

## A Binary World

**“Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck . . . Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head. . . ” (Psalm 69:1,4).**

In almost all the Davidic psalms David is calling out to God for help (or he’s praising God for help received). David is suffering! His enemies are pursuing him to kill him. He needs God to protect and deliver him. Why? As king, David represents, identifies or is in corporate unity or solidarity with the people of Israel. And the Nation of Israel is hated by the nations of the world. It’s all the people of Israel who really have been targeted for extinction. What’s this all about? We need to understand what’s going on in our world, how our world is constituted, because it involves us greatly.

I must begin by explaining the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. My suggestion is this: It defines this present era (that is, the time period covered by Genesis 3 to Revelation 20) and serves as the great theme of *all* Scripture, all history. We live in a world purposely ordained by God to be saturated with evil yet also containing, here and there by one means or another, good. God’s good. So there’s this on-going conflict on earth, reflecting a more cosmic heavenly conflict, between the demonstration in real time and space of evil *versus* good. On earth, human creatures serve as the ones thru whom the existence of evil or good is expressed (with just accountability for their choice). The “knowledge” of good and evil is a Hebraism meaning to personally experience, not merely to be cognizant of, good and evil. The other tree, the Tree of Life, represents the era that’s to come (introduced in Revelation 21), after evil is dealt with and disposed of, so that only good, God’s good, and those who desire the good, remain. So, two eras, the first one of evil into which God’s good invades so that a conflict results and a choice is forced upon everyone, and a subsequent glorious era forever devoid of evil.

The trees were there as a test for the man. If he obeyed God, he would be invited to eat of the Tree of Life and there would not have to be the first era. But by disobeying and eating of the first tree, that set in motion the first of the two eras. Dominion by a wicked supernatural being was added, and a sin nature was added to humanity, both to amplify the individual’s awareness of the conflict and, hopefully, the desire for God’s mercy and deliverance. The “good” invades our world by means of God’s Word, by His Spirit, and ultimately by the Son, and it involves Abraham, the elect of Israel, and Jesus and His obedient followers. Fundamental to all creation is, testing. All God’s creatures are being tested: Evil or God’s good? The world is a radically, strictly binary place! It must be one or the other; God judges.

All Scripture is the unfolding of this good/evil conflict. It began with the contrasting light and dark of the Bible’s opening chapter, and it became explicit in the oracle of Genesis 3:15. So, Abel/Cain; Enoch/Lamech; Noah/everyone else; Shem/Ham; Abram/Nimrod; and Jacob/Esau. There’s lots more: Moses/Pharaoh; David/Goliath; Hezekiah/Sennacherib; Mordecai/Haman; and Stephen/Pharisees. And of course, the Nation of Israel versus the Canaanites and then the Philistines. In the face of evil, certain individuals shine brightly, such as Rahab, Hannah, and Ruth, and Samuel, and certain of the kings. Thus also the recurring theme of not-the-first-but-the-second. And thus the strictly binary ending to Torah in Deuteronomy 30:11-20 [which, please read!], a passage that prepares the reader for the rest of the Bible, including the Gospel.

Consider also the following: (i) In the beginning of the Book of Job, it appears that Satan really did want to kill Job! God only partially removed the hedge of protection around Job to allow Satan to afflict him, but not kill him. So Job suffered. The problem was, Job was righteous, that is, he lived according to God’s standards of good. Job was not under Satan’s control, so Satan despised him and wanted him dead, even though it meant he had to deceive God. (ii) The Book of Proverbs starkly expresses the Bible’s binary theme, with its division of all humanity into two categories, the wise, who live based on God’s standards of goodness, and the foolish, those who don’t. (iii) And then, Satan really tried to kill Jesus. But . . . surprise! Jesus did give Himself over to death, but it was a unique and special death for it expressed God’s unique love for humanity, love that fulfills His goodness. And binary verses abound in the New Testament, such as Matthew 7:13ff and John 3:36. And Paul’s curse at the very end of 1 Corinthians.

Paul's writings continue this theme. He distinguishes, for example, between those who are "a new man" from those who are "the old man," or those in the Spirit from those in the flesh. To Paul, there are no other categories, just those two. And that's how Paul lived, expressing God's "good." We're called to do the same as Jesus, the same as Paul, viz, live the "good" as we've been instructed in Scripture to do, although it entails suffering and loss. Why? So that God's beloved humans can be saved from evil and brought into His "good." That's why Jesus unequivocally and unconditionally stated, "take up your cross and follow Me," because those who live the "good" will, in this era, suffer persecution by those living out evil. The Bible closes by reprising this narrative and, at the very end, it concludes this era and prophesies its fulfillment in the next era. All Scripture implores us—no, commands us!—to join God, not only taking His side but actively pursuing His "good."

But there's more. This era isn't merely one in which evil and good are mixed and human creatures must choose one or the other. That's true but woefully incomplete. It's worse. In this era, the evil, *as evil*, hates the good, loathes it, and seeks to annihilate all good from even existing. So there's necessarily dreadful conflict. And the good overcomes the evil, not by force, but [and this is astonishing] by *submitting to it*! So in this era, in this present time and space world, the good suffers. Submitting to evil is an act of love. David was God's servant. He represented, and brought into the world, God's "good." So Satan hated him and incited the nations under his control to seek David's--and all Israel's--death. Thus David's pleas in the Psalms express his trust in God, which expresses love for God. He had love also for his people and sought God's blessing for them, whatever suffering that necessarily entailed.

It's not the suffering itself that's virtuous, but that it occurs out of love. It's suffering at the hand of evil men motivated by trust in and love for God that expresses God's good. Suffering persecution because of seeking the good of others, motivated by love (or duty, but "duty" is really another way to express love), demonstrates God's goodness. At the most fundamental level, it's love that accepts suffering as a consequence, that expresses God's goodness, that defeats evil and that reveals Satan and his followers to be wicked beings deserving of the severest punishment.

So suffering is loaded with meaning. Because God is sovereign and just, His good ultimately prevails and results in blessing and evil experiences deserved condemnation and suffers for it. Suffering is thus linked to justice. Thus Israel's sufferings demand justice. And the Son's sufferings. And the sufferings of the followers of the Son. In His time, God will in perfect justice vindicate the good and punish, and dispose of, all evil, forever. Faith is trusting in this eternal truth and living based on it. We're God's servants, servants of the "good," just as David was and as Jesus was (is). And so God's servants faithfully suffer at the hands of those who are evil, knowing that God is just, and loving Him for it.

Evangelicals will reject the above because it seems to make God the source, if not the cause, of evil. As if we need to protect God's holiness!! God is free to do whatever He wills with His creation, and His holy will is vastly more complex than we finite, mortals can imagine. Anyway, ultimately, God has the responsibility for evil whether we care to acknowledge it or not, because in His exhaustive knowledge, He knew the consequences of having creatures with free will yet He went ahead with His creation, allowing it to happen. God thus may not be the proximate cause of evil, but He is inescapably ultimately responsible for it by permitting it. Which only then raises the issue, Who or what *is* the proximate cause? What *is* the origin of sin? It's unanswerable in the absence of revelation, but speculation is unavoidable.

So, Is sin something external to us that controls us? If so, how can God hold us accountable for our acts, for our choices, for our attitude toward Him? If sin is not outside us, but intrinsic to our being . . . how did we acquire it, for it wouldn't have been there at creation? And surely Satan cannot alter our very being, only God can do that. As we're accountable to God for our deeds and our attitude toward Christ, then we must assume that we have the moral agency of choice, which means sin doesn't so totally control us that we can't think clearly about it. Yet, Scripture teaches election and (Calvinist) theology teaches the absolute necessity of election for anyone's salvation. This issue must be something for us not to be able to comprehend. When essential revelation to resolve such questions is absent, it's absent deliberately so that we make our choices on what *is* there. Election is an invisible work of God, something we cannot know; sin and the cross and the Word of God are all very visible to us and demand our response. Where did evil come from? Not revealed. Without knowing that, we're to respond appropriately to the Scripture that we have.

Now I ask this, How did Satan suppose he'd get away with rebellion against God? What was he thinking? Probably this: God would not, *could* not, simply oppose him and destroy him, because that would require the use of brute force, which God eschews as unjust and which is, anyway, how Satan himself operates. So Satan can safely (he supposed) rule God's world forever. Satan also knew that he was God's beloved creature and that God's love takes primacy over justice. (And Satan anyway may not have understood justice, or love.) So God's way to defeat Satan—indeed, to defeat all evil—is exactly what's unfolding in this current world: God's love, which results in suffering and expresses God's good, overcomes the violence, hatred, deceit, and all other Satanic wickedness. In this current era, good must suffer. It's a necessary result of that rebellion in the Garden.

One more issue, because modernity rejects the idea of a binary humanity. It's this: How do we explain Western civilization? It can only be either: (i) God has placed a hedge around the West, granting the prosperity and freedom necessary to enable His Church to carry out missions in the world; although the Church mainly disobediently indulges itself within that hedge. Or (ii) Satan has made the West a comfortable, prosperous and free place to deceive and enfeeble the Church with self-indulgence so it does NOT carry out missions in the world. What has happened is, certain biblical values such as kindness, compassion, and such, have so civilized the West that we seem to be "decent and good" people. And we have a shockingly deficient understanding of the power of sin to control us. So we erroneously suppose that a society of seemingly good people voids the idea of a strictly binary world. In reality, a thin veneer of civilization covers innate corruption and latent evil.

\* \* \*

Why is this so important? Christians in the West have a hard time grasping and accepting Scripture's revelation of the binary-ness of humans. We don't experience persecution, after all. But the importance of it is, Jesus is our life. And all else is evil. And there can be no mixing of polar opposites, nor hopping from one to the other. Being passive, indifferent to, or ignorant of our responsibilities is folly in the extreme. We've been endowed with privileges beyond what any other people in history have had, which greatly—*vastly*—increases our responsibilities. So we must be committed to God's "good" and fulfill our role in the Bible's great over-arching narrative, according to the Scriptural command given to us.

Revelation Chapter 12 anticipates the climax of John's vision, but it does more. The chapter dramatically summarizes the story line of the entire Bible. There's warfare between the Serpent, with his raging hatred and violence, and God's irruption of good in the Person of Jesus. Those who take the side of God suffer, but because of their testimony and the empowerment of Jesus' Spirit, they overcome evil. We need to live this. Nobody automatically expresses good. Since the advent and then ascension of the Son and the gift of His Spirit, we can live the good only thru our relationship with Jesus. He is God's ultimate and climactic good. We express His good by being like Him, lovingly obeying Him, and seeking to honor Him in all we do.

**"For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ"** (2 Corinthians 4:6). If I substitute "good" for light and "evil" for darkness in this verse [because light and darkness are metaphors for good and evil], what this Scripture would say is that God puts His goodness, which is His glory, in us who are in Christ, because He, Jesus, is the expression of it. Apart from Jesus, that is, apart from being *in Him*, there's no possibility of expressing God's goodness, only evil. The advent of Christ has made stark and compelling the binary-ness of all reality.

We need to know Jesus better, because to know Him is to love Him. David knew that the Lord is beautiful and his one desire was to gaze upon His beauty (Psalm 27). And to love Him (biblical love, that is), regardless what shame, loss or suffering comes to us as a result, means we join God in His great cosmic work of defeating evil. In that way we glorify God. It will almost surely mean simplifying our lives by cutting out useless interests and activities. There is only one pursuit that makes life significant, that's serving the "good" as God has revealed we're to do it. We'll undoubtedly suffer in some way for doing it. But Jesus is worth it.