the weight of those burdens.

While Jesus grew up He had lived in the house of Joseph, his earthly father. But already then He had loved the temple in Jerusalem. The temple was the house of his heavenly Father. It was the place where the Lord lived among his people. As Jesus grew older, He understood better that He Himself was also a temple. By being God's son He was God lived as man among men.

The people of Israel celebrated special feasts in the Temple. One such feast was the Passover. From all over Israel people traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate. The feast lasted for seven days. Every day the priests offered sheep, cattle and birds to God. Together the people would eat the meat. The Passover meal reminded them that the Lord had saved from slavery in the land of Egypt.

With his twelve Jesus traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. He really looked forward to seeing the House of his heavenly Father.



But what a disappointment hit Him when He got there! It was a mess! The holy temple had become a market place. Men had set up tables and loudly sold the animals that people needed for their sacrifices.

Filled with holy eagerness He tied several small ropes together into a large whip. Without fear He charged at the salesmen. Screaming and yelling they ran for the exit. Fearlessly Jesus turned their money table upside down. He untied all the animals and chased them out. The loud bleating, mooing and squawking was painful to the ears. But above the noise of the animals the voice of Jesus was heard clearly. "Get out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market?"

The many onlookers looked at Jesus with amazement. What a remarkable man! Suddenly the twelve helpers remembered. The prophets of old had spoken about this. In the books it was written, "He will be filled with the eagerness for God's house."

The leaders of the temple were not impressed. What business did

this Jesus have to interfere with their profits?

"Show us who gave you permission to behave like this!" they demanded.

They thought Jesus would not have an answer. But He did.

"Break this temple down, and I will build it again in three days."

The leaders were dumbstruck. They did not understand that Jesus Himself was also a temple. Jesus was even more a temple than the building in Jerusalem. Jesus was God Himself, having become man. When Jesus would give his life on the cross, this temple would be destroyed. But after three day Jesus would rise from the grave. The temple was restored. Death was conquered by life.

This new life is freely given to all the people who believe that Jesus is the Son of God. God will come to live in their hearts through the Holy Spirit. Through the work of Jesus all believers will become temples. God has come to live among men.

Glory to God in the highest!
Heavenly peace among men!

Jane

Activity Page

HOUSES OF GOD

God is everywhere. Yet, He chooses places on earth where people can worship him. In those places He lives among his people. Because God is everywhere, there can be more than one place to worship Him. And there are! Around the world there are many buildings where people come together to worship God.

THE TENT

A long time ago the people of Israel did not have a designated place for serving the Lord. The first place for serving Him was a tent. This Tent was also called the Tabernacle.

The Tabernacle had a Holy Part and a Most Holy Part. The Holy Part had three things in it: a table with bread, a lamp and an altar. The Most Holy Part had only one special thing: an altar with a statue of two angels on top on its lid.

The Temple in Jerusalem

Later the people of Israel worshipped the Lord in a building. This building was called the Temple. It had the same Holy Part and Most Holy Part as the Tent.

Jesus in God's House

The Lord Jesus loved the Temple. It was the House of his Heavenly Father. But the Temple was special to Jesus for another reason. The things in the Temple were pictures of Him.

Let us look at them.

The bread: Jesus says of Himself that He is the bread of life. As bread gives us life, so Jesus gives life to his people through the death of his body.

The lamp, or candlestick: As the lamp gave light, so Jesus is the Light of the World. He was stronger than the darkness of sin. Through Him the light of God's love shines again in the lives of the believers.

The altar: the altar in the holy place was a picture of prayers going up to God. It is Jesus who made it possible that people can freely talk with their Lord again.

The altar with the angels: this is the altar that showed that the blood of Jesus takes away our sins.

WORD PICTURE

All the parts of the temple speak about Jesus. The candlestick tells us that He is the Light of the World. The angels were witnesses of the saving work of Jesus. They also protect those who are saved through the blood of Jesus.

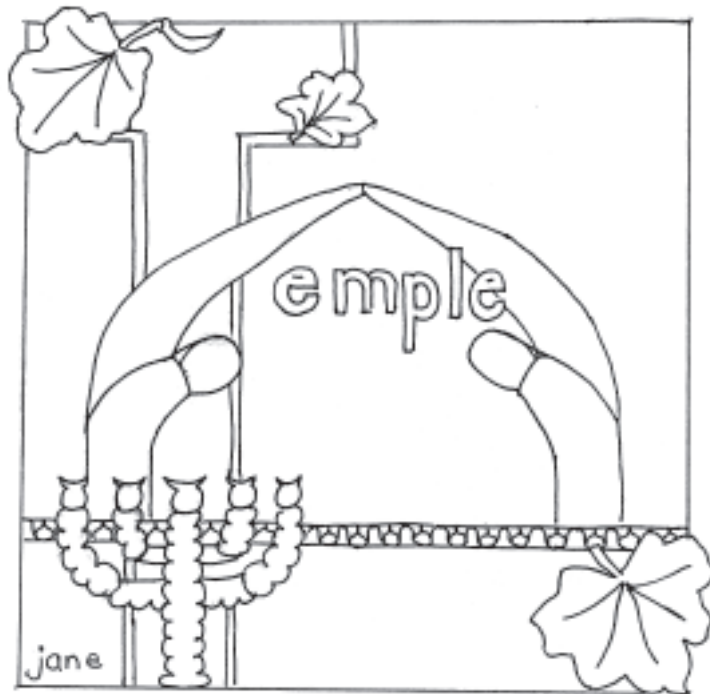
Come, O Creator Spirit blest

(A song of the early Christian church)

*Come, O Creator Spirit blest,
And in our hearts take up thy rest;
Spirit of grace, with heav'nly aid
Come to the souls whom thou has made.*

*Thou art the Comforter, we cry,
Sent to the earth from God Most High,
Fountain of life and Fire of love,
And our Anointing from above.*

*Show us the Father, Holy One,
Help us to know th'Eternal Son;
Spirit Divine, for evermore
Thee will we trust and thee adore.*



God Becomes Really Personal

“ . . . a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger ”

Luke 2:12

All God ever wanted from the human race was to have a personal relationship with you. When God created Adam and Eve He gave them gifts that were unique among all the creatures God had made, because God wanted to enjoy their friendship. He created them for himself. Every day, at evening when it was cool, God came down to earth to walk with Adam.

The worst thing we could do would be to ignore God completely, or use Him for our own advantage, or abuse his generosity. To prevent this, God demanded that Adam and Eve accept certain principles. They must recognize that He is God and they were humans; that He is the Creator and they the creatures; He was to be worshipped and they were to worship; He was in charge and gave commands and they were to obey.

You know what happened, though. Adam and Eve tried to use God for their own advantage. In his love for them, God planted the tree of life, but before they could get to that tree, they would have to get past the tree of knowledge. This tree would give Adam and Eve the opportunity to show if they really loved God or not, for God said, “Don’t eat of this one tree.” If they loved God, they would not eat.

But they did. They used God. They hoped that by eating the forbidden fruit they would become

like God himself. And the human race has been doing that ever since: Using God, abusing his generosity or ignoring Him completely. What an awful thing we have done to God. All He wanted was our friendship, but we have shown him the very opposite.

But amazingly, God did not give up his plan to enjoy our friendship. Even though the human race for the most part was busy ignoring God, or otherwise using and abusing Him, yet God loved us. He would do something so that we could no longer ignore Him. God the Father sent God the Son to the earth, and He became a human being. The Creator became a creature, a human, one who must learn to worship and obey commands. God the Son became Jesus of Nazareth.

And He was full of personality. The story of his birth makes it hard to ignore Him. He was born at an

inconvenient moment in his parent’s life – while they had to travel across the country. Because there were so many travellers at the time, they could not get a room in the town they were at, so the child was born in a barn. He was wrapped up in rags and put to bed in an animal feed trough, probably filled with straw.

The way God entered this world is a great story that people love to hear. His entrance into the world was full of personality; his life is even more so. You can still ignore Him, but it’s harder. It is always exciting to read the story of Jesus. If you get to know Him, He will show you the way to the Father, and when you get to know God through Jesus Christ, you will never want to ignore, use or abuse God again. For you one never ignores, uses or abuses the one you love.

Paul Aasman

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