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Can You Really Say Evil Is Just a Privation of Good?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether one can legitimately say evil is a privation of good, how the Bible can say sin and death entered the world at the fall if angels rebelled before man, and why God would judge Israel with a famine so great they would eat the flesh of their children.

* Saying that evil is a “privation” is simply wordplay. How is the privation of a thing not creating the result of that privation? If one is denied oxygen, he will die, but you would blame the one denying the oxygen for that death.

* Scripture says sin and death entered the world at the fall, but didn't angels rebel before man? Wouldn't sin have been introduced then?

* Why would God judge the Israelites for sacrificing their children to idols by pronouncing upon them a famine so great that they would eat the flesh of their children?

Transcript

This is Amy Hall, and Greg Kockel here to answer your questions on the hashtag S-T-R-S podcast from Stand to Reason. Welcome. And welcome to you, Greg.

Thank you, Amos. Welcome to you. We're going to start today with a question about evil, and this comes from David.

Okay. How is the privation of a thing not creating the result of that privation? If one is denied oxygen, they will die, but you would blame the one denying the oxygen for that death. Privation to cause evil is simply wordplay.

Well, you know, I'll get into the details here. I just want to throw this out. The statement, the one who deprives oxygen is the one who's responsible, but if the person who is breathing the oxygen is the very one who deprives himself of oxygen, then that person is responsible for his death.

Okay, no. That's going to make more sense. Sense in just a moment when I get into detail.

This issue of deprivation of good has to do with our understanding of the nature of the problem of evil, because the way the thinking has gone or at least some have raised the issue, if God created everything and evil is something, and of course, evil would have to be something in some sense in order to be real, in order to be a genuine problem, well, if it's something, then God created it and God is responsible. Now, the standard response to that is it's one that, you know, it's not hard to figure out if you think about it for a while, but classically goes back to Augustine because he's one that wrote about this. God made everything good.

And when human beings sin, they broke the goodness, as it were. They broke the world. And so it turns out that there is a diminution of good, which we call evil.

Therefore, evil isn't a thing in itself. Evil is a description of when something good is missing. And that's the concept of privation.

And the way I usually characterize this for an audience is kind of fun, actually, as I ask a student, if I could borrow a pencil, somebody's got a pencil. So they hand me the wooden pencil, and I say, is this thing good? Well, yeah, why is it good? Well, it writes. It does what it was intended to do.

Okay, good answer. Then I break the pencil with half, which shocks the audience. I got everybody's attention.

And I say, now is this pencil good? No, it's not good. Why not? It's broken. All right.

But let me ask you a question. Did I add anything called badness to the pencil? No, of course not. There's a capability.

And this is the circumstance, then, that we call evil. Now, I think it's, and then I give the broken pencil back to the students. I hope you bring extra pencils.

Yeah. And so the idea here, then, is that God is not the author of evil. He made everything good.

And human beings ruined it. And when they ruined it, it lacked goodness. It wasn't the way God intended.

It wasn't just the way God wanted it to be. It wasn't the way things are supposed to be. Now they're different.

And there is no, to use a big philosophical term, no ontology of evil. There is no existence of a stuff called evil that gets attached to certain behaviors or things because that then would have to have been created by God. No, evil is a privation.

We have examples of this. Shadows don't have ontological status. They aren't a thing in themselves.

They are what we see when light is missing in a certain area. All right. In fact, our language reflects this.

We talk about righteousness and unrighteousness, perfection and imperfection. We talk about sin, Greek word in the New Testament, Hamartia, which means missing the mark. There's the mark.

That's the mark of perfection. This falls short. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

So this explanation turns out to be, I think, a very handy, adequate and sound way of describing the condition of evil in the world, even though God made the world without evil. Everything was just the way it was supposed to be. And human beings came and broke that.

And so therefore, they're responsible for the diminution of the goodness that God made the world with originally. Notice now we have a world that was not evil, but it was not immutably so. It could be changed.

And that's what happened when human beings disobeyed God. And so this becomes a very, I think, effective way and sound way of sidestepping what appears to be a challenge if evil is a thing and God created everything, then God created evil. And this, of course, undermines the Christian view.

But if evil is not a thing but a privation, then we have to look at what was the cause of the privation. Now, the way the questioner puts it, it's a subtle presumption that God was the one who caused the privation. So could you read the question again for us? How is the privation of a thing not creating the result of that privation? If one is denied oxygen, they will die, but you would blame the one denying the oxygen for that death.

Okay, so I agree with the statement. The statement says, the one who creates the privation is the one who's guilty. But the reason that this question is being asked of us is the subtle intimation that God is the one who created the circumstance that creates the privation, which we suffer under.

Therefore, God is responsible for evil. But on our account of reality, and that's, by the way, what one has to deal with, when there's a challenge to the Christian view, and they say there's a problem here that you can't solve, all we have to do is show that on our view, that problem is solved. And on our view, God created everything the way it was supposed to be, and man is the one responsible for the privation, which brings me back to my opening comment about if man is, if a human being himself is the one who deprives himself of oxygen, then his own death is his fault.

It's not anybody else's fault. It's the one who was responsible for the deprivation. And in our understanding of the nature of the fall, God didn't cause the fall.

God's actions were good throughout. Everything was just so. It was human beings who disobeyed God that created the rift, that created the problem, the fracture, the brokenness, the diminution of evil, the privation of evil, the privation of good, that created the circumstance that we now call evil.

I think your response regarding the illustration of the oxygen is perfect. Imagine someone has given oxygen and said here, use it at this level, and they say, no, I really want to use it on a one, not a four. I want to turn it down as well.

That's how I like it. So they turn it down, and then they die. That's where the privation comes from.

It comes from their love of sin, and not doing what they were told to do. And what would be optimal for them and what would be good? Okay, Greg, let's go on to a question from another David. And here's his question.

Scripture says sin and death entered the world at the fall, and that sin is rebellion against God, but didn't angels rebel before man? Wouldn't sin have been introduced then? This is a question that came up in our outpost class about the problem of evil. Well, I guess the answer is yes, that's a fair point. But does that mean there's a problem with the statement in the Scripture, which seems to be the case, which is why the question was raised.

Whenever you see a statement about something, you always have to be taking into consideration the frame of reference. Now, I got this for J.P. Moreland a long time ago, but it's a great hermeneutical principle. What is the frame of reference? I went to a party the other day and everyone was there.

Allen was there, John was there, Hazen was there, you were there, Meg was there. I mean, everyone was there. Well, wait a minute.

There's like seven billion people in the world, and seven billion people in the world weren't in that room at the time. So everyone wasn't there. But of course, the frame of reference in my comment has to do with the community, standard reason community, that was the subject of discussion.

And I was reading in the book of Acts the other day, and it said all were coming to this thing. And everybody, oh, I know what it was. It was the greatest Artemis of the Ephesians.

It's chapter 20 of Acts and the big hallelujah. And they said, these men have brought the whole world into disruption or something like that. Well, the whole world, you mean the Chinese were mad? The Mayans were mad? No, that wasn't the frame of reference that was being spoken of.

It was that whole community, the world of that community. Okay. So with that in mind, we know the scripture talks about the fall of angels prior to the creation of man, and that sin was obviously evident as a feature of reality.

But Paul's remarks, I think that's where the citation comes from here, I have to do with the problem of humanity. And at the creation of Adam and Eve, our first parents, the first two humans were morally innocent. Now, they weren't immutable innocent.

They weren't perfect in the sense that it could never be changed, but they were perfect in the sense that there was no stain of sin. And so that world, as it were, the world of humankind, which is what the scripture is concerned with with regards to the plan of salvation, which has no bearing at all on angels. There is no plan of salvation for them, only for human beings.

And so that frame of reference, that world, if you will, was affected by sin at the fall. That in that world, sin came into as a result of the fall. So this concept of frame of reference is really important.

And if you don't, whether it's explicit or implied, now, we know it must be implied for two reasons. We know sin was in the universe in reality before that. And secondly, this is speaking about the nature of human salvation, salvation plan for human beings.

Here's the problem. Here's the solution. So those are two tip-offs that the frame of reference is more limited there.

And by the way, if you don't take frame of reference into consideration, not only are a host of scriptural statements ludicrous, but so are a host of our own statements, ludicrous, like the one I opened with as an example. It's just the way language is used, so we have to keep that in mind when we're reading the text. And Adam was basically the head of the creation here on the earth, in the universe.

Notice that the angels aren't mentioned in the creation story at the beginning. So it's already focused on Adam as the head of this world that God was creating. So when he sent, he introduced sin into this world as a characteristic of this world, because Paul says that the all creation was subjected to futility because of Adam.

It wasn't because of the angels, it was because of Adam because he was the head. He was the kind of designated head. What's the term I'm looking for? He was the, yeah, I can't think of it, but you know, it was given over to him, the head ship and the rulership of the, you know, be fruitful, multiply and subdue the earth.

So this is his domain to rule over. And when he sinned and Eve sinned, that domain over which they were to rule, it was infected by the consequence of this. And that is when the curse came in.

So that is when this whole universe was subjected to futility. That's in Romans eight. So that is, that's the sense he's talking about.

Yeah. Yeah. I think so.

And incidentally, just as a procedural matter, some people might say, well, I don't think that's what it means. I said, well, okay, you're welcome to think what you want. But if you come up with another answer, you got a problem to solve.

We just solve the problem. And all we have to do when somebody raises what looks like a contradictory element in the text is all we have to do is show a possible, plausible solution to show that it ain't necessarily so. Well, that's not necessarily a contradiction because if you read it this way, and this is a very reasonable way to read it, then there's no contradiction.

And so our presumption is that people writing the text in God is not goofy and crazy, stupid. They're going to put contradictory statements in there. You try to read a text charitably, try to find a way to understand it.

So there's a harmony in the concepts. It's perfectly legitimate to do that. And in this case, the rationale I offered was based on the way language is normally used.

So it's a good explanation. Now, if somebody doesn't like that explanation, they're welcome to reject it. But what they can't say is this is a necessary problem with the text because it's not.

There is a solution to it that makes perfect sense that comports with the way we normally use language. All right, let's go on to a question from Timothy. In Jeremiah 19, God's people are sacrificing their children to bail.

Then one of the judgments that God pronounces upon them is that there will be a famine so great that they will eat the flesh of their children. I'm having a difficult time understanding why God is making the children suffer such an excruciating death, cannibalism, because the parents are killing their children through idle sacrifice, another excruciating death. Can you help me with this? Yeah, well, a couple of things.

First of all, the text doesn't say they're killing their children to do this. The text just says that they're eating their children. It is likely, I think, that what's going on is the children are dying of starvation.

Children are more vulnerable than adults. There is a passage where a woman says that there are two women and they were going to eat their babies. Oh, I see.

And they eat the first one and then the second one hides. That was during a, it was during a siege, I think. So the implication there is, or maybe the statement that she actually took the life of her child for the sake of cannibalizing.

Okay, either way, it's still, in the first case, you have an outright sin. Healthy women are taking their children and they're killing them, but their killing in parents are killing them as a part of a ritual sacrifice to a pagan deity, all right? That's prohibited. Okay, so God brings a judgment upon them.

And the judgment is this famine. And by the way, keep in mind, when God deals with the nation of Israel, he's dealing with the nation of Israel as a whole, all right? It's corporate. So when he brings famine to them, everybody has to experience the famine.

Even when there are some people that are righteous, because he's dealing with the nation as a whole. He's not doing all these little surgical strikes. Okay, I'm going to drop fruit on Levi over there, but not in Simeon.

Because Levi's a good guy, and Sibi is not so. You know that there's famine in the land, all right? And everyone suffers adults and children. Okay.

Now, in this particular case, there was a siege, I think in this case. I think so. Yeah.

And the Assyrians, I think, and they're sieging, they're laying siege to the city, and everybody in the city is suffering because it's a de facto famine. Now they can't get the food in. Okay.

And what ends up happening is the people who are being judged because they're evil, continue to do evil things in response to the famine. Nobody's obliged to eat their children because they're starving. If I was starving, I would eat my kids.

I'd starve to death because it's wrong to eat my kids. And so what they did is they just continued to the evil. God didn't cause all of that to happen.

He didn't cause their evil actions. What he caused was the circumstances that brought judgment upon them as a nation. For their other evil practices.

So there are consequences to God's judgment. People die, including children. But the nation is being punished for the nation's sin.

God's covenant is with the nation. It is not with individual people in the nation. Okay.

If you sign off, we'll make this agreement. No, he makes a covenant with the nation of Israel because he rescued the nation of Israel. And so this is a, there's a corporate effect of that.

Now what people do in response to God's corporate judgment, that's on them. This isn't God. God didn't make them eat their children.

God judged them with a siege that created a famine-like circumstance. And many died that some would revert to cannibalism. That's on them.

That's not on God. There's the idea that sometimes God's judgments, his judgment consists of handing us over to our sin. And we see this in Romans 1 where he talks about people exchanging the truth of God for a lie.

So he hands them over to their sin. So in this case we have people who are following other gods and sacrificing their children to gods. They're, they're burning them in the fire.

And God says that because of that, he's going to hand them over to those gods. So those gods who don't care about children, he's going to hand them over to that, to what they desire. And they're going to go to the point where they eat their own children.

So this is a handing over of the evil that they were already engaging in. So that was, that was their judgment. It was a fitting judgment for what they were doing.

I don't think that necessarily means that it was an excruciating death. I don't think people eat their children alive. So it's probably worse to be burned, but it doesn't matter because God was handing them over to their own sin.

Whatever it was, they're responsible for it. Right. And also I would say that when he hands people over, and this is the same thing that's true in Romans about God revealing an image of what it looks like to reject him in favor of the creation.

In this case, the eating the flesh of their own children was a picture of what happens and what we become when we follow other gods. So it's a punishment and it's a warning and it's a parable all rolled into one. And as you said, Greg, this isn't, this isn't just a, this isn't a judgment on the children.

This is a judgment on the culture and what happens to a culture when they turn away from God and turn to other gods. We embrace the evil of these other so-called gods who are no gods at all. Notice that a lot of Christians, they look at our culture here and then they say God's going to bring judgment on the culture.

Certain things are happening that are God's judgment on the culture. But I don't think characteristically that's a sound assessment. But nevertheless, it's interesting how they kind of say that.

And then there are all kinds of innocence and children that in the culture are suffering from this blanket judgment. They think God is bringing on the country. And that question doesn't seem to come up during that discussion.

You know, if my people are called by that, my name will humble themselves or whatever, I'll heal their land. I total misapplication of the passage as it turns out. I'm not interested on our country and therefore we need to repent.

Nothing wrong with that antidote. I just think it's misplaced with regards to the verse. In any event, notice that there is an implicit understanding that all people in the nation are suffering, not just the bad people, not just the adults, children as well.

And we can look back on what happened in Israel and see what a terrible thing it is to turn away from God and embrace your sin and the evil that's in the world because that's exactly what was happening. And God was basically saying, you want these other gods? Here is what these other gods are going to do for you. They're going to turn you into cannibals.

You're going to destroy each other because you didn't want me. So it's not that God is doing it to them. It's that God is saying, this is what you want.

Here is what that's going to do for you. He's letting them do that to themselves. Yeah, which is a horrible, fearful thing for God to hand you over to your sin.

But it's an accurate characterization of biblical anthropology. This is what human beings are like in sin apart from the restraining grace of God. Well, thank you so much, Timothy and the two David, who sent questions in today.

We'd love to hear from you. Send your question on X with the hashtag SDRAsk or you can just go to our website at str.org. This is Amy Hall and Greg Coco for Stand to Reason.