

"Out of the heart of man come evil thoughts..." Mark 7:21

WHERE DOES

EVIL

COME FROM?

**THE REAL SOURCE OF
HUMAN EVIL**



If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.
For it is written: “He shall give His angels charge
over you,” and, “In their hands they shall bear
you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.”

~ Matthew 4:6

Where Does Evil Come From?

The real source of human evil

Most world religions, ancient or modern, have some concept of an evil, malignant, supernatural force that brings moral confusion and physical evil into our lives.

If you find yourself in this company of people, then this booklet may surprise you.

This booklet accepts that God is the only reliable source for an answer to our question, and that this answer will only be found in the book He has given us, the Bible. This is where the surprise will be found: When we closely examine what the Bible says, we will be led to an unexpected conclusion, one that will resonate with what we know about ourselves intrinsically, but that is different from what we often hear.

The Source of Thoughts and Actions

Begin by taking a look, a very close look, at yourself: what are the real forces that motivate you to do what you do?

One well-known follower of Jesus, the Apostle Paul, struggled to understand his behavior:

I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. (Romans 7:15 NLT¹)

The apostle wants to serve God with all his heart, but can't seem to do it. With his mind he is determined to do right—yet in practice, it is not happening. Instead, he finds himself doing the very things he hates.

Something is wrong. Yet Paul insists, “I am not the one doing wrong.” There has to be a force at work stronger than his own will. So, what is this other force?

He makes a very blunt admission:

The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. (Romans 7:14 NLT)

But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. (Romans 7:23 NLT)

¹ This quote is from the New Living Translation (NLT). While the English Standard Version (ESV) will ordinarily be used for quotations, the NLT is used for Romans 7 to make the text easier to follow.

Paul's understanding of the source of his struggles is not unique. Jesus makes exactly the same point in regard to all humanity:

For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. (Mark 7:21-23)

"Sin" is not a fashionable word to use in today's world. It is kind of old fashioned. The idea it expresses, though, is not old fashioned: just look at the list Jesus recites. All of these words describe various aspects of selfish human nature. And, says Jesus, the source of this behavior comes from within us, out of our own hearts and minds.

What Causes Sin?

So what exactly is this power that makes people slaves to sin, moving them to do things that are so destructive to human relationships? The Apostle James, the half-brother of Jesus, helps us understand:

Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. (James 1:14-15)

What is this overwhelming power or influence that propels us into sin? Clearly, it is our own natural desires that seek to be satisfied.

Take a simple example like hunger, not the hunger of someone starving, but the hunger arising from our own natural desire. There is nothing inherently evil about this desire. Yet, what if the food with which you seek to satisfy your hunger belongs to someone else? How easy it is to rationalize why it would be okay to quietly take the desired item from a store or your neighbor's tree or a farmer's field. Once freed from moral constraint, we quickly work out a plan. This gives birth finally to the act of theft.

P R I D E

W R A T H

L U S T

G L U T T O N Y

S L O T H

E N V Y

G R E E D

If we continue in this behavior, when it becomes a habit or way of living, we become a thief deserving of punishment.

You can develop for yourself scenarios that depict how human desire so easily gives birth to sexual immorality, adultery, murder, slander and similar acts that bring great harm to others, and ultimately to ourselves.

The Apostle John breaks down our inner desires into three types:

Do not love this world nor the things it offers you... For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. (1 John 2:15-17 NLT)

Consider the truth of this statement in your own personal life. The consistent Biblical view is that this world is ruled by human desires gone wrong.

The Apostle Paul describes the situation as a struggle for loyalty between God's will and desires ("the Spirit") on the one hand, and our human will and desires ("the flesh") on the other:

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (Galatians 5:17)

The picture is of two enemies striving against each other for the loyalty and obedience of humankind. It is the will of God against the desires of our flesh:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit... For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Romans 8:5-9)

Human Desire Personified

The above Bible passages portray our innate human desire to satisfy ourselves as the real opponent of right behavior. The Apostle Paul refers to this tendency as if it is a real, living opponent separate from (but inside) himself. He depicts self-centered human thinking as an enemy of God. The Apostle James pictures human cravings in the form of a seducer or seductress, drawing the individual away from God and ultimately to a hopeless death.

Presenting something abstract as a person is called personification. The Bible often portrays sin in this manner. In Romans 6, the Apostle Paul personifies sin as a king, and slave master and an employer:

Verse 12: “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions” as if sin is a king who wants obedience.

Verse 17: “you were once slaves of sin” as if sin is a slave master.

Verse 22: “you have been set free from sin” as if being rescued from a slave master.

Verse 23: “the wages of sin is death” as if sin is an employer paying wages.

In Ephesians, Paul uses personification in writing about trespasses and sins:

*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following **the prince of the power of the air**, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Ephesians 2:1-3)*

Who or what is this “prince of the power of the air”? Is it a supernatural fallen angel, who controls unseen spirits? No. The context shows it is “the course of this world,” that is, the spirit or attitude of mind of the age that is at work in those who disregard God.

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James 1:14

The disobedience is further defined as coming from “the desires of our body and mind.”

Today, we recognize the kind of power Paul is talking about as the cultural influences of our age. These powerful influences we too readily follow when we don’t know any other way. In this passage, Paul dramatically personifies this cultural influence as a great prince who has power over humankind.

The Apostle John uses a different word when referring to the human tendency to sin: the devil.

Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. (1 John 3:8)

Right from the beginning, the Bible reveals that it was human desires that led to sin.

The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise. (Genesis 3:6)

Driven by these desires, Eve sinned and took of the forbidden fruit. Just as James said, “each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire” (James 1:14).

This passage in 1 John also contains a powerful personal lesson. Anyone who walks in sin is spoken of as being “of the devil”:

By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:10)

He warns those who seek to follow God's ways not to be "like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother" (v. 12). Literally, Cain was a son of Adam and Eve, but in his behavior, he was a child of his own lust—in the form of jealousy.

We, too, have a choice of being either children of God or children of our own desires, which are here personified as "the devil" or "the wicked one."

How the Devil was Destroyed

In the book of Hebrews this personification of human desire is also referred to as "the devil." Consider very carefully the implications of these words:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil. (Hebrews 2:14)

Jesus shared the same flesh and blood nature as all humans. He struggled against the same desires we all have to do his own will, to follow his own desires.² When Jesus died, whatever had the power of death in him was destroyed.

So what is it that has this power of death?

The wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23)

It was sin, producing death in me through what is good. (Romans 7:13)

The sting of death is sin. (1 Corinthians 15:56)

Sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. (James 1:15)

The marvel of the death of Christ is that, here, at last, sin (the cause of death) is forever defeated:

(Christ) himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree. (1 Peter 2:24)

(Christ) appeared in order to take away sins. (1 John 3:5)

By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, (God) condemned sin in the flesh. (Romans 8:3)

The word "devil" is a suitable way to describe the human urges that are the root cause of sin. The original Greek word (diabolos) means a slanderer or false accuser, as it is translated in some places (1 Timothy 3:11; 2 Timothy 3:3; Titus 2:3). Judas Iscariot is termed a "devil" as the betrayer of Christ (John 6:70).³

² For the interested Bible reader: compare Jesus' struggle before his crucifixion in Matthew 26:38-42 with Hebrews 5:7-9

³ Notice from these two examples how people can also rightly be called a "devil" if they become driven and controlled by these same sinful human urges."

When faced with temptation to sin, the human mind often "slanders" and "falsely accuses" God. A person may think: "God will not see"; or "He will not care"; or "He really doesn't mean it"—knowing very well something is not right to do. Thus, calling this kind of thinking "the devil" is certainly appropriate.

How could the devil be destroyed by the death of Christ? Moreover, how could this same devil that was destroyed still be active today?

There is no need to puzzle over such questions if the devil is understood as a personification of sinful human nature. In seeking to obey his Father, Christ selflessly refused to give in to the most basic instincts of his human nature. And when he died, those human desires died with him.

Christ's victory over the devil—his human nature—opened the way to forgiveness of sins and reconciliation to God for all. Ultimately, his triumph will bring immortality to those who have faithfully followed him, who will then be freed from those same human desires.

The Temptation of Christ

Immediately after Jesus was baptized, the devil tempted him in the wilderness. At his baptism, Jesus received a full measure of the Holy Spirit power of God, which enabled him to perform miracles, including multiplying food, healing all diseases and even bringing the dead back to life. After he received this great power, the record says in Matthew 4:

And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God command these stones to become loaves of bread." (v. 3)

Then the devil took him up to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." (v. 5)

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." (v. 8)

Who was this tempter? Many assume the devil here is a fallen angel. However, we are told that Jesus, the Son of God, was "in every respect tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Have you ever been tempted face to face by a supernatural devil? Is not the common experience of temptation the one described by James, when "each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (James 1:14)?

Only one conclusion is possible here: Since Jesus was a human being, the desire to satisfy his own appetites, exercise and show off his new power, and enjoy the admiration of others must have been an inherent part of his nature.

It is in the third temptation above where we can see the incredible power of personification at work.

#1 There is no mountain high enough from which all nations can be seen. This can only be done in the imagination of the mind.

#2 God had already promised to his son power and rulership over all nations, all he had to do was ask his Father: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.” (Psalm 2:8)

#3 At Jesus’ baptism, God had given His son power “without measure” (John 3:34). In doing this, He gave into Jesus’ hands “all things” (John 3:35). In other words, no person or angel, no matter how important, was needed to deliver all the nations to Jesus! Jesus had the power at that very moment to conquer them by himself. In addition, he could summon twelve legions of angels to aid him in this work (Matthew 26:53).

Putting all this together, can you see the dramatic picture God is painting? The only one who could give Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” was Jesus himself! What we are seeing is Jesus being powerfully tempted to serve himself and take possession of what God had promised there and then.

The devil Jesus faced was his own human desires. This has always been the real adversary to God and His purpose in our world. The temptation of Jesus is perhaps the most profound example of the personification of the imaginations of human thinking.

Satan—an Adversary to God

Would it surprise you that this same anti-God thinking is also spoken of as Satan?

The Hebrew word *satan* literally means “adversary,” and in the Old Testament it is regularly translated as such (e.g., Numbers 22:22; 1 Samuel 29:4). The same Hebrew word is transliterated into Greek when used in the New Testament.

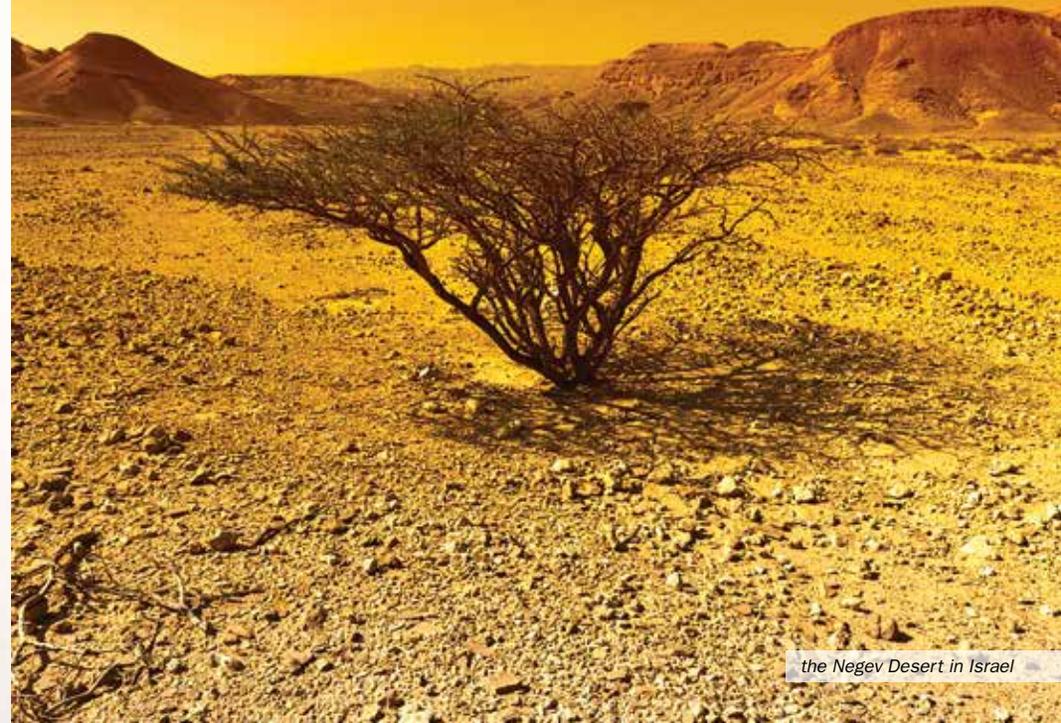
Jesus’ loyal disciple, Peter, provides an illuminating example of the use of this word.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and

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the Negev Desert in Israel

scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." (Matthew 16:21-23)

Let those words sink in: Jesus calls his loyal disciple "Satan". Peter hardly resembled the malignant force of popular imagination. So, what is going on?

Jesus had just explained the terrible things that awaited him in Jerusalem, including his death. Peter was horrified: this would never happen to his master! But Peter was not looking at this from God's point of view. Instead, his reasoning arose from what he felt was right for Jesus. In thinking like this, Peter became an adversary to Jesus, and to God; Peter set himself squarely in the way of God's purpose with Jesus.

In the Bible, "Satan" often refers to the opponents of God and His purposes, especially when it comes to the preaching of the Gospel. For example,

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. (Revelation 2:9)⁴

Consider another example found in Acts:

But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ... Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart?" (Acts 5:3-4)

What was the origin of this deceitful plan? It was "contrived" or originated in Ananias's own heart. His own desire for money is personified as Satan. Why use the word Satan? Because it means "adversary" and accurately depicts what Ananias' desire for money was: an adversary to right action, causing him to sin against God.

When considering the use of this word in the New Testament, you may be surprised to see situations where Satan is actually helpful in saving people. In one case, Satan is helping turn a person from adultery, actually opposing wrong behavior (1 Corinthians 5:5)!



⁴ Here are two other examples: 2 Corinthians 11:14; 1 Timothy 5:15.

In others, Satan is helping keep Paul humble (2 Corinthians 12:7), and, teaching people not to blaspheme (1 Timothy 1:20), the opposite of the Devil of popular thinking! This shows that "Satan" is simply a generic word to describe an adversary.

Old Testament Perspective

At the time of the Genesis flood, people seemed to be driven by their quest for self-gratification:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Genesis 6:5)

All blame for this condition rested on what originated within the hearts of the people. Nothing is said of any external force of evil. After the flood, nothing changed, so God declared: "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth." (Genesis 8:21)

The same conflict is found in Israel's history:

But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels. (Psalm 81:11-12)

The struggle was between God's voice and "their own counsels." The competing ideas to God's word were originating within the minds of His own people. This theme becomes a steady drumbeat in the prophets. Note the constant reference to the thoughts and hearts of the people and especially their false prophets:

I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices. (Isaiah 65:2)

Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. ... How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart. (Jeremiah 23:16, 26)

Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel, who are prophesying, and say to those who prophesy from their own hearts: 'Hear the word of the LORD!' Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!' (Ezekiel 13:2-3)

Again, it is not a supernatural being working against God, opposing His word and will, but the rebelliousness of the people and the lies of the false prophets.

One last example, a famous one, is presented here to demonstrate how clearly the Bible always identifies the Devil and Satan with human reasoning in opposition to God and his thinking.

Job and Satan

Recall that the Hebrew word *satan* simply means an adversary. In the book of Job he certainly seems to be just that, an adversary to Job. I say “seems” because his accusations are actually not directed against Job, they are directed against God! Job is the illustration that proves Satan’s point:

Then Satan answered the LORD and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.” (Job 1:9-11)

The adversary only saw the unfairness of God in His treatment of Job: He says in essence, ‘Of course he does what you want, look how well you treat him! Take it all away and you will see a different man. I know how men behave, I have seen all kinds in my travels.’

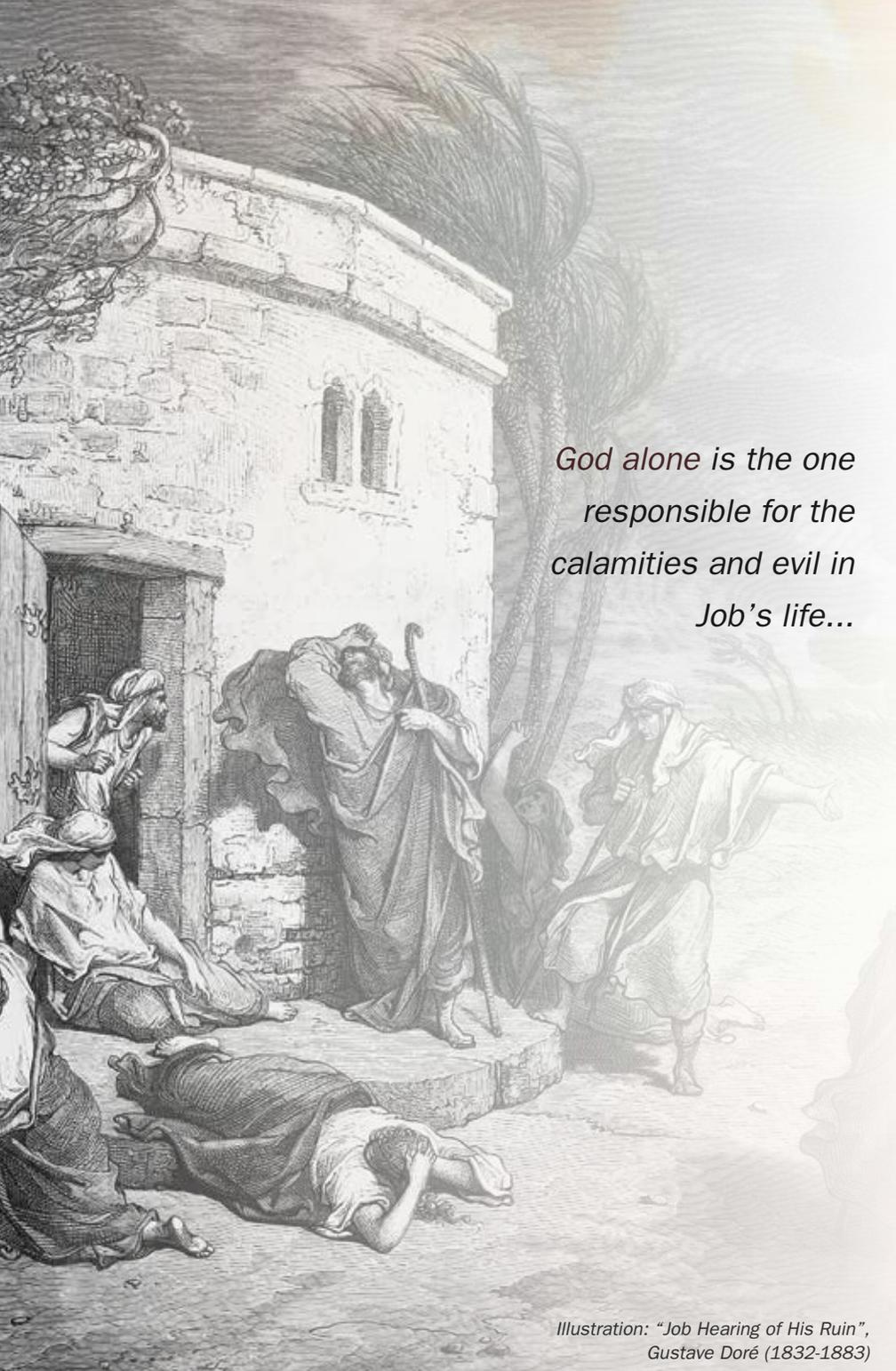
This same theme is virtually repeated after Job refuses to turn against God, even when he has lost almost all that was dear to him:

And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason.” (Job 2:3)

Did you notice something odd? Whatever you may be thinking about Satan in the book of Job, did you notice this Satan has no power to inflict hurtful actions against Job? God alone is the one responsible for the calamities and evil in Job’s life, even though the one inciting this evil was this adversary. Does this fit the usual profile of a supernatural being? This theme is found throughout the book of Job:

1:21 Job says: “*The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away.*” Job correctly attributes his calamities to the action of God.

2:3 God to Satan: “*...you incited me against him to destroy him without reason.*”



God alone is the one responsible for the calamities and evil in Job’s life...

Illustration: “Job Hearing of His Ruin”, Gustave Doré (1832-1883)

2:5 Satan to God: *“But stretch out your hand...”* Satan clearly acknowledges with whom the power to bring calamity is found.

19:21 Job’s response to his friends: *“Have mercy on me, have mercy on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me!”* Job continues to attribute his afflictions solely to God.

42:11 Job’s family understood this too, for they *“...showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him.”*

Is it not safe to conclude that all interpretations that would make this Satan a fallen angel of some kind fail completely when the text is read as written?⁴

Demons

The word “devil” does not occur in the Old Testament. “Demons,” though, are mentioned in four places, to describe the image of a goat representing a false god. (See, for example, Leviticus 17:7; Deuteronomy 32:17.) This may well have been the source for medieval depictions of Satan as a two-horned, goat-faced monster.

Similarly, in the New Testament, other than in the gospels, the word “demons” is used for false gods (1 Corinthians 10:20-21; Revelations 9:20).

In the four gospels, demon possession is always associated with conditions or illnesses cured by Christ and the apostles:

All those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. And demons also came out of many. (Luke 4:40-41)

Some demons were thought to cause a speech deformity (Matthew 9:33); some caused blindness (Matthew 12:22); others caused forms of mental illness (Matthew 17:15,18; John 7:20). Demons became the explanation for any ailment that could not be attributed to a physical condition.

Today such ailments can be treated. For example, antidepressants, antipsychotics and similar drugs have put an end to the idea that mental illness is caused by a demon or evil spirits inhabiting a person. However, such medical understanding is relatively recent.

⁴ Side note: Job 1:6 speaks of those who “...came to present themselves before the LORD.” Job did not come into a “heavenly court” as some versions suggest. The language describes worshippers coming to a designated place of worship (e.g. Deuteronomy 31:14). Job was such a man, and so, it would appear, was the Satan or adversary: a devout, religious man of wide experience...with a chip on his shoulder. Not something unknown even today.

The Lord Jesus did not correct the medical concepts of his contemporaries. It was enough that he demonstrated the power of God to heal all types of diseases.

Why does all this matter?

Understanding that sin comes from within the human heart is a key to understanding the Bible. You are responsible for what you do and think. The Bible does not leave room to shift the responsibility for sin onto someone or something else.

Sin is portrayed as a king, as a slave master, as a harlot enticing people to sin, as a deceiver, as the devil, as Satan, as a great adversary, as a prince ruling the behavior of this world. Since everyone on earth is controlled by their own human desires in some form, the Bible personifies sin as the ruling power both in our bodies and in this world.

The fact that God gave over his only-begotten, sinless son into the hands of evil, envious men bent on his death showcased more than any other act in history the real source of opposition to God—our human desires and thinking.

The wonderful message of the Bible is that God offers to us through Jesus Christ, salvation from sin and all the effects produced by our uncontrolled desires. What God wants from us is the humility to acknowledge the problem is in us, and then a willing desire to turn away from our own thinking and ways to the thinking and ways God has shown us in His son:

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:6-7)

I urge you to seriously consider this appeal.

~ Don Styles

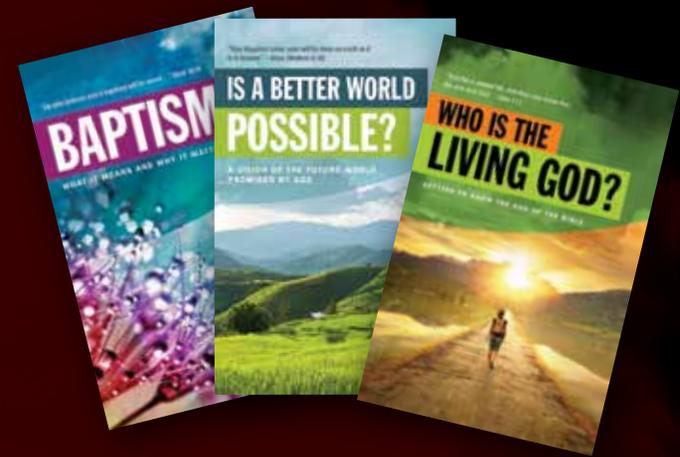
“But what about...?”

Yes, what about the Serpent cast out of heaven?

And his angels cast down to hell?

And who exactly is Lucifer?

A single booklet cannot answer all questions. You may well have these and other questions about confusing Bible passages not discussed in this booklet. If you would like to explore some of these questions, go to our website and look for the online booklet titled: *“But what about...?”*



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WHERE DOES EVIL COME FROM?

Is there a supernatural being at the root of all the evil we see in our world? The Devil does make a frightening plot for a movie, but does such a being actually exist?

By taking a close look at ourselves through the witness of the Bible, we can arrive at an answer to our question. The exploration of the origin of moral evil may be uncomfortable, but it will make way for a clearer understanding of our world and ourselves. Even better, it can lead us to a greater appreciation of God's purpose with this world—and with us.