

# THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

BY JEFFERY A. VINES

## Part 1: How Can We Believe in God With So Much Evil in the World?

I was on a speaking trip to Brisbane, Australia, when a rather aggressive hotel manager discovered I was a minister and invited me to join her staff for an evening meal.

Since eating cheap food and sitting alone in my hotel room was my unattractive alternative, I quickly accepted. Arriving at the table however, I immediately recognized something was amiss! Apparently, I was on the program as the entertainment! A circle of skeptics had assembled to take this preacher boy apart!

Only seconds passed before Dan, a burly Australian in charge of hotel security, broke the silence. As soon as he spoke I got the feeling he had been designated to get the ball rolling as soon as I arrived.

After taking a big gulp of his Australian beer, he slammed his glass down on the table, winked at his peers, then turned toward me and dropped the bomb. “So Jeff, how can you believe in God with all the evil in this world!? Have you ever heard of the Holocaust? Stalin? Lenin? War? Starving children? Wake up, man! There is no God!”

Stunned, I thought, *Wow, so this is what this is all about.* Laura (the hotel manager) seemed proud of how Dan had delivered his philosophical dart. The look on Dan’s face and his Barney Fife-type grin exposed his pride and revealed his lack of expectation concerning any kind of logical response.

In his eyes, this was a foolproof accusation. No comeback was possible. His statement (although formed as a question) was the end of the matter, so let’s eat!

Taking a sip of Diet Coke I reviewed Dan’s assumption. War, death, and the devastation of people on this planet, according to Dan, cannot possibly be harmonized with the existence of a “higher being.” In short, *evil exists, therefore, God does not!* His statement seemed incredibly similar to the words of David Hume, an infamous 18th-century skeptic who complained:

Were a stranger to drop suddenly into this world, I would show him as a specimen of its ills a hospital full of diseases, a prison crowded with malefactors and debtors, a field strewn with carcasses, a fleet floundering in the ocean, a nation languishing under tyranny, famine or pestilence. Honestly, I don’t see how you can possibly square with an ultimate purpose of love.

### ANALYZING THE QUESTION

Clearing my throat and gathering my thoughts, I looked toward Dan and asked him a question he was not expecting:

“Dan, can you and I interact on this issue for a moment? You have asked a great question, but I think the question itself needs to be analyzed. Can we analyze the question together?”

Hesitantly, but confidently, he said, “Sure. What do you want?”

I replied, “Well, first of all, once you admit there is such a thing as *evil* in the world, are you not also assuming there is such a thing as *good*? After all, how can anyone know the definition of *evil* unless he knows the definition of *good*?”

Puzzled, Dan took another sip of beer, and responded, “If you are asking me if I know how to tell the difference between good and evil then my answer is, ‘Yes, I think we all can.’”

I agreed and continued, “On what basis do we determine this distinction? How do we know what event goes into which category? Who told us that evil is evil and good is good?”

Dan’s response was both quick and typical, “Jeff,” he replied, “I already said it is not rocket science! We all know the difference between good and evil. We all have a sense of right and wrong.”<sup>1</sup>

After receiving permission from Dan to refer to this system of *right* and *wrong* as *moral law*, I continued, “Dan, if there is a *moral law* inside every one of us that reveals to us what events, actions, or reactions should be filed under the category of *evil* and what events, actions, or reactions should be filed under the category of *good*, then by necessity, that *moral law* would be applicable to all cultures in every generation.”

### HITLER’S RATIONALE

This is a crucial argument in a postmodern world that rejects absolute morality and then attempts to invoke an absolute moral law, cross-culturally, on the Hitlers, Stalins, and Lenins of the world. You should have seen the look on Dan’s face as he listened to the following scenario.

Suppose we could board a time machine, travel back into Nazi Germany, and have a one-on-one interview with Adolf Hitler. Seated in the chair adjacent to his evilness, suppose we said to the dictator in protest, “Hitler, you are an evil man! You took the lives of innocent men, women, and children. You wreaked havoc upon humanity and committed all kinds of atrocities against the human race. You murdered more than 6 million Jews and are responsible for the deaths

# Part 1: How Can We Believe in God With So Much Evil in the World?

(Continued)

of many others. You are a bad man! Internally, I have placed your deeds into the category of evil! Shame on you!”

What if Hitler responded (and he might say precisely this), “I beg to differ. In fact, as I see it, I am a *good* man who tried to rid my country of a race of people who had tarnished and poisoned humanity with its corrupted bloodline. I employed the Final Solution in an attempt to purify and protect my people and advance the evolutionary cycle toward perfection and the survival of the fittest. How can you say that I am *evil*? I am highly offended by your accusation. Your limited understanding of the universe has narrowed your thinking.”

Confused, Dan asked, “What is your point?”

“Clearly,” I said, “unless there is an absolute moral law somewhere that classifies as *evil* murdering children in the gas ovens, shooting whole families to death, and exterminating an entire people group through starvation and torture, then Hitler would have a point to make, would he not?”

“Dan, do you see the irony of the university professor who claims that morality is situational, that right and wrong are left up to the individual, and then states categorically that Hitler was wrong to commit his horrendous acts upon humanity? An absolute accusation requires an absolute moral law to which everyone, in every place, in every time, must conform.”

## UNTENABLE DEFENSE

This was the argument given by an American lawyer at the Nuremberg trials. The primary defense given by the generals of the Third Reich who assisted Hitler in carrying out the horrendous acts associated with the Final Solution, was that they were only obeying the law of their land and therefore could not be held responsible for their actions. After hours and hours of this ridiculous defense, an American lawyer finally threw up his hands in frustration and said, “Is there not a law above our laws?” Indeed, is there not an authority higher than our authority to which all men, regardless of the mandate of any political leader, must be held accountable?

After hearing the premise that *good* and *evil* as absolute categories can exist only if an absolute moral law is present to sustain them, I asked Dan a key question.

“Do you know anyone who possesses the knowledge and authority to give this absolute moral law to which all humanity must conform?” In anger, Dan responded, “Well, it’s sure not the religious hypocrites of this world or people like you!”

In wholehearted agreement, I confirmed that all men are tainted by their finiteness and cannot possibly give an absolute moral law under which the rest of humanity should live.

Such absolute law can originate only from an absolute moral lawgiver. Only the Creator and sustainer of all things has the authority, knowledge, and power to implant within all creatures the ability to distinguish between *good* and *evil*.

Seeing that Dan was uncomfortable with this line of reasoning, I again reminded him that any moral denouncement implies an absolute moral law. Without an absolute moral law that defines the absolute categories of *good* and *evil*, the rest of the world would not be able to stand up and shout, “Stop! This is wrong! This is unjust! This is evil!” Without this absolute moral law we would have no foundation to stand on when screaming out against the atrocities and injustices of our world.

Irritated, Dan exclaimed, “OK. OK. What is your point?”

In a gentle voice I responded, “Without God there is no such thing as absolute, categorical *evil*. For only the One who has created all things possesses the knowledge and maintains the right to give the rules by which creation should be governed. Absolute morality requires an absolute being, namely, God.

“Here is the problem then. God is the one you are trying to disprove. This faulty logic is similar to using a butterfly to disprove the existence of a caterpillar. One cannot exist without the other. Without God, there is no such thing as absolute moral law. Without absolute moral law, there is no such thing as absolute evil. Without the existence of evil, no accusation can be made against God. In short, your question self-destructs. Without God, there is no such thing as absolute evil.”

Dan’s response was classic. “What then am I asking you?”

Holding back the laughter I said, “You are asking me a good question but you have worded it poorly.” Since evil assumes the existence of God—in fact demands it—the more appropriate question is, “How can Christians claim that God is good, loving, and kind, with all the pain, suffering, and evil in the world?” That is an entirely different question. The latter question assumes God’s existence but questions his nature. The former denounces God’s existence while attempting to confirm it at the same time.

The second question will be the topic of our discussion next week when we meet a young philosophy major named Sherri who also attended the dinner that evening in Australia.

---

<sup>1</sup>Although the postmodern mind typically denies an absolute moral law, I have yet to meet even one person who lives consistently with such a denouncement. When backed into a corner, we all will invoke an absolute moral law when we believe we have been mistreated.

# THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

BY JEFFERY A. VINES

## Part 2: How Can You Claim That God Is Good and Loving With All the Pain and Suffering in the World?

Sherri, a philosophy major at a local university, was irritated at how Dan's accusation against God self-destructed. A clear thinker, Sherri knew my response had not addressed the real issue. She fired back, "If God is so good, gracious, and kind, Jeff, then why is there so much pain in this world? Have you seen the pictures of those starving children? Where is the loving God Christians talk so much about? While it may be true that God, as you say, is the one who determines the categories of good and evil, you still have not addressed why this all-powerful, all-loving God allows so much suffering in the world he created."

Although there are similarities between Dan and Sherri's questions, they are not identical. While Dan suggested the very presence of evil disproved God's existence, Sherri's accusation assumes God exists but questions his very nature. In other words, Sherri did not deny God is real, but questioned whether or not Christians correctly understand him. Is God really a God of love?

In retrospect, I am convinced that Sherri merely verbalized the pain and turmoil in the lives of everyone around that table. A part of us wants to believe in a Creator. Without such faith, rational beings know there is no real hope, meaning, and purpose to the lives we live and the heartache we endure. But the presence of such enormous pain and suffering in our world makes it extremely difficult to believe in a God of love and kindness.

### NO CHOICE

Ironically, right before my eyes was the perfect illustration to sustain the truth. Seated next to Sherri was her boyfriend, Richard. But it was obvious that Richard liked Sherri a lot more than Sherri liked Richard. Infatuated, if not mesmerized by this young lady (she was indeed attractive), Richard refused to accept the fact that she did not return his affections.

Sherri had invited him to sit beside her and share the evening meal, but this relationship was undeniably one-sided. The fact that everyone knew this made Richard the perfect candidate for a bit of role-playing.

"Richard," I said, "What if I told you I could give you a microchip to implant in the back of Sherri's head, accompanied by a miniature laptop computer that would enable you to program Sherri to do, act, think, and say everything you wanted her to do, act, think, and say? Would you like that?"

The mere thought of such a contraption sent Richard into fantasy. Although he attempted to hide his dreams, we all knew

what he was thinking. He could preprogram Sherri to say things like, "Richard, you are the most handsome man on the planet," "What would you like me to make you for dinner?" and "I will love you and only you for the rest of my life."

The thoughts so moved him he stumbled over his words as he bolted out, "Yes! Absolutely! Where can I get it?" Sherri, of course, gave him a look bordering on disdain.

Looking back now, I think Richard actually believed I had this contraption! But I responded to Richard's confidence by demanding, "No you would not!"

"What do you mean?"

"Richard," I answered, "the truth is that down deep inside, this is not what you really want. You would not want to possess such an invention."

"Sure I would," he responded.

Shaking my head I urged him to consider what all this really meant. "How long," I asked, "would it be until Sherri meant nothing to you?"

Confused, he exclaimed, "What do you mean?"

"Richard," I replied, "After a while, nothing Sherri said or did would be meaningful since nothing stated or spoken originated from a personal, free decision. You are not alone in wanting to be honored, respected, and ultimately loved by someone. However, the irony is that for love to be genuine and authentic, it must be given freely. Love can be coerced and encouraged but it cannot be forced. In other words, true love between two people can exist only if both have the freedom to give, receive, or reject that love."

I am convinced this is not philosophical mumbo jumbo. This is about as real as life gets. *Love* can only be *love* when it is given freely. We can force someone to be a slave. We can force someone to enter into all kinds of illicit acts. But we can never force someone to love us. This is something every man who has attempted to win the heart of a woman understands.

### FREEWILL

One of my favorite scenes in the film *Bruce Almighty* is when Bruce, played by Jim Carrey, jumps onto a ledge and tries to call upon his powers to force Jennifer Aniston to love him. Rendering a poutish expression and stretching arms wide open, attempting to harness all the power of the Almighty, he demands, "Love me! Love me! Love me!"

But earlier in the movie *God*, played by Morgan Freeman,

## Part 2: How Can You Claim That God Is Good and Loving . . . ?

(Continued)

had clearly defined parameters within which Bruce could use the powers given him. “If you want to be God, Bruce, you can’t mess with freewill!”

After describing this scene to Sherri, I asked, “Why do you think the writers would have God make such a statement? Could it have something to do with the fact that the very purpose men and women were formed by the Creator was relationship? Could it be that even God himself sought to relate, to love and be loved? Is love the highest value in the universe because that’s exactly how God wanted it?”

Weary of the questions, Sherri responded, “Enough, Jeff. What does love and freewill have to do with all the pain and suffering in the world?”

“Everything!” I responded. “Once God decided love would be the hallmark of his creation, a great tension must have arisen.

“On the one hand, he desires intimacy, love, and relationship with those he creates. He desires to shower his goodness upon all humanity and to grant such gifts as sunshine, rain, oceans, mountains, and beautiful waterfalls. Even the brightest, sharpest mind cannot penetrate nor understand the fine-tuned, intricate design of the universe he created and sustains. Each new evening as the sun sets and the stars shine, he grants a vivid reminder of his awesome ability. But why does he do it? Why does he provide such awesome scenes?”

The only rational, workable answer is that God is constantly wooing man to himself. G.K. Chesterton said, “If my children thank Santa for putting candy into their stockings, who do I thank for putting two feet into mine?”

### FREEDOM, LOVE, AND HATE

With all of this in mind, I softened my tone a bit and said to Sherri, “Love and freewill are directly connected to the pain and suffering in this world. Love cannot occur without freedom, but freedom opens the door to all that is tragic in our world.”

With every ear and eye trained, I continued, “Can you imagine the tension God must have encountered in his decision to create? He wanted love to be the highest value in his universe—love between Creator and creature, and between creature and creature. The only way, however, God could ensure that all men and women on the planet receive and return such love was to insert, within every human being, a microchip whereby he could control the mind of every person. Sherri,” I asked, “What is the problem with this scenario?”

Richard, knowing he had the correct answer and still attempting to impress Sherri, chimed in with, “That would not be genuine, authentic love.”

Richard is right! If love is the highest value in God’s universe,

the only way to ensure the potential for such love is to replace the microchip of control with the microchip of freewill!

So, in the creation scenario, God grants freewill in order to protect life’s greatest pursuit, love. Enter the tension! As soon as God decided to create a world where genuine, authentic love could exist, the potential for pain, suffering, and evil also became part of the package. Why? Essential to love is freedom.

Freedom however, can also result in the opposite, hate. Not everyone uses his freewill to do the honorable thing. Many choose neither to pursue God nor to love and protect one another. In fact, many choose to use their freedom for their own selfish purposes.

Instead of loving God and loving their neighbors as themselves, they love themselves above all else and use their freedom to advance their own purposes and plans in the world. See Hitler, Stalin, Mugabe, and Hussein.

This is known as self-love. Self-love is the ultimate underlying characteristic and the primary motivation that catalyzes most of the suffering and pain in the world.

Noticing that both Sherri and Richard were captivated by this thought and were processing the implications, I attempted to drive the point even further. “Sherri,” I explained, “When someone says, ‘How could God create a place with suffering and pain?’ They are really asking, ‘How could God create a world that featured the possibility of pain and suffering?’ Few ever ask, ‘How could God have ensured a world without pain?’ Only one answer exists to that question: create a world without freewill.”

This would be the only possible way to ensure no pain, suffering, or evil exists in our world. The only problem is that in such a scenario, love would not and could not exist. Since *love* is the very reason the world was created, *love* would be something God would not be willing to sacrifice.

Not long ago, I was sitting across from a man in a café in New Zealand who was so angry he could not carry on a logical conversation. Frustrated that his arguments against God were going nowhere, he pointed his finger at me and said, “Look, Jeff, I will believe in God when he removes all the evil from this world!”

My response? “OK, then you will be the first to go!” Stunned, he sat back in his chair, slumped in defeat, and knew that his demand was logically impossible.

As long as men and women with freewill exist in this world, the potential for evil will exist. The degree of pain and suffering will greatly depend upon the actions of such creatures.

However, let’s never forget that God has every intention of removing all the evil, pain, and suffering from creation. In Heaven, God will separate those who have chosen to use their freedom to love him from those who have used their freedom to wreak havoc on creatures for whom he has intense love.

# THE PROBLEM OF HELL

BY JEFFERY A. VINES

## Part 3: How Could a Loving God Send Anyone to Hell?

After the stimulating conversation with both Dan and Sherri, a young lady named Jucinda loaded her gun and was ready to fire. Having made the connection between freewill, pain, and suffering, Jucinda anticipated my next move when she interrupted to say, “Come on, Jeff. Stop avoiding the issue! What is God going to do with people who use their freewill for their own selfish agendas and choose not to follow God? He is going to send them to Hell, isn’t he? I know that’s what you Christians believe. But how on earth could a good God send people to a place of eternal punishment? I just can’t accept this!”

Surmising this was a sensitive issue with most of those present, I proceeded with caution. I asked, “Jucinda, can you tell me what you think *Hell* really is? What is it like?”

“I can tell you exactly what it is like,” she said. “It is a place where you burn and burn and burn and where worms eat your skin. There is darkness and suffering more horrific than any Nazi concentration camp. I know! This is 12 years of Catholic school talking!”

Catching her breath she continued, “I know what you Christians claim about Hell, and there is no way I could ever believe in a God who would send anybody to a place like that! No matter how bad they are!”

### THE MEANING

Settling down with a sip of soda, I began my response by asking Jucinda to consider what the Bible actually teaches about Hell. The word translated *Hell* comes from the Greek word *gehenna*, the name for a place just outside Jerusalem where the bodies of desolate or despised persons were gathered and burned. The smoke from *gehenna* ascended endlessly from this horrible pit. This must have been one of the most detestable sights in Jerusalem.

It should not surprise us that Jesus, when looking around for an earthly symbol to describe what eternity without God would be like, chose the death and devastation of *gehenna*. My purpose here is not to talk about all the symbols that have been used to describe this place, but instead to highlight Jesus’ primary point when discussing the issue. Amid all the hyperboles, symbols, and metaphors, Jesus stressed one central truth. Whatever Hell is, the worst part about it is separation from God. I calmly asked Jucinda to consider this primary aspect of Hell that is seldom mentioned.

“Jucinda,” I asked, “if a person spends his entire life

wrapped up in his own selfish ambitions and selfish pursuits, refusing to pursue a relationship with the Creator in thanksgiving for all he has provided, would God be unfair or unjust to send him to a place where throughout all eternity, he would not have to endure the thought of God?

“What if such a person, while living on the earth, no matter how many times God pursued, convicted, or attempted to draw him toward himself, always responded the same? Internally, he said, ‘I don’t want God. I don’t need God. I want nothing to do with him!’ Jucinda, do you really believe God is bound by goodness to override a person’s freedom and force his way into their lives?”

### THE TRUTH

This is simply not the way God works! As the ultimate respecter of freewill, God grants a person his ultimate wish for all of eternity. He simply places any man or woman who has separated himself from God in a realm (Hell) whereby he can be apart from him forever.

C.S. Lewis, one of the greatest thinkers of our time, described this scenario when he painted a picture of the day of accountability. He describes how the selfish, godless person approaches the throne of God, and God throws his hands up in the air in frustration and exclaims, “All right then, not my will but yours be done!”

“Jucinda,” I begged, “think about this! God has pursued you all of your life! He has convicted you of right and wrong in hopes of deterring you from doing evil. He has painted his presence across the sky in every sunset! He has spoken quietly to your spirit in the deep of the night. He has inspired you, at opportune moments in your life, to ask life’s deepest questions. In short, he has compelled you day after day, urging you into a deep relationship with him.

“Yet, all of your life you have ignored him. Fearing that you may have to give up your own agenda and become part of his, you ran from God in a constant act of rejection, claiming, ‘I don’t want God!’

“Then eternity comes. In a cruel but just twist, the very thing you deeply desire, in the twinkling of an eye, becomes a full-blown reality. You become unhinged forever from the Creator’s moorings.”

Jucinda sat stunned as I reminded her of what a place without God would be like. If we think the world is bad now, let God totally remove his influence, systems of deterrence, and

# Part 3: How Could a Loving God Send Anyone to Hell?

(Continued)

the impact of his people.

Two world wars may have given a glimpse of what that world would be like, but it remains a far cry from the reality of what any place without God's oversight would entail. What untold evil runs rampant when the hand of God is completely removed? More than anything else, this is the point Jesus was trying to make. Completely remove God and you completely remove the possibility of anything good.

## THE CHOICE

Hours had passed since Dan's first question. The evening had not turned out in any form or fashion in the manner Laura (the hotel manager) had expected.

If space permitted I could tell you how at the end of this long evening, around 11:30 PM, Laura, the one who had invited me to this meeting, gave her life to Christ. Yes, it is an experience I shall never forget.

For now, it is important to mention that no one left the room during the six hours these things were discussed. This once again assured me that down deep inside, many are looking to resolve these difficult issues. We must be ready "in and out of season" to give an answer.

In the words of C.S. Lewis, a "God-shaped void" has been placed within the human heart encouraging all to seek the One who wants desperately to be found. Rather than choosing to lord his power over the earth and force freewill men and women to submit, God seems ever to draw us to himself, giving us the final say in whether we enter into relationship with him or not. Only then can this genuine love, the greatest value in God's creation scenario, be given and received.

---

*Jeff Vines is teaching pastor with Savannah (Georgia) Christian Church.*

---

Subscribe to **CHRISTIAN STANDARD** — a weekly magazine for church leaders — by going to [www.christianstandard.com](http://www.christianstandard.com) or calling (800) 543-1301 or (513) 931-4050.