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Foreword by
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Demystifying



EVIL

*A Biblical
and Personal
Exploration*



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Chapter One

ENTERING THE CONFLICT

To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven . . . a time to tear down and a time to build up.

ECCLESIASTES 3:1, 3

LIFE IS HARD. The world is filled with evil. Pain and suffering, anguish and anxiety often drive people to despair. Many of us hold God responsible for the evil in our lives. Others have abandoned the idea of God because of the suffering they've experienced. People are often blindsided by tragedy and trapped in their trauma, anger, or fear. Most never find the exit. Bad things, and sometimes horrendous evils, happen to good people who are trying to live moral lives. We struggle to understand. Life is supposed to be fair. People are not supposed to be brutalized. Parents are not supposed to molest children. Accidents are not supposed to happen to loved ones. We are supposed to be valued, not treated like scraps or objects used for the benefit of others.

The contradictions may overwhelm us, and we are unable to rise from the despair. "The world feels worse than random, it feels cruel."¹ Most of us are at a loss to handle the blows that come against us, much less to define evil or figure out what to do next. Confusion ensnares us, entraps us in triggers that we don't recognize or understand. As moral philosopher Carol Neiman writes, "The problem of evil can be expressed in theological or secular terms, but it is fundamentally a problem about the intelligibility of the world as a

¹Rachel Hastings, in *Comment to the manuscript*, August 3, 2022.

whole.”² When we have a sense that things *are not the way they’re supposed to be*, we’re entering the problem of evil.³

Most literature on the problem of evil in the last few centuries has focused on the philosophical arguments of theodicy, which seek to condemn, vindicate, or eliminate God based on a three-point structure claiming that if God is good and all-powerful, and God created this world, then God is responsible for evil.⁴ However, the intrusion of evil is not simply a philosophical, intellectual, or theological issue; it is an extremely personal one. Evil, like a phantom, waits to strike undetected. It lurks in dark corners, in shadows, and in unknown and unexplored regions. We never seem to be prepared for its attacks. Biblical scholar N. T. Wright observes the human reaction to evil, “First, we ignore evil when it doesn’t hit us in the face. Second, we are surprised by evil when it does. Third, we react in immature and dangerous ways as a result.”⁵ Universally, I’ve found that it’s grueling for people to understand what’s happened to them when they encounter evil and the question of why God, gods, people, or the universe allow these serious breaches of goodness. How we navigate evil not only impacts our personal lives in the short and long terms, but potentially has lasting consequences—rippling through our world and affecting whole generations. In this book, I seek to pull evil out of the shadows, define evil, examine sources of evil, and identify things we can do to either prevent evil or greatly alter the wake of its destruction.

In this book, I do not specifically address how to deal with the societal evils that surround us. At times, we may be powerless to do so. However, our

²Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Princeton Classics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 21.

³“Every time we make the judgment *this ought not to have happened*, we are stepping onto a path that leads straight to the problem of evil.” Neiman, *Evil*, 18. See also Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 5.

⁴For more on philosophical approaches to theodicy or the problem of evil, see, for example, Walther Eichrodt, “Faith in Providence and Theodicy in the Old Testament,” in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, IRT 4 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 17; Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1985); James L. Crenshaw, “Introduction: The Shift from Theodicy to Anthropodicy,” in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, IRT 4 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 2-3; Antti Laato and Johannes C. de Moore, “Introduction,” in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, ed. Antti Laato and Johannes C. de Moore (Leiden: Brill, 2003), vii; Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Continuum, 2006); Ulf Görman, *A Good God? A Logical and Semantical Analysis of the Problem of Evil*, Studia Philosophiae Religionis 5 (Stockholm: H. Ohlsson, 1977).

⁵N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 24.

personal response to evil along with our proactive engagement against it does impact whether systemic injustices will be prevented or perpetuated. As Abraham Heschel pointedly observes, “Few are guilty, but all are responsible” for the corruptions in society. “In a community not indifferent to suffering, uncompromisingly impatient with cruelty and falsehood, continually concerned for God and every man, crime would be infrequent rather than common.”⁶ Every movement to stop systemic evil begins with one or two individuals deciding they will not tolerate the wrongs any longer and persevering in the risks to stop them. As we heal from our hurts and traumas and grow to be no longer afraid of evil or those who perpetrate it, we become powerful agents for healing, restoration, and the establishment of goodness.

THE STORY THAT STARTED MY QUEST

My search to understand evil began in spring 2001, after working myself into a disability while managing two startup companies and consulting for a third in the insurance field. Not a likely occupation to begin such an inquiry. The cause of my disability was more than just fatigue from working eighty plus hours a week. My symptoms manifested as severe asthma and oxygen compromised blood that left me gasping for every breath. Up until the illnesses, I was a runner and a regular at the gym. The doctor told me to take thirty days off work. In an effort to comply with his recommendations, I quit the consulting job, but there was no one else to run my businesses: my husband, Walt, was a disabled Vietnam veteran, and our son was in grade school. The weight was on my shoulders. I felt like the weight had always been on my shoulders since I was in grade school. I couldn't stop. I didn't know how to stop. But somehow, I knew I had to find the space. An inner prompting led me to sit in my big armchair for an hour every day, stare out the window in silence, and just listen. This was the conscious beginning of my quest.

At first, three minutes of sitting still felt like torture, but I persisted. One morning, after a few weeks of sitting quietly for an hour a day, a strange, almost painful tingling sensation began to creep up my limbs from my toes and fingers. Scared, I asked within, prayerfully, *What is that!* I heard in

⁶Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2017), 1:16.

response, “Relaxation.” As I continued this meditative journey, in time I came to understand that my addiction of choice had been my own adrenaline. If I was constantly working, I could numb the pain and block out the traumas, which also prevented the possibility of healing.

As Bessel Van der Kolk describes in his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, my body was telling me things that I was unable, or more accurately, that I was refusing to hear.⁷ I had no breath—I had lost my voice, my own agency. During the weeks and months that followed, I began to connect with my inner voice, my body, and with God, who I thought had abandoned me. The process led me to study theology. I wanted answers, and I wanted them from God and from Scripture, in the original Hebrew and Greek.

In the years since my disability and through my theological studies, life has often grown even darker. By early summer of 2007, I had completed a Master of Divinity degree, undergone major surgery, hit rock bottom financially and emotionally, and was about to start a PhD in theological studies. I was no master of divinity: I was broke, broken, and beating myself up. I had convinced myself that all the problems in my life must be God’s will. I was desperately trying to figure out what I must have done wrong, or what was wrong with me for my life to be such a mess. For years, I had been praying to *know* the love of God because, for me, God’s love was only a theological construct. I didn’t *know* that God loved me. How could I believe in God when I had experienced so much evil, abuse, and loss?

Later that summer during a worship service, my life flashed before my eyes. Science informs us that people who report these flashes are dying, having a near-death experience, or are under severe stress.⁸ That fit. A burn pile of “supposed tos” and “shoulds” was amassed over my heart, ready to be lit. For years I had been trying to live while hoping to die. I was secretly jealous at funerals, wondering why I had to stay. I was tired of living a “Whack-A-Mole” carnival game where it felt like every time I lifted up my

⁷Bessel A. Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2015). See also Gabor Maté, *When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress* (London: Vermilion, 2019).

⁸Judith Katz, Noam Saadon-Grossman, and Shahar Arzy, “The Life Review Experience: Qualitative and Quantitative Characteristics,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 48 (February 2017): 76-86; Veronika V. Nourkova, “Compressed Life Review: Extreme Manifestation of Autobiographical Memory in Eye-Tracker,” *Behavioral Sciences* 10, no. 3 (2020): 1-14, www.mdpi.com/2076-328X/10/3/60.

head, some unseen hammer would whack me down again. I felt powerless against dark thoughts that compelled me to comply with covert contracts. The malevolent forces I could not then comprehend impelled me to “just be quiet and the pain will go away.” Retreating, I submitted to physical, spiritual, and emotional abuses, hoping my acquiescence would make the hurting stop. But it never did. I didn’t understand the various forces of evil at work. The subconscious lies I came to accept about myself and the world became the pervading narrative of my day-to-day existence, derailing the boldness intended for me and the wildly beautiful life I was meant to live. Through the lies, I too often allowed evil rather than good to flourish.

That summer morning of 2007, every bad thing that had ever happened to me flashed across the screen of my mind in living color: There were quick clips of my life from my earliest sense of being unwanted, to rejection by my husband, to rejection by my church family. Unique to my experience, however, was an awareness between each scene of walking along a path with a deep chasm on either side. As each hurtful experience knocked me off the path onto one side or the other, I glimpsed the cause behind each blow. Sometimes the cause was someone else’s deliberate harmful intention, sometimes it was my own ignorance or naivety, and sometimes it was unintentional but still devastating.

Incredibly, however, with each fall I felt an unseen hand I knew to be God catch me and gently place me back on the path. With each blow, in place of my self-flagellation for being so stupid or worthless, I felt enveloped with an overwhelming love by the hand that caught me. Never did that hand harm me. This centering and impactful experience became an undercurrent guiding my next steps. Even though the journey ahead was steep and filled with challenges, something within my core connected and grounded me in a *knowing* love. I was seen. I was not traveling alone. I was never alone.

During the next six years of work in the doctoral program, my research occasionally hit pause as another clip from my flashback reel replayed in my head. Then, as the silent divine voice disclosed, “*This* is the cause behind that one,” I saw the relationship between the evil that happened, its cause, and how my response affected what came next. Gradually a network of connections developed. Evil gained entrance into my life through different sources and means. Some evils entered willfully and intentionally. Other evils

entered as a consequence of a chain of actions, and some were simply acts of nature, but how I responded mattered. Through this process, I began to identify distinct, destructive instruments of evil and various operations through which they worked.

The insights sparked an awareness that I, that we, are not alone and are not powerless against the internal and external forces that assault us. In this book, many of the stories behind the scenes from my flashback will be filled out, along with what was learned about the evil behind them and their implications for how to get back on a meaningful path of life.

APPROACH AND GOALS

My life experiences, research, and conversations are the foundation of this book's exploration into demystifying evil. I have engaged a broad range of materials including academic studies and people's stories ranging from ancient history to modern times, on different continents, in different languages, belief systems, and cultures. Universally, I've found that it's hard for people to understand what has happened to them when they encounter evil and why God, gods, people, or the universe allow these serious breaches of goodness.

The fourfold aim of this book is to (1) challenge simplistic answers to the problem of evil; (2) resist passivity or resignation to evil; (3) affirm the goodness and justice of God; and (4) provide tools for transforming the wake of evil into forces for good.

This book is written for those who wrestle with life's hardships and confusion, those who are questioning their faith, and those who have quit believing in or never believed in God but are willing to engage in the conversation about the intersection of God, humanity, good, and evil. That's a broad goal. I continue to engage and wrestle. Mine has not been an easy quest—few are. The hope is that my stories and studies can point to paths that cut through evil and move toward personal empowerment and peace. May the excrements of evil be overturned into manure for fertile soil where goodness can grow.

WHAT'S AHEAD?

While it's presumptuous to pretend that we'll solve every mystery about evil, this book seeks to provide clarity by examining the various ways harm,

distress, and other destructive forces work to prevent our flourishing. Five major instruments of evil and/or good are presented that give us insight into how evil enters our lives and how we can alter its impact by the choices we make and the actions we take.⁹

The book of Genesis is the premier account of the beginnings of good and evil. The opening chapters provide a framework for this book by examining the ways good and evil operate. Each of the major instruments, or sources, of evil in the five parts of the book is paired with a corresponding image from Genesis. Discussion of the sources of evil and their operations offers a way to objectively evaluate evil so that we are better equipped to find healing, motivation, and power to transform their devastations into good. The major instruments of evil addressed in this book are as follows:

- action-consequence
- natural forces
- human agency
- nonhuman malevolent spiritual forces

In the final section, we will explore the role of God and Jesus Christ in all of this.

Part one, “Wrestling with Evil,” (the part you’re currently reading) continues in chapter two, “Distinguishing Between Evil, Suffering, and Pain and the Ambiguity of Evil,” along with a cautionary note on the misuse of the terms *evil* and *good*. Chapter three, “Defining Evil—Biblically,” provides a definition of evil as the corruption of good, with emphasis on God’s creational and relational goodness.

Part two, “Natural Causes: Cosmic Seed and Natural Evil,” contains two chapters. Chapter four, “Action-Consequence and the Cosmic Seed,” explores the oldest beliefs about the cause of good and evil. This concept is the basis of the adages “you reap what you sow” and “what goes around comes around,” and most understandings of karma. The image from Genesis is the seed. Almost all living things on earth come from seed: plants, animals, people, and metaphorically speaking, thoughts, words, and actions. This

⁹The ideas for this book arose out of my life and my research: Ingrid Faro, *Evil in Genesis: A Contextual Analysis of Hebrew Lexemes for Evil in the Book of Genesis*, Studies in Scripture & Biblical Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2021).

universal expectation can be seen in ancient texts and prayers, in most religious systems, and in New Age vernacular. It makes sense logically, but it doesn't always hold true. Chapter five, "Nature: Are All Natural Forces Natural?" considers the role of nature to gain perspective on the wildness of creation, along with ways in which the willful intent of sentient beings can affect biological and environmental factors to bring good or harm. We'll look at biblical perspectives on the relationship between nature, humanity, and God, and examine the role of physical forces and laws of nature that are part of the ebb and flow of living on this earth.

Part three, "Human Causes: Surprising Ways We Participate in Evil and Good," contains three chapters. In chapter six, "Human Need and Desire: The Misuse of Intended Good," considers the fact that we all have needs and desires, and that they are meant to be good and intended by the Lord! We will conversely examine how our needs and desires can work for us or against us depending on how we respond to them and what we do to fulfill them. In chapter seven, "Self-Sufficiency: The Root of Pride and Insecurity," readers consider how both pride and insecurity are related to self-sufficiency and our need to be in control. This approach either elevates self by squashing others or becomes ineffective by diminishing personal agency by focusing on our inabilities. In their own ways, both responses can contribute to the proliferation of evil, harm, and wrongdoing. Positive expressions of these negative attributes are confidence and humility, which at best, work together in a healthy personality to foster human flourishing. Chapter eight addresses "Human Responsibility and Authority." This may be the most challenging conversation in the book, calling us out of lethargy and passivity toward evil into our God-given vocation to act as his image-bearers. Chapter nine explores "Human Freedom and the Path to Restore the World," beginning with the question of what human freedom is and what it means for the operation of evil and good.

Part four, "Unseen Causes: Spiritual Forces at Work," investigates the participation of nonhuman, spiritual entities that act with purposeful intent in human lives and world systems. Chapter ten addresses "Malevolent Forces and The Rise of the Satan." Although the concept of spiritual forces has been scorned by intellectuals since the Enlightenment, a global perspective together with the acknowledgment that there's more out there than meets the

eye will be openly discussed. Chapter eleven, “Demons, Angels, and Other Spiritual Entities,” examines scriptural evidence of malevolent and beneficent spiritual beings and their engagement with the physical universe. In chapter twelve, “The Divine Council and the Rules of Engagement,” the reality of the divine council is explored, especially regarding their participation in heavenly, human, and world systems. The section on “rules of engagement”¹⁰ provides further explanation of God’s response to spiritual conflict and cosmic involvement in the administration of good and evil.

Part five, “God at Work,” may raise the biggest questions for most people. In chapter thirteen, “The Power of Mercy and Grace,” we look at God’s approach to human evil. Chapter fourteen addresses “The Costly Work of Forgiveness” for God and for us. Too often the words “just forgive” or “you have to forgive” are tossed around without understanding the price of the process. Chapter fifteen, “For Those Who Mourn: Turning Ashes into Beauty,” concludes our exploration with hope.

Welcome to this journey. I believe you won’t be the same by its conclusion.

¹⁰The first to use this military term to refer to God’s actions in spiritual conflict is John C. Peckham. See his “Rules of Engagement: God’s Permission of Evil in Light of Selected Cases of Scripture,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 30, no. 2 (2020): 243-60, and *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

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