

"The difficulty is not to gush."

TIMOTHY KELLER

EVERYTHING
YOU ALWAYS
WANTED TO
KNOW ABOUT
G O D

(BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK)



ERIC METAXAS

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

"For his stylish and entertaining handling of this particular subject, Metaxas deserves a prize."

DICK CAVETT

Praise for
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“The difficulty is not to gush.”

—TIM KELLER, founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church and *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Reason for God* and *The Prodigal God*

“For his stylish and entertaining handling of this particular subject, Metaxas deserves a prize.”

—DICK CAVETT, Emmy Award-winning television personality

“I’ve always wished I could answer important and difficult questions about God with as much heart, humor, intelligence, and truth as Eric Metaxas does in this book. Now I can—by giving friends and family a copy of Eric’s excellent book, which is itself an answer to the question ‘Is God powerful enough to take a witty, Yale-educated, orthodox Christian logician and use him to make you laugh while simultaneously answering the most difficult questions and inspiring you to genuine faith in God?’ The answer is *yes!*”

—KIRK CAMERON, television and film actor and producer

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and provoke you to understand truth in a deeper way. Theology has never been so much fun!”

—KRIS VALLOTTON, senior associate leader, Bethel Church, Redding, CA; cofounder of Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry; author of *The Supernatural Ways of Royalty* and *Spirit Wars*

“How anyone writes a book on God that reads like a can’t-put-it-down thriller is a miracle itself.”

—JUDGE JEANINE PIRRO, host of *Justice with Judge Jeanine*

“We are in the beginnings of a sudden shift, especially among millennials, to an interest in spiritual things. I like the fact that Eric writes simply but intelligently. Congratulations on staying relevant and caring enough about people to answer their questions.”

—CARTER C. CONLON, senior pastor, Times Square Church, New York City

“Eric Metaxas has written a book about God based on questions that people are actually asking. His answers are pithy, practical, often funny (who says God doesn’t have a sense of humor?), and true. This is a splendidly unconventional introduction to the Christian faith.”

—JOHN WILSON, editor of *Books & Culture*

“Finally, a book of apologetics you can give your friends without cringing!”

—LAUREN WINNER, author of *Girl Meets God* and *Mudhouse Sabbath*

“Every question in this book is one I have asked, have heard asked, or want to ask! And the answers are so good humored and easy to read that you almost forget how profound they are.”

—ANN B. DAVIS, Alice of *The Brady Bunch*

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WATERBROOK

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To whom it may concern

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Lastly but certainly not leastly, I want to thank Ciccio (a.k.a. “Cheech”) for aiding the creative process by “taking care of” the neighbors’ annoyingly distracting Weimaraner, no questions “axed.” [Note to self: remove this para from final.]

Introduction

This is the first time I've had a book reissued, so let me begin by saying I'm thrilled about it—and deeply grateful to Water-Brook. This book is extremely close to my heart, and nothing could please me more than to know it's finding a new audience, which is to say *you!*

From where I stand, no subject under the sun is more important than the truth, but the subject of truth, especially as it concerns God, has fallen on hard times in our culture. We live in a world that has grown deeply uncomfortable with talking about God and therefore usually gets it all wrong or, worse yet, avoids it altogether. That's tragic. And it's precisely why I wrote this book.

In fact, the title is a takeoff on the famous 1969 blockbuster *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex (but were afraid to ask)*. At that time the subject of sex was taboo, but just the opposite has become true in the decades since, as you surely have noticed. Today we are awash in—or more often begrimed by—such endless talk on the subject that it has entirely lost the mystery that drew us to it in the first place.

And at the same time, the subject of God has become every bit as taboo as sex once was. But, as I say, because everyone wants to know about God whether they admit it or not, that's not a good thing. Every human being at some point asks the big questions about life and God and truth: Why are we here on this planet? Does my life have any meaning? What exactly is the point of it all? Can we even know?

On the subject of God, most of us want to know whether he actually exists and whether we can know he exists and how we can know that. And if he does exist, we want to know what he's like and what that has to do with us and how we live our lives.

These are the deepest human questions, and we deserve to get some answers, even if those answers might be imperfect, which the answers in this book certainly are. But at least they are a beginning, and having an honest conversation on this subject is every bit as important as getting our answers right, or as close to right as possible.

One more important thing. If the God of the Bible is real (and let me say I have private information that confirms he is), he doesn't care only about right and wrong. He cares about how we talk about right and wrong. He cares about how we communicate. Do we communicate with joy and hope and love, or do we communicate in a way that gets the answers "correct" but makes the people with whom we are communicating want to head for the hills?

I wrote this book and my other two *Everything...About God* books for people who are looking for answers to life's biggest questions, but I also wrote them for people who have plenty of answers but aren't sure how to communicate them. I hope this book begins a conversation and provides solid answers to these important questions, but I also hope it helps people find a way to talk about these questions.

So it is my deepest desire that this book will help kindle faith in people who have none and bolster the faith of those who do. But I hope it helps us all have the conversation itself.

I've often said we aren't responsible for having answers to every question about God or the Bible posed to us, but we are responsible

for how we answer, even if we don't have a full answer. If we behave as though having the answer is the most important thing, we give credence to the false idea that once you become a believer, you know everything. And we certainly do not.

If you're a person of strong faith, it's vital that you let nonbelievers know that you do not know everything (because you don't, and being honest is a big part of having faith in the God of the Bible). It's important to let them know that you may have nearly as many questions as they do and that having questions is nothing to be ashamed of! That's the truth. The God we believe in welcomes questions with love and joy. He is not afraid that he doesn't exist, so questions about his existence and about his nature can never trouble him. And neither should they trouble us. Who would want a God who is annoyed by our honest questions? I certainly wouldn't.

I know that the God of the Bible is a loving and merciful God, that he is not the caricature so often presented in our confused culture, and that he adores us as his children and more than anything wants to help us find him so he can touch us with his love. When we know that much, all the other questions recede in importance. This doesn't mean we shouldn't try to answer them, but we should know that answering them isn't the most important thing in the world. So we can relax and actually have fun trying to answer them.

Let's face it. If you see people all knotted up about having the "right" answer, you begin to wonder whether they truly believe in this God they claim to believe in. If they act as though they are one difficult question away from losing their own faith, then perhaps their faith isn't worth much.

In closing, let me say that in the course of writing these books, I

naturally fell into writing a dialogue between Q and A. I found it a ton of fun to do and hoped it would be as fun for the reader. The responses I've received on this subject have been extraordinarily positive, so I dare to think I may have succeeded. I hope you will agree!

ERIC METAXAS

How Can You Prove God's Existence?

The Meaning of "Proof"; What God Is Like; Miracles

S ometime around 1890 a man and the young woman who would soon become his wife were walking in a field when the man saw an ant on the ground. He stooped down, let the ant crawl onto his index finger, and held it up for his fiancée to behold. (This was in the days before anyone had heard of Albert Einstein, so when someone wanted to refer to the Greatest Scientific Mind in Human History, they referred to Isaac Newton.) The man and woman looked at the ant, and then my great-grandfather spoke. "Tell Mr. Newton," he said, "to make me one of these."



Q: Let's cut to the chase: Does God exist?

A: Well, he certainly claims to.

Q: What do you mean "he claims to"? Isn't this a bit too serious to joke about?

A: Actually, no. In fact, it's too serious *not* to joke about. Wait, didn't I explain that in the introduction? I could have sworn...

Q: Okay, but simply saying that God claims to exist doesn't do it for me. How can anyone prove that God exists when we can't see him? Isn't it something we just have to take on faith?

A: You're bringing up a very important issue that comes up whenever anyone talks about God. The fact is that we live in a deeply materialistic culture. Our culture is so obsessed with the physical and the material that we have lost the ability to think logically about anything outside that realm.

Our culture is so obsessed with the physical and the material that we have lost the ability to think logically about anything outside that realm.

Q: What do you mean?

A: Most folks know there is a realm beyond the physical, beyond our five senses. Remarkably few people would argue with that. But many people somehow believe there is no way to reasonably discuss anything outside the material realm, so they conclude that everyone can have whatever opinion they want on "spiritual" issues—which makes no sense. Because if there is such a thing as a spiritual reality, there's no reason it shouldn't be as solid as physical reality;

in some ways even *more* solid. And there's no reason we shouldn't be able to discuss it the same way we discuss anything else—like flying a plane or painting a landscape, or like physics. It's real. So it's subject to logic.

Q: Then it's possible to prove God exists?

A: Well, yes and no. This gets into the whole concept of what proof is. Yes, we can reason our way to God's existence. But no, we can't prove it definitively, the way we would a mathematical theorem. Actually, some philosophers *have* done that—they've come up with what they call "proofs of God's existence"—but most of us find such proofs dry and unconvincing. I certainly do. So let's first define what we mean by *proof*.

Q: Define away...

A: Sometimes we act as if proof has to be a black-and-white thing, but no one really believes that. We certainly don't act that way in our daily lives. For example, most parents know they love their children. But how would they prove it to a skeptic? It would be hard. But that doesn't mean their love is suspect.

Or think about this: I *know* electricity exists—and works. I have no doubt about it. But how could I prove it? I don't know enough about electricity to prove it, really, and yet there is no doubt in my mind that it is real and it works.

As a kid I once stuck my finger in a light socket...

Q: Ouch!

A: Exactly.

Q: Anyway, your argument might hold water when it comes to parental love or electricity, but how does it prove there is a God?

A: It doesn't. But it sets up the discussion so that we're not looking for the wrong kind of proof. It's important that we think logically and clearly about God. But we're still not going to approach the question of his existence the way we would a scientific experiment. His existence isn't demonstrable in the lab, but that doesn't mean that reason and common sense can't be applied to who and what God is.

We shouldn't check our brains at the door when we're dealing with issues of faith. We should think hard about these things and reason them out. But most folks feel that if something's not scientific or physical, then it can't be discussed rationally. They're mistaken. We must be rational and clear-minded when we're talking about the existence of God and about who he is. Anything else is really just superstition and mush.



Q: Okay, let's be rational. How do we know God exists?

A: The same way we know lots of things, such as whether someone loves us or whether electricity is real or just a crazy idea. We base our view of things, and our view of the world, on observation, including other people's observa-

tions. And we weigh the validity of other people's observations based on how trustworthy and credible those people are. So a number of things, taken together, form our view of everything, including God's existence and his nature. And it's on the basis of many different things that I know God does exist.

Q: You know he exists?

A: Yes. But again, I can't prove it to you in five minutes. It's a longer process than giving you a quick proof.

Q: What can you give me?

A: Well, in the course of this book, I can give you lots to chew on. But for the time being I can give you something fairly simple that would fall under the category of "the argument from design."

Q: What do you mean by that?

A: The argument for God from design basically says that the universe is so intricate and beautiful that it obviously didn't just happen; it *had* to have been designed by someone. If you find a watch on the ground, you know *someone* made that watch. You might not know who exactly, but you know it didn't just come into existence by accident. Ditto with Mount Rushmore, for example. You'd never look at it and say that it was a natural rock formation, that the wind and rain had carved out four faces over the millennia. You just know that someone was behind the design and creation of it.

Q: You're stating the obvious. But what does this have to do with God?

A: The same principle holds true with God and the world. The more you look at the universe and study it, the more it seems impossible that it all just happened by accident. Even many scientists who are not people of faith have come around to this way of thinking. It's simply not logical that it all just "happened," that no intelligence was behind it. Here is just one example of what I'm talking about, and please keep in mind that it doesn't "prove" anything. It's just a piece of information you need to think about in ultimately answering the bigger question.

Q: Fire away.

A: Okay, this might sound a bit odd, but think about the sizes of the sun and moon and their distances from Earth.

Q: All right...

A: As everyone will agree, the sun is about 93 million miles from the Earth. And the moon is about 240,000 miles from the Earth, or just less than a quarter of a million miles. You can get the exact figures and do the math yourself, but what it means, as your calculator will show, is that the distance from us to the sun is almost exactly four hundred times the distance from us to the moon.

Q: I'm with you so far.

A: Okay, here's where it gets weird. The *diameter* of the sun is almost exactly four hundred times the diameter of the moon.

Q: You lost me. Meaning?

A: Meaning that because of this, when you look at them from our vantage point—from the Earth—they look *exactly* the same size. Not *sort of* the same size, but *exactly* the same size.

If you were designing a planet with a sun and moon in the sky, wouldn't it be nice to get them to look *exactly* the same size, just for the symmetry and aesthetics of it, even though they are millions of miles apart and gigantically different in size from each other? The whole thing is all the more astonishing when you see that other planets and their moons don't begin to come anywhere close to this. Not one of them does.

Our moon is about fifteen hundred miles across, but the moons of Mars are nine and seventeen miles across. They're a couple of glorified boulders compared to our moon. You wonder that they are even called moons. Not only that, but most planets have several moons. Jupiter has twelve. But only our planet has this mind-boggling, once-in-a-solar-system super-symmetry, one moon and one sun that—to us—look precisely the same size.

Q: That really is a bit odd.

A: It's nuts. Of course it *could* be pure happenstance, but just *whom* are we kidding? And one of the results of this extraordinary fact is that we have eclipses. The moon and the Earth have to fit precisely over each other for *total* eclipses to occur. But they do happen, almost as if it has all been planned for our benefit. Again, this doesn't *prove* anything,

but to an unbiased and open mind, it can't be anything less than astonishing.



Q: Okay, for now let's say that God exists. But if he exists, what's he like?

A: He likes walks in the rain...fluffy pillows...quiet candlelit dinners...

Q: Very funny. I didn't mean what does he like; I meant what is he like?

A: Sorry. I couldn't resist.

Q: For example, is he some remote higher being or energy force, or is he, as I've heard it said, a "person"?

A: Well, he *is* a higher being—the *highest*, in fact. And yes, he's also a person. But before we go too far with this, understand that many people have an odd idea that God is an old man with a white beard sitting on a cloud. That's not God; it's just our imaginations at work. But on some important level, God is a person. What's really important to think about is that God is not some vague, impersonal energy force or some dispassionate Creator who is "all Mind" or something like that. That's a recent New Age concept, not a biblical one. If there is one thing God has made clear in the Bible, it's that he is a person and that we are persons because he made us in his own image.

Q: But why is it so important that God is a “person”?

A: Because it radically affects how we see him. If we think of God as a being like us, we know that he understands us and isn't just some ethereal brain or energy field that doesn't particularly care if we live or die. We also know that God has a personality, that he thinks and reasons and communicates with us in a way that is on some level similar to the way another human would do so.

Q: Okay, if God is a person, is God male or female?

A: That's a tough one to answer. We know that when Jesus prayed, he addressed God as his Father. And when Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he told them to pray to their Father in heaven.

Q: So you're saying God is male?

A: Not exactly. Because we also know that when God created us in his image, the Bible says, “male and female He created them.”¹ Which would lead you to believe that God is somehow both male and female.

Q: So what's the right answer?

A: I think this is one of those questions that doesn't have a “right” answer. We know that Jesus taught his followers to talk to “God our Father.” And there is no question that when Christians pray to Jesus, they are praying to someone who was a man while he was on earth. But there are a few places in the Bible where God uses metaphors to lead us to believe that he has maternal and mothering qualities, too. I

think it's safest to pray to him as our Father in heaven and to think of him that way because Jesus did. But we all need to keep the perspective that God has *both* male and female qualities, and that's why when he made us in his image, he made us male and female.

Q: Okay, how about this? If God is a person, does he have a sense of humor?

A: Wouldn't he have to?

Q: I don't know. I'm asking you.

A: God created everything that's good, so he'd have to have invented humor, which is obviously good (though, like all good things, it can be used to hurt and harm as well). And when you consider that he created us in his image, it seems that because we have a sense of humor, he'd have to have one as well. Self-consciousness—or self-awareness—leads, among other things, to humor, doesn't it?

Q: I don't know, does it?

A: Yes, and since God created us with self-consciousness, he created us with an ability to understand such things as irony and sarcasm. (Jesus had moments when he was short and sometimes even sarcastic with people—his disciples and Jewish religious leaders alike. I don't know how else to read some of the passages in the New Testament.²) Anyone who is reasonably emotionally healthy has a sense of humor, so it seems that God would have to have a sense of humor too. Or some semblance of one.



Q: What about miracles? How can any reasonable person believe in them?

A: Good question. Here's one answer: If we believe—as many scientists do—that God created the world, that he created the entire universe and everything in it—including quasars and black holes and Saturn and the Grand Canyon and thunder and lightning and whales and hummingbirds and fleas and you and me—and that he created it all in an instant from something 10 trillion times smaller than the period at the end of this paragraph, it doesn't seem like a big deal to make the leap that he could do relatively easy things like parting the Red Sea or healing lepers, does it? It's kind of like accepting that Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace* but then being shocked that he could move a comma in the manuscript. It's just not logical.

Q: Okay, let's assume for the moment that God can do miracles. Why would he want to violate the rules he had already set up? It's like admitting that the rules weren't all that hot in the first place, so every once in a while he has to cheat to make things come out the way he wants them to.

A: Good point. Still, there are a number of reasons God might violate his own rules. But what's to say he actually does? We sometimes assume we know all the rules with the little bit of science we have. But any of the scientists living in the

nineteenth century who knew everything about Newtonian physics would have been blown away by the concepts of relativity and quantum physics. They would have said that one particle affecting another particle in another part of the universe—which is what quantum physics teaches—is impossible, a miracle. But today we know it's just science.

Q: Okay, but are you saying that God would never violate his nature or break his own laws, that every single miracle is somehow natural?

A: Well, again, you'd have to define *natural*, and that's not so easy to do. When someone is miraculously healed and science can't explain it, does the fact that it is perhaps supernatural also mean that isn't on some level *natural*? Isn't it possible that God is working within the rules he set up, but in a way that we can't understand? Isn't it possible that our knowledge of the natural world is incredibly limited?

Q: I suppose so...

A: I mean, you at least have to think about that sort of thing. It's important not to leap to conclusions. Human beings love to assume that everything they know is all that can be known—which, of course, is a mistake.



Q: Are there some miracles God can do and some he can't?

A: Yes. The best way to explain this would be by telling you a story. A few years ago I was writing my own adaptation of a Grimm's fairy tale, and in the process I decided to see what the original German version said. The fairy tale is about a talking fish that grants a fisherman and his overly ambitious wife every imaginable wish. When the fisherman's wife says she wants to live in a vast castle and be the empress of the world, the fish grants her wish. And we suddenly find her sitting on a throne that every version of the story says is two miles high! That's right, two miles.

Somehow, immediately you know that something is wrong. I mean, the Empire State Building is a quarter of a mile high! Even in a story with a talking fish, you know there can't be a throne two miles high. You'd die of a heart attack sitting on a throne like that. But there in the original German version, it used the word *myle*, which means mile. But somehow I knew this couldn't be right—it didn't *feel* right. So with a little research I found that the German word *myle* also has another definition, a much older one. The archaic definition of *myle* is “fathom,” which is about fifteen feet.

“Aha,” said I. “So the throne was thirty feet high, not ten thousand feet high!” Thirty feet is high enough for a high throne, don't you think?

Q: I suppose so.

A: But the bigger question is, “How did I know that the throne couldn't be two miles high?”

Q: Okay, I'll take the bait. How did you know?

A: It has something to do with the internal logic and rules of the story. In this fantastical and wonderful story, many details seem appropriately fantastical and wonderful, like the talking fish. But the detail of a throne that was two miles high didn't seem fantastical and wonderful; it just seemed ridiculous and wrong. It stopped the story cold.

Q: What does this have to do with God not being able to perform certain miracles?

A: Everything. What I'm saying is that once an author creates something, it begins to have a logic and nature of its own. As the reader, you don't think to yourself, *Well, absolutely anything can happen*. On the contrary, while you give the author lots of leeway to do what he or she likes, there are boundaries and limits to what you will accept. And in the talking-fish fairy tale, the two-mile-high throne was far beyond that limit. That's because once the creator or author has established the unwritten rules, even he is not free to write anything he wants. So if in this story the author has written "two miles" instead of "thirty feet," something in the reader says, "Wait a minute, that's wrong. That violates the rules of this story." Which shows that an author submits to the internal rules he has set down from the beginning. And, of course, in the case of the fairy tale with the talking fish, it wasn't the author who screwed up, it was a bad translator.

Q: So? My question was about God not being able to perform some miracles.

A: Right. So when God created the universe, he created it in a way that precludes even him from monkeying with certain aspects of it. He laid out certain ground rules, just as anyone does when he or she is creating anything. It's part of the warp and woof of creation itself. Every creation has a kind of internal order. God has allowed himself all kinds of leeway, but there are limits in his creation that even he respects and stays within—and he designed it that way. To go beyond the limits is to violate his own nature as well as the nature of the creation. So God allows himself to do almost anything, but he cannot and will not do something that is the equivalent of sticking a two-mile-high throne in a story where it is patently out of place. You might find all kinds of amazing things, but some things you will not find.

Q: Can you give me an example?

A: Well, you might find God parting the Red Sea so the Hebrew slaves could escape their captors in Egypt, or you might find him healing someone miraculously, but you will never find God doing something that is not within his nature. For example, he will not lie or deceive or do something tricky and confusing. Ever. And he won't do something that violently violates the fundamental rules of his creation.

So what might seem to be a contradiction—that God is actually limited rather than being all-powerful—is really a tremendous truth about God. Namely, that God limits himself precisely because he *is* all-powerful. He decides what is and isn't, what can and can't be done, and he always

remains true to his nature. This is no contradiction; it's simply God operating fully within his nature. He can do any miracle that is consistent with his nature, but he will not do a miracle that would violate it.



My great-grandfather was not a religious man. He was an intellectual, somewhat famous in his day. But he knew that the mysterious Creator of the universe—whoever he was and wherever he was—sometimes left bits of evidence for us to stumble across if we walked slowly enough and if we had our eyes open. Some of those bits of evidence are actually quite small; sometimes they are no larger than an ant.

Why Would a Loving God Allow Suffering?

The Existence of Evil; Who's to Blame; God and Suffering

On a historic spring day in 1947, Jackie Robinson, wearing a Brooklyn Dodgers uniform, became the first black man to play in a major league baseball game. At the time many felt elation that the color barrier in baseball had finally been broken, but others felt deep hatred for Robinson and all he seemed to represent. It would not be an easy season.

But Branch Rickey, the Dodgers' general manager, was a canny fellow. He knew that breaking the color barrier would take far more than a .300 hitter who could steal bases. The player he chose would have to be able to stand up to something even more intimidating than the best fastball pitchers in the world. The man he chose would have to face slurs and personal insults worse than anything he'd experienced before. Crowds would scream their hatred at him; other players would call him unprintable names. Rickey knew that if the player he chose fought back, the cause would be set back a decade or more. But what man could resist the temptation to fight back?

Rickey, who was a devout Christian, sought out an athlete who

was a similarly devout Christian, someone who could be persuaded to turn the other cheek. That was Jesus' way of dealing with evil, and it was what he commanded his followers to do. Such an approach would make absolutely no sense to most athletes. It would seem cowardly. But Rickey knew that if the man he chose agreed to obey God's command, the evil of racial hatred in major league baseball could eventually be defeated. And so he chose Jackie Robinson. The rest is civil rights history.



Q: What is evil?

A: Evil is that which is utterly opposed to God and, consequently, utterly opposed to all that is good, loving, beautiful, kind, true, and so on.

Q: But the various understandings of evil are so subjective. Who's to say what really is evil and what is just a matter of personal preference or belief?

A: Let me say, first, that the idea that evil exists makes many people very uncomfortable, and in some cases, it frightens them. But for many the idea of evil simply strikes them as moralistic and old-fashioned. And yet who would deny that Hitler and those who served him were conduits for evil? What other term could we use to describe what happened under his regime? Or during Stalin's and Pol Pot's dictatorships?

The main reason the term *evil* makes some of us

squirm is because it implies a black-and-white moral order, which means that we have to deal with that moral order and how our own behavior fits into it. And yes, we all have to deal with it. Sometimes people will try to avoid the issue by saying something like, “Well, that’s evil from *your* point of view.”

Q: Exactly. That’s what I was saying before.

A: But is that because the idea of *objective* evil seems too harsh? A lot of people can’t deal with the idea that something could be objectively evil, because for something to be objectively evil implies a certain someone—God—who is objectively *good*. It implies a moral standard outside ourselves. But just because we don’t like the idea of a set moral standard doesn’t make evil go away. It’s real, and we need to see it for what it is.

Q: But if there is such a thing as evil and if there is a God who is good, why would this supposedly good God create a world with so much evil and suffering in it?

A: You may already know it, but this is *the* classic question, and many books have been written on the subject. The best is Peter Kreeft’s *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, which is a must-read if you haven’t already read it.

On the question of God and suffering, there is no completely satisfactory answer. With some questions, we can sort of bite right into the center of an answer and get the full and satisfying taste and texture of it. But other times we

can only nibble around the edges of the answer and hope to catch most of its flavor and get a few good hints at what it is ultimately like. The question of why God allows suffering is definitely one of the latter.

Q: Can you at least try to answer it?

A: Sure. Evil is not caused by God, and it doesn't come from God. But God allows evil to exist because he gave us all free will, and he wants us to exercise that will. It would be meaningless to have the ability to make choices if there were only one option available—if, for example, there were only good in the universe. For us to be able to either choose God or reject him, there has to be an option B. And in this case, option B is everything God is not—namely evil.

Let's look at it another way: God created us out of love, and he wants us to love him back. But love can never be forced. We can love our kids so much that it hurts, but we can never force them to love us in return. It's the same with God. He can't force us to love him.

Love, by definition, is always freely given. So God, in order to make it possible for us to love him, gave us free will. Which means we can also choose *not* to love him. By giving us free will, God gave us the ability to reject him and all that is good, and thereby bring evil into our world. And all of us suffer in this life because of the evil that exists.

By giving us free will, God gave us the ability to reject him and all that is good, and thereby bring evil into our world.

Q: So you believe that, somehow, humanity chose to endure all this suffering?

A: Think about this: God could perhaps have created us as some form of robotic creatures who were forced to love him and accept his authority over us. But in God's infinite wisdom, he didn't. Again, we can't understand it completely—at least not right now. The best we can do is to see that if our kids loved us because they had to, it wouldn't be love. There is something about love and free will that is part of the grand nature of things.

Free will makes love possible because love is always voluntary. But the other side of free will is that we also have the option to blow it, and...well...at one point we sort of blew it big time.

Q: What do you mean by that?

A: I'm referring to the Garden of Eden and the Fall, which we can get into later because that brings up its own wacky set of questions. But the fact is that at some point in the dawn of our history, the first humans chose to exercise their option. They rejected God, and by making that choice, they allowed all of the negatives that come with that decision into the world we inhabit. Hence sin, death, evil—you name it; if it's bad we let it in.

Q: But why would God create a world where these things could get in? Seems to me like he really messed up.

A: You certainly have to wonder. Still, it's not God who allowed these things into his creation any more than a mom

and dad allow drugs to be stashed in their teenager's room. It's just that when you are dealing with human beings and not robots, you get a lot of bad with the good. But again, the free will to choose the bad is what gives meaning to choosing the good. We choose in favor of one thing and against another.

This is not anything like a deeply satisfying answer, I know. The fact is that the question of human suffering bumps right up against the very mystery of life itself. It's about as big as questions get, and people who try to give you a pat answer are kidding you and themselves both.



Jackie Robinson's response to the evil and hatred that came against him in the summer of 1947 was nothing less than heroic. God calls us to be heroic in the face of evil. He knows that suffering isn't easy, yet he doesn't promise to take the suffering away, at least in this life. But God does promise to be with us in our suffering.

Every night of that historic summer, Jackie Robinson would kneel by his bed and pray that the God who had commanded him to turn the other cheek in the face of evil would comfort him in his suffering and would give him the strength to continue. Robinson knew it wasn't possible by human means alone. But he also knew that with God, all things are possible.

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