

## Jeremy and I

### The Problem of Evil Revisited Over a Mountain Dew®

By Adam Shields

*Adam and Jeremy are long time friends. They have grown up together, going from elementary school to post-collegiate careers. Since the time they were children, Jeremy has been an unbeliever while Adam, though not a believer in the trusting sense while a child, has been a believer. Adam never understood why Jeremy could so easily dismiss the idea of God, while Jeremy thought Adam's belief structure, though okay for him, was a sort of primitive view of the world that allowed for little fun and adventure. In some senses, both Adam and Jeremy, as they grew up, had a very law-based view of Christianity. Later in high school, Adam came to understand the gospel of Christ's righteousness and forgiveness more clearly, and came to trust more deeply in the blood shed for his sins against God. Jeremy remained in his unbelief and continued to trust in himself far more than he ever would in God.*

*Over Christmas, Adam and Jeremy get together to see each other and catch up a bit. They meet at a bar and each order a Mountain Dew® to drink. As they sip their drinks, Jeremy asks Adam how seminary is going and where Adam thinks he will go afterwards. After Adam tells Jeremy about seminary and some of his classes and where he feels like he is going, Jeremy poses a question that starts the following dialogue.*

**Jeremy:** Adam, let me ask you something. I was reading about the Holocaust the other day in a magazine, and it made me start thinking about suffering and the evil that exists in the world. You believe that God is good and all-powerful right?

**Adam:** Yes, I do.

**Jeremy:** Then my question is: How can this God you believe in exist if such evils exist in the world as well? How can you explain events like the Holocaust, the rampant starvation existing in our world today, or even the World Trade Center attack?

**Adam:** Jeremy, you are not the first one to struggle with this problem of God and evil in existence. Men and women throughout history have asked these same questions, including myself. I will tell you from the beginning that there are no easy answers — but that doesn't mean there aren't any answers. There are things that God has revealed to us to help us understand and to guide us to see the truth. We struggle with these questions because God is the Creator and we are his creatures, and He is infinite and we are finite, so that we cannot understand everything fully or exhaustively. There will always be things that we don't know to the degree that we might like or things that appear contradictory. Thankfully, however, God has not left us to ourselves without a map to guide us or light to allow us to see clearly along the pathway of life.

God has given us his Word, the Bible, to reveal to us the truth about himself, ourselves, and the world in which we live. As God's Word, it is true and authoritative in the meaning it carries for the human race. The Bible reveals to us that God is Lord over all things, including nature, history, suffering, evil, and each man. What this means is that all men are obligated to submit themselves as servants to the Lord.

Jeremy, each one of us has presuppositions that we hold.

**Jeremy:** Wait Adam, what is a presupposition?

**Adam:** A presupposition is some belief that you hold previous to an argument that informs the way you see the world. In terms of what we are discussing, I am referring more to ultimate presuppositions however. An ultimate presupposition is "a basic heart-commitment, an ultimate trust."<sup>1</sup> It is a foundational belief that forms and shapes every other belief you have, so that if you didn't hold it, the rest of the beliefs you hold and the ways you think, act, and feel would change. Does that make sense?

**Jeremy:** Yes, I think so. I mean that makes sense. I guess we have presuppositions about lots of things such as our reliance upon technology. We presuppose that bridges are trustworthy to hold our cars and airplanes are trustworthy to remain in the air and not fall. Is that what you mean?

**Adam:** Yes, those are definitely presuppositions, but the ultimate ones that I am referring to have to do more with what you trust as valuable, trustworthy, authoritative, beautiful, and worthy of giving yourself to. It has more to do with religion than you might think. When I am speaking of religion, I am speaking in broad categories. I am not referring simply to a system of beliefs about a deity, but rather to a system of beliefs that are ultimate for the one who holds them.

**Jeremy:** Well, what do presuppositions have to do with the problem of evil? Regardless of one's presuppositions, the problem still exists for us all right?

**Adam:** Yes, the problem exists for every person regardless of their presuppositions. However, our presuppositions frame the way we look at the problem, and even guide the conclusions we come to as a result. I know you are thinking that this matters very little, but really it matters in a huge way. There is no neutral ground from which to argue because neither one of us is a blank slate of objectivity with no leanings.

**Jeremy:** Wait a second, we may each have our own presuppositions, but can't we appeal to a common ground of neutrality between us, such as our experiences or logic, to help us come to a knowledge of the truth in these matters?

**Adam:** That is just the thing Jeremy. We can appeal to our experiences or logic to look at these issues, but we each filter those things through the lenses of our ultimate

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<sup>1</sup> Frame, John M. *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction*. Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1994, 6.

allegiances. In other words, we carry our presuppositions into these realms, and as a result they help form both our investigation and the conclusions we draw from our investigation. The reason that this is important to talk about in respect to the problem of evil is that you and I come into this issue with different presuppositions.

**Jeremy:** Why can't we look at the issues involved in the problem of evil and come to a knowledge of the truth regardless of what presupposition we hold?

**Adam:** Because if God is true and the author of meaning and knowledge as the Bible teaches, then no true and meaningful knowledge can be gained if God's existence is not taken into account and if we don't recognize his authority as Lord. One cannot even argue or think or believe without the presence and power of God in reality. Thus, how can you expect to find the truth if you deny the Lord who guides our knowledge and is truth himself? You are starting from a faulty foundation and can only expect to run into falsity by pursuing this avenue of inquiry. God, as Creator and Lord over all things, defines things for us and tells us how to think and believe rightly about the issues of life. In denying God's existence and his Word, we cut ourselves off from the map that leads us out of the dark and into the light. So, we must examine what the Bible says about the problem of evil and God's relation to it if we are to come to a right understanding of it all.

**Jeremy:** Adam, your argument seems kind of circular though. You seem to be saying that we should look to the Bible to prove the Bible and the claims therein. One has to be able to appeal to something outside what they are seeking to prove in order to make it legit.

**Adam:** You are right, Jeremy, my argument is circular and at first sight it does appear to be a little childish. However, I submit to you that every system of belief uses circular argumentation to prove their system. For example, if one wants to prove that experiences are the ultimate standard of truth and meaning, they will appeal to sense experience to make their point. Or if one wants to prove that logic and reason are the norms for determining what is true and real, then they will appeal to logic or reason to prove their system. There is simply no way around arguing in this manner.

**Jeremy:** I never really looked at it that way but you are right. But I am still unclear how we can know there are ultimate universal standards or teachings by which we are to obey and live by. If these standards are so universal, how come so many people are operating off different ideas of truth and morality in the world today?

**Adam:** Well, Jeremy, the Bible teaches us in Romans 1:18-32 that all men know both of God's existence and the nature of his being. God is evident to them in both nature through the skies and seas and their consciences revealing that they are accountable to him. The Scriptures tell us, however, that men, because of sin, suppress the truth that they know deep down within themselves and pretend as if God did not exist or hold them accountable. It says that men, even though they knew God, did not honor God or give him thanks, but instead worshiped other creations rather than the Creator and exchanged the truth of God for a lie.

So sin and the suppression of this truth of God are the reasons that all mankind do not operate on the same system of value, truth, and beauty. With that said, however, I want to return to your question about evil and suffering and how we account for their presence in the world where God supposedly lives. You mentioned the Holocaust earlier, Jeremy, and said that it was evil. How do you know that it is? What standards hold authority for you to believe this?

**Jeremy:** Well, I think it is pretty obvious that the Holocaust was wrong. Wouldn't you call murdering six million Jews viciously evil?

**Adam:** I would definitely agree that murdering six million Jews is evil. But who determines that it is wrong and worthy of punishment? What authority do you find for this belief?

**Jeremy:** Well, for one the laws of our government have said that murder is worthy of punishment because it takes away the right of life that we each possess.

**Adam:** Who gave you these rights to life and why does the government form laws determining right and wrong if these are subjective preferences?

**Jeremy:** These rights are inherent within ourselves as humans. I guess our government makes their laws based on protection of our citizens and what is best for all people and what keeps order in society. If there were no rights and wrongs then society would be chaotic and people could do whatever they wanted without fear of punishment.

**Adam:** But if the right to life is inherent within human beings as you say, by what authority then must we live according to this principle? Hitler apparently didn't believe that all humans had the right to live, and he murdered in light of this belief. Hitler apparently believed he and the Nazis' had the equal right to take away life. How can we say he was wrong and that preserving life is good?

**Jeremy:** Because everybody knows that murder is wrong and deserving of punishment.

**Adam:** Hitler didn't believe that and there are lots of people around the world who kill people today. Everyday throughout our country hundreds of people are murdered as well as many around the world. How do you know that their beliefs are not right? Who tells you that your beliefs are right?

**Jeremy:** I guess there is just a sense that I have that certain things are right and certain things are wrong. Call it my conscience if you want.

**Adam:** You bring up a good point, Jeremy, and that is that regardless of the presuppositions or beliefs one holds about life, everybody has a sense of right and wrong. There are certainly many different ideas of what those standards are, but nevertheless everyone asserts that some things are worthy of approval and other things should be disapproved. I would even venture to say that there are some things and

issues that almost all people would agree are wrong and should not be endorsed as good or permissible, such as adults having sex with children. But the question we must ask ourselves is who or what determines our morals? Who determines what is evil and what is good?

**Jeremy:** I agree that there is a universal sense of right and wrong in some degree, but my question is not about the reality of right and wrong, but how God can co-exist with evil if he is good and all-powerful?

**Adam:** Jeremy, obviously, you would not be talking about this issue to me if you did not first believe that evil, in fact, does exist and is to be disapproved. What you need to see, however, is that God has revealed to us through the Bible his relationship to evil, the cause of evil in the world, and how evil fits into his plan of history. We are not free to think about these issues in whatever way we want because we are not ultimately in control, nor are we the bearers of ultimate authority. God is the ultimate standard and norm for our beliefs and our formation of true understanding and life practice. God has revealed his will and law to us in his Word, and so we must turn to it with teachable spirits and open ears.

**Jeremy:** Well, presupposing the Scriptures are true, what do they teach in regards to the relationship of God and evil?

**Adam:** Well, first of all, the Scriptures do teach, as you asked about earlier, that God is both good and all-powerful. The Scriptures also teach that there is evil present in the world. However, the Scriptures do not communicate abstract notions of goodness, power, or evil. For example, goodness is not necessarily what is best for the majority of people in a society, nor power the obligation to perform certain acts of display, nor evil a notion of lack of self-actualization or psychological disconnection. Goodness and being all-powerful are defined, in fact, by the being of God himself. If he is the Author and Creator of truth, beauty, value, and knowledge, then those things must be defined and understood according to him, his person and his acts. The Scriptures teach us that God is good and does only good, but our ideas of what that should look like don't always match up with what God does.

**Jeremy:** Well, if God is the Creator of goodness and we see this in his person and acts, why does evil exist and run rampant upon this planet? It seems that God would, with a snap of his fingers, remove it and evil would be done with forever.

**Adam:** Because God is all-powerful, he could have chosen to do it that way for sure Jeremy. However, we need to remember that God is all-powerful, but he is all-wise and sovereign as well. This means that God answers to no one higher than himself in realms of authority and accountability and that he operates in complete wisdom at every moment.

**Jeremy:** How come God does not have to answer to anybody else like you claim we must and do? That doesn't seem fair. And how can you say that he is wise to let evil

remain in existence when we look out and see all the pain and destruction it brings to our world?

**Adam:** God does not have to answer to anybody else besides himself because there is no higher authority than himself. God is completely self-sufficient. I don't claim to know the complexities of the wisdom of God, but we can talk about a few ways God uses evil to bring good and permits it for his own purposes. For example, you mentioned the World Trade Center bombing earlier.

**Jeremy:** Yes, how is there any good involved in that tragedy? Thousands of people lost their lives that day; lives you say matter to God.

**Adam:** Well, for one, many people returned to churches after that day sensing the control of their lives not being so secure. Beyond this outward movement of people, there was a greater appreciation for life, family, our country, freedom, and a realization that all these things are gifts from God. People began to pray, pick up their Bibles again, and ask questions of deep and eternal significance about God and their relationship to him. And the key is not so much that I say that these are good things but that God says these are good things.

**Jeremy:** I could see how those things could be considered good from your point of view and beliefs, but my question still remains: How God could stand by and let this evil run free. He can't be in control of all things if evil which is antithetical to him is co-existing.

**Adam:** Jeremy, there is a story in the Bible that helps us understand God's relationship to evil with a little more clarity; a story that is not a bed-time story but one that is real. It's the story of Job. Job was a righteous man who feared God. He was a man of immense wealth with a family and good health in his possession. One day Satan comes to God and asks if he can test Job. Satan tells God that Job will surely curse God if God allows Satan to taken away everything that Job possesses. God permits Satan to destroy all that Job possesses, but gives him permission to do this only; he may not harm Job himself. Now, what God reveals to us in this dialogue with Satan is that evil is under the direct control of God. It is not a chaotic force operating on its own initiative. It exists only by permission, only for God's purposes. The World Trade Center was not an evil at work that was somehow beyond God's control; it was under the umbrella of His sovereignty and power.

**Jeremy:** So Satan is like a pure evil being?

**Adam:** Yes, he is the archenemy of God and forever rebellious to his rule.

**Jeremy:** Then why is Satan even allowed to exist? And how can God be in control of September 11 and not be the cause of it or not receive the blame for it?

**Adam:** Satan is allowed to exist, in some way, for God's good purposes to be carried out and to display God's power and glory in the defeat of Satan and all evil, which will

come fully at the return of Jesus. I confess I don't know the fullness of God's mind in allowing Satan's continued existence. As far as September 11 goes, perhaps an experience we are familiar with would serve as a helpful model in understanding the way God controls evil while remaining blameless. The model I am referring to is the author-character model. In a story, an author creates the characters and causes them to do things within the story. There are problems and solutions and good and evil existent in the story. Now, when a character murders someone else, we naturally say that the character who performed the murder is to blame, correct?<sup>2</sup>

**Jeremy:** Yes.

**Adam:** The character is the one who performed the action along with the evil motive and did so freely according to his or her desire. The character is responsible for the murder, not the author. However, there is a sense in which the author causes the evil too, but not in a sense where he can be blamed; he is not the immediate cause. This is the same way that God operates with evil in such a way as to remain in control but to be separated from the blame.

**Jeremy:** That makes sense somewhat, but I am still confused on how God is not to blame. I mean, using your example, the characters have no other choice or option to do anything different than what the author writes.

**Adam:** In a sense you are definitely right, but let's not forget what Scripture, which is our presupposition, tells us concerning God in this regard. 1 John 1:5 tells us that "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all." There is no evil in God's being in any way, shape, or form. The Bible also tells us in Numbers 23:19 that "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should repent." God is not like man; God does not sin. He does not repent because he has no sins of which to repent; he is and always remains pure and without blemish. And another text helps us as well. James 1:13-15 teaches that God does not tempt us to sin. God cannot tempt us because he himself cannot be tempted by sin. What the passage does teach, however, is that our sins are caused by the lusts within ourselves that gives birth to sin which gives birth to death.

**Jeremy:** So God is not evil himself, does not author evil. Evil, in fact, resides or stems from us as humans in some way.

**Adam:** That is correct.

**Jeremy:** Well, I can see that if I believed in God and held the Bible as my foundation for truth then the problem of evil would be at least a little easier to grapple with. There are some strong pillars you stand on, and though they don't in any way solve the problem, they give some reference and apparently some comfort to you in the issue. I still think it is very confusing and doesn't provide the solid answers I'm looking for.

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<sup>2</sup> Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of God*. Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2002. 156-157.

**Adam:** You are right, there are no “solid” answers for us in terms of understanding things perfectly, but as you mentioned I do find strong pillars to hang on to. God is sovereign and holy. Sin is real and evil does exist and spring from it, but God, in his love, has made a way for us to escape the death that stems from evil. He sent Jesus, his Son, into this evil world to rescue us from evil and the Evil One, Satan. Christ lived the perfect life and died in our place, taking our sin and giving us his righteousness so that we could stand before God blameless and without stain. If we will believe this in faith and trust in Christ to substitute for us, we can be saved from evil and be with the One who is good forever. As a Christian, I am awaiting Jesus’ return. At that time, evil will be destroyed forever and we will live with him forever without even the presence of sin and evil. That is the gospel Jeremy; the good news that Christ has made a way for evil to be destroyed and our sins against him to be forgiven. Would you hear his call upon your life tonight and repent of your sins and turn in faith toward Jesus as Lord and Savior?

**Jeremy:** Adam, we’ve been talking about this stuff ever since we were kids. You have always been so persistent and willing to listen and talk to me. I just don’t see things the way you do. Sometimes I wish I did but I don’t. I’ll be thinking a lot about what you said. Maybe we can talk again sometime after I ponder these things some more. Anyway, I have to be going anyway. It was great to see you man.

**Adam:** It was great to see you too Jeremy. I am glad we can talk about these things that are so important in life and disagree, and yet be friends still. I hope you have a great Christmas and I would love to talk about these things some more and discuss any questions you might have. Take care, brother.

**Jeremy:** I will. You do the same.