

OpenTheo

#92 Why are people evil? Could God be evil?

November 18, 2021



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Why are some people so totally evil? Is it possible that God could be evil? Will Satan and Jesus become friends again? Tom answers these and more questions from listeners on the subject of evil.

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Transcript

[Music] The Ask NTY anything podcast.

[Music] Hello and welcome back to the show. It's Justin Briley, Premier's theology and apologetics editor welcoming you once again to a sit-down with NTY right, Tom Wright as he's more informally known.

The former Bishop of Durham and a renowned New Testament scholar in a show that's brought you as ever in partnership with NTY right online and SBCK, Tom's UK publisher. Today on the show, looking at your questions on the subject of evil, things like the emotional and intellectual problem of evil, could God be evil? And will Jesus and Satan make it up one day? Thanks to Scott who got in touch and left a review of the podcast recently. Scott says I serve as a chaplain across three personal care homes, weeks are busy and often difficult, but every week I look forward to the little burst of new life that comes into my podcast feed when a new episode of Ask NTY right anything is released.

I can feel the peace coming over me as soon as those first guitar chords ring out. But the content is always lively and at least once an episode, though often many more times an answer Dr. Wright offers becomes a eureka moment for me. If you're a Christian, this podcast will be of immense benefit.

If you're not a Christian, but want to learn about the faith, this is the place to hear it at its best. Gosh, what a glowing endorsement. Scott, I'm so thankful that the shows have been helpful to you.

Thank you so much for writing a review for the podcast. If you enjoy the podcast and want to rate and review us, then do feel free to do that wherever you get your podcast from. It does help other people to discover the show themselves.

If you want more from the show, including our regular updates, bonus content, automatic entry enterprise draws, that kind of thing. Do sign up at [ask NT Wright dot com](http://askNTWright.com). So into today's conversation.

Welcome back to this week's edition of the show. And today we're talking about evil, which comes up quite a lot actually in various contexts, Tom. And I think we'll live straight in because there's quite a sort of interesting opener here from someone in America.

They've called themselves friend. I don't know if that's actually their name or just the way they've chosen to put their name in today. But their question is simply this, why are some people so totally evil? Are they possessed by demons? Or did God make them that way? Wow.

There is a mystery here. And I think most philosophers and all theologians have always recognized that evil is dark. And in that sense, mysterious that it's ultimately incomprehensible, which is an interesting phenomenon because it indicates that humans actually have a capacity to recognize goodness to recognize when something is as it should be.

And that if it's out of kilter, if it's totally out of kilter, there's a sense that everything has gone wrong here. And that tells you what you need to know about evil really, which is that it's a denial of the goodness of creation. You know, we Christians sometimes talk about the problem of evil if there is a good God, why is the world such a mess? But actually for the atheist, there is the problem of good.

If the world is random and chance and meaningless, why do we all instinctively call some aspects of it good? And the normal answer, which is that this is what we're evolutionarily conditioned to do, doesn't actually carry much conviction, I don't think. So then when it's a question of human beings, there is there is a kind of a graded scale. The famous thinker Scott Peck, I see a famous thinker, but you know who I mean, who wrote that famous book, *The Road Left Traveled* about 30 years ago.

He was a lifelong psychotherapist, that was his job. And he wrote a book called *People of the Lie* because he had been a thoroughly secular psychotherapist, he hadn't believed in angels and demons and any of that stuff. And then occasionally in his professional

practice, he would meet a situation which was so far beyond an other than normal human folly and silliness and even wickedness that the only conclusion was that there is something else going on here, which it's hard to name, but from time to time, it is there and it's real, which is that there are other forces that we don't really have good names or words for which seem to inhabit or take over a person, maybe only temporarily or maybe more long term.

And then in that case, the conclusion is this person is whether you want to say demon possessed or some other phrase. See, that's part of the problem that we in the modern world and actually people in the ancient world as well don't have and didn't have good accurate language to describe evil and evil forces. And there's a reason for that, that evil does not really belong in our world.

And it's an intruder, it's an invader, the powers of death are corrupting and distorting and destroying of goodness so that our language which is designed to look out and celebrate and name the good things in God's creation. We stumble when it comes to saying, what's actually going on here? And so there is something about the possibility of evil taking somebody over so completely that they cease to be meaningful human beings and behave in irrational ways. I don't know very much about this, I haven't happily had personal experience of having to minister to people in this condition, but I do know people who I certainly know very well and trust very well, who have worked in these areas, who have said it's dark, it's horrible, it's murky, when you have to do the business of getting rid of an evil possessing spirit, then it is a very unpleasant thing and it leaves you feeling dirty and so on.

So that is a reality, but for most people, most of the time that is not the answer to why this person seems to be behaving in a bad way. Beyond that I don't think one can say much further. Well let's move on to question two then, this is from Pete in Sydney, Australia and he says, are we just lucky that God is good and loving? What I mean by this is that if God is uncreated then couldn't his natural being have just as easily been evil.

Now this question isn't meant to be argumentative, I'm trying to rid my mind of the idea that God is a human construct, I'm a 35 year old Christian who has been plagued with doubts my whole life. Thanks so much for your ministry, it helped me a great deal. And Pete's question actually reminds me of debates we've had on my unbelievable show a few times, Tom with atheist philosophers like Stephen Law, who's well known for something called the evil God argument in which he essentially makes a similar point to Pete here, he says well couldn't God's character have just as easily been evil and that actually it's, every time something good happens that's a contradiction to his character, why do we assume that God is automatically good and loving? What's your take on this particular philosophical sort of question? Yes, I confess this is not a question I've been asked before and it's a very interesting one.

I think what it alerts me to is the fact that our words good and evil though they seem to be sort of equal and opposite aren't in fact working like that, that good is a positive thing, it's creative, it's affirming whereas evil is negative and denying and pulling down and destroying and so on. I know that people can use them in a whole variety of ways of course but I don't see them actually as equal and opposite and the idea of an evil God which is of course a very scary idea if you sort of think it through would imply that an evil God would not make a world full of beauty and joy and love and laughter and light and so on and therefore I think the idea that well maybe if there is a God he's a bad God just doesn't sit with the world that we know and with all the hopes and aspirations of the human heart etc. Now I know that's a pretty thin argument from one point of view but then of course from a Christian point of view any world view which has Jesus anywhere near the middle of it is going to be about the affirmation of goodness and of the goodness of the created order over against all the forces that destroy and suspect and lie and distort and so on.

Indeed lying is itself it's very interesting in the New Testament the Satan the dark force which is only quasi-personal is a liar and the father of lies says Jesus which is fascinating it's implying something about truth and goodness really do go together and that evil and lying would go together which then would be self-defeating because once you get into a tissue of lies the whole thing eventually collapses. I'm just talking around this really but it's a way of saying let's be careful about assuming that good and evil are kind of equal and opposite because though there's been endless philosophical discussions about this and theological as well I think in the last analysis that doesn't really make sense good is a different kind of thing or kind of way of being to evil. Yes it is a very deep philosophical question and I've heard different answers to it I mean at one level my mind goes to the fact that well why do we even think of good as good and evil as evil in a sense it's sort of it's a given isn't it that we prefer the good we hate the evil there's almost a given this I think that we can't really get beneath when it comes to why we automatically assume that God is loving and good it's almost the definition of God I would say it's hard you know you would be talking about something different to God if you if you it's a definition of God if you live within a Christian or post-Christian world but of course there have been many many civilizations and philosophies where God or the gods are a long way away and they don't care about us and they may be very happy but that that's up to them that that's the world view of Epicureanism.

Deism is a very cold God who sits back yeah I made a world but it's now running itself. Stoicism I'm not sure the God of Stoicism which is a pantheistic God it's the life force which inhabits everything that seems to be a pretty ambiguous divinity as well as you see in the great Stoics like Marcus Aurelius and so on. So I think the idea that God and a good God that that's sort of how it works is a legacy of our Judea Christian heritage.

You may well be right and yeah that's that's really helpful actually and all the more suggests why we do believe that Jesus kind of is the affirming principle at the centre of

why we believe in a good God. Well absolutely absolutely and the curious thing there is you remember Pascal's point about we believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and not the God of the philosophers that the the old pagan gods were very capricious they did all kinds of crazy things and they favored one mortal over another etc etc and they started wars or they caused earthquakes and so on and and it was to get away from that scary pagan idea of who the gods might be that the Stoics and the Epicureans and then ultimately the Platonists as well invented their philosophical schemes which enable you to have a much more serene view of the gods either in their absence or indeed in their in their supposed pantheistic presence and then the question is is the God of Israel more like the former or the latter and the answer is dangerously scary the God of Israel is more like the former because he's alive he's active he does stuff he causes things he calls Israel out of Egypt he gives them tasks to do he rebukes them warns them sends them off into exile and much more like in a way some of the older pagan gods might have done except for the fact that he's got this principle of absolute justice and truth and goodness and stitched in from the beginning so that it's like the pagans were sort of half right but then horribly wrong the philosophers were reacting against that but they missed the reality of a personal God who is actually doing stuff in the world and it's that personal God but then oh my goodness becomes human in and as Jesus of Nazareth yes we don't just worship an abstract concept he in Davis California is asking what is you know a well-worn question on the problem of evil but he has a particular take on it says I've been listening for a while now I've really appreciated your wisdom and experience Tom my question though is the emotional versus intellectual understanding of evil I know why evil occurs and why bad things are part of life on an intellectual level you know free will growth of the individual those sorts of arguments but emotionally I still can't wrap my head around it I trust God to a certain extent but he has allowed some pretty terrible things to happen to me as he does with everyone else I suppose my question is how is it possible to put your emotional and not just intellectual trust in someone who will allow you to be hurt even if in their infinite power they could have done otherwise yeah it's tricky I appreciate the question I think the first thing I want to say is that we are all different in terms of how we balance out in our own inner being the emotions and the intellect you know we've got Enneagrams and Myers Briggs is and all those sorts of things which have alerted us to the fact that we aren't all alike that some people do react very much on the basis of emotion and other people do react very much on the basis of intellect and have to allow the other bits of their personality as a way to catch up and so we have to be careful about there isn't a one size fits all here at the same time I very much get it that I trust God for all of my life I trust him for my family I trust him for my health and yet I know that friends and plenty of people I know quote bad things happen to them even though they are apparently God fearing human beings and I would not instantly say ah this is because they must have been cherishing some secrets in or whatever that that would just be naive and actually quite a wicked thing to conclude and I think the answer is we are all in a world which is groaning in travel Romans 8 remains absolutely central that the creation as we know it is groaning in travel

and we ourselves we who have the first fruits of the spirit we who that is have been enlivened by the spirit to believe in the gospel and trust God we groan within ourselves as we await our adoption the redemption of our bodies and Paul says that's the hope we were saved in but hope that is seen is not hope we are hoping for a new world in which this will be recreated but then he says the spirit the spirit's own self groans within us as we are in that position and here is the mystery at the heart of it all that it isn't a matter of why does God organize the world this way rather than that way it's as though God is a kind of celestial CEO who just needs to do a better job you know Woody Allen's famous line about I do believe in God he just seems to be a bit of an underachiever in other words if he was really God he'd have he'd have sorted this mess out by now and the answer is God is sorting the mess out but he's doing it in his own loving way by coming into the place where the pain is happening which is the hearts and minds and the groaning of his own people so that the groaning of all creation can have God's own groaning at the heart of it this is very mysterious but Romans 8 26 and 27 I've for long regarded as absolutely central to actually a trinitarian theology of prayer because Paul then says that God who searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the spirit knows what the spirit is thinking as the spirit is groaning and the result is that we are formed into the pattern of Christ as we hold on to the pain of the world in the presence of God I had to work through all this again last year when the pandemic first hit and I was asked constantly to comment on it and so on I said this is this is the first answer there are other answers this the first answer we are called to be people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain and when the pain strikes home to us we shouldn't say oh dear God is being incompetent we should say with fear and trembling and I hate the thought of it because I don't want bad things to happen to my family etc etc and that if bad things bad things happen things we didn't want this probably constitutes among other things a call to lament in the knowledge and faith that God the Holy Spirit is lamenting within us so that God's own lament the lament of the God who in his incarnate form wept at the tomb of his friend that's hugely important that is going on in us when we are in that position and I think that doesn't solve the problems it constitutes a vocation to who are supposed to be when the problems are striking does that make it does is really helpful thank you maybe with time just to squeeze in one more on this theme quite an interesting one because it actually comes from a child effectively but the parent is Matthias a in Lisbon Portugal and says again lovely lovely compliments at the beginning of his message expressing gratitude and admiration for all the shows that we host but this is the question I've been practicing trying to explain in gracious and compelling ways the truth of the gospel and its significance in our daily lives with my children and they hit me back with a good question that I'd never thought about in this way so I thought well perhaps professor Wright will help me to answer it so anyway in the light of explaining to my children 10 and 8 years old about God's purpose for us and his creation through the reconciling work of Jesus my two kids asked well will then Jesus and Satan become friends again when God will finish putting all things right will Jesus forgive Satan then well to my surprise the question wasn't asked as something that worries them as if an

adult might judge why would God dare to forgive Satan but the question was actually made in a hopeful manner as a child excited to know that two people have befriended each other again I know this question touches on the idea of universalism but I wonder how do we make sense for children as well as for ourselves that a God whose ultimate goal is to restore and reconcile all things through Christ would leave behind the one who started all this mess I know the question of evil and Satan has been addressed elsewhere I'm sorry if I'm late but yes thank you Mathias it's a really interesting question and you've told me also that you're the pastor of the vignard church in Lisbon in Portugal so great great to know you but yes well what about this question from Mathias his children it's a fascinating question it is the kind of putting your finger on something question that children do come up with that we adults might not have wanted to articulate like that several things to say I am first reminded of something very poignant which was reported by the present Bishop of Worcester John Inge who's an old friend of mine and John reported that in Sunday school whether it was in his diocese or I'm not sure where somebody had been talking about Jesus descending into hell and somebody saying well what was Jesus doing descending into hell after his death and the child said he was trying to find his friend Judas that absolutely hit me between the eyes and yet in the gospel story Jesus says woe to the man by whom the son of man is betrayed it would be better for that man if he'd never been born and I think you know that's something we have to take extremely seriously when it comes to the Satan itself I really do want to add the definite article and put it in the newtor as I do in my writings where the word satanas comes up in the Greek because satanas is not it becomes a name but actually it is the translation of or the transliteration of a Hebrew word which means the accuser and it goes back to the idea which you find at the beginning of the book of Job that God has a cabinet a room full of counselors all his ministers who are doing the different jobs of running his world and that one of these is the director of public prosecutions whose job it is to accuse people and the Satan is the accuser that's what the word means that's why back to Judas in John 13 when Judas has already got it in mind to betray Jesus then it says the Satan entered him now does that mean he became demon possessed well in some ways I suppose that is what John is saying but the point is Judas becomes the one who turns Jesus in he becomes quite literally the accuser he's the one who takes them and points this is the man sees him and so that sense of the accuser is what's going on here and I think we have to be very very wary against the idea of over personalizing the accuser because this is ancient Hebrew language for the strange mysterious what we would call forces at work in God's world and the job of the Satan in the ancient Hebrew mindset is a way of saying that the one true God van whom there is no other he as part of his regular proper work in a world full of rebellion and sin and idolatry and evil he has to name and shame and deal with evil and that the way of saying that that's part of God's cabinet responsibilities as it were is to talk about the Satan that that's a task that has to be done but then when God has reconciled the world to himself there is no need anymore for an accuser and one of the extraordinary things at the end of the book of Revelation well nearly at the end in chapters 18, 19 and 20 is when you get that death

and Hades and the Satan and and the old serpent and so on they all get thrown into the lake of fire that's a way of saying that in God's ultimate new creation these things will no longer be because they are part of God's proper way of dealing with a world in disarray and when the world is no longer in disarray it's not as though they were personalized creatures who then need to be reconciled some of the early fathers thought that origin start the third century thought that maybe one day everything will be reconciled including Satan I and the church rightly I think condemned origin for thinking that and you can see where there's a line of thought which would take you there but if you're thinking hebratically with the Old Testament I don't think you'd go there I think you would say no these are vivid ways of talking with a kind of a personalizing metaphor about forces in God's world which actually in the new creation simply won't be there because there will be no place or need for them. Thank you so much Tom you've done a wonderful job taking all kinds of questions on the subject of evil thanks for all the those who have sent them in as well and I'm sorry we can't get to all the many many questions that come in every week Tom but we do our best to pick a good handful that you know give a good sense of the different sorts of themes people are asking on and and we'll approach another one same time next week but for now thank you very much for being with me thank you very much.

So good to have you with us this week on the show and next time we'll be talking about gendered language for God as a father and those who have trouble with that for all kinds of reasons so do tune in again next week for that. Don't forget that SBCK one of our show partners have some special deals on Tom's books for podcast listeners there are links with today's show to that and if you want more from the show go to askentiright.com and if you feel able to support us you can do that from there as well and we'll send you the exclusive show ebook 12 questions on the Bible life and faith answered by Tom again that's askentiright.com the links are with today's show notes for now thanks for being with us we'll see you next time you

(upbeat music)

(buzzing)