

Buzz King

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1st Kings 3:5–12 ESV, highly abridged

The LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, “Ask what I shall give you.”⁶ And Solomon said, “You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you. ⁷ And now, O LORD my God, give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil.” ¹⁰ It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹ And God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind.

A Dead Man and Only Goodness in the City of God.

I went to grad school at USC, near the old downtown center of L.A., which is an inland area surrounded by lower income neighborhoods. My first year at USC, I lived near campus, but I had a couple of spooky interactions. So, the next year, I moved out near the ocean, maybe 15 miles away. I could drive to USC in an hour, or bicycle there in 20 minutes. Just do the math and then you’ll understand the nature of L.A. freeways. But seriously, I would drive or bike to school each day for classes, and if I drove in, I would often stay there until the middle of the evening before driving home in somewhat lighter traffic. I did not want to pay the fee for parking in a structure at USC, so at first, I parked on the perimeter of the campus, on a public street that bordered USC. One day when I was done with class, I walked to my car, having decided to go home

early that day. I was just stepping off the curb, with one foot in the air, when I saw that there was someone lying on his back in the gutter, behind my car. He seemed to have been shot in the chest, perhaps with a shotgun. He was quite dead. My immediate reaction was to look around me, to make sure I hadn't stepped into the middle of something bad. The only people I saw were two cops pulling up in a police car. At this point, I was worried that they might somehow think I had done it. But, as they got of their car, one of them called to me to go ahead and go about my business, that the guy had been there for a couple of hours. I asked the officer what happened to the man, and his reply forms the motivation for today's message. I'll get back to this.

We're going to look at a passage from 1st Kings. 1st and 2nd Kings were a single book in the original Hebrew, but in our Bible they are separate books. 1st Kings begins with the last years of the reign of the famous King David, the second king of Israel, after Saul – who tried to have David killed. The part we're looking at today concerns Solomon, the son of David, becoming king after David passes away from natural causes at a somewhat older age. Our passage comes from Chapter 3, and the first two chapters tell us how Solomon became king. David was an extremely successful king. He united the many tribes of Israel. He defeated the Philistines, the vicious, long-standing enemy of the Israelites. David made Jerusalem the spiritual center of Israel, a place that it of course holds today. He gave the ark of the covenant an honored place in Jerusalem. King David grew the size of Israel and Israel became the dominant power in the ancient Near East. But

as he grew older, David became corrupt. The question of succession led to violence, as there were no clear rules about who should take over after a king died. Having a son succeed his father was common in other, pagan nations, but Israel's tradition was to elect a charismatic leader from among the ranks of the people. Remember that David was not related to Saul and David was a nobody shepherd boy until he killed Goliath. He was then acclaimed by the people of Israel. There was a lot of infighting in King David's household, as various people, including his sons, fought for power. Apparently, King David did not do a good job of managing the conflict. Only when those around him forced him to come up with a plan did he turn to the question of succession. It became clear that, in the absence of a charismatic person, the new leader of Israel would be a son of David. At that time, the influential people of Israel realized that this was the only way that a new leader would be accepted by the population as a whole. David's eldest son, Adonijah fought hard for power. He was handsome, like his father, and had been a loyal son. But there were other, powerful leaders of Israel who preferred Solomon, the younger brother. Ultimately, David was convinced to choose Solomon. Perhaps a powerful reason for this choice was that Solomon was known to be extremely intelligent. Solomon would eventually build the first of two great temples in Jerusalem. Solomon eventually, though, had his own fall from grace. We see a cycle of religious fervor followed by corruption in the series of kings of Israel.

In 1st Kings, Chapter 3, Solomon is talking to God, asking for guidance in leading the

people of Israel. I have highly abbreviated this:

The LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you."⁶ And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you."⁷ And now, O LORD my God, give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil."¹⁰ It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.¹¹ And God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind.

And remember: Solomon became known as the wisest of Israel's kings.

At this moment in time, Solomon is filled with God's grace. Many of us today would be extremely happy to know that a leader of our nation had as his or her primary concern the ability to know the difference between good and evil. Remember that the story of humanity begins in the Garden of Eden with God warning Adam and Eve to not eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, because we need God's guidance in learning to do good in a world filled with evil. The choice that humanity has in living with goodness or with evilness is central to the entire Bible story. So, given such a leader as Solomon, we, as Christians, would be quite excited to see that person turn to God for this knowledge. But just what is good and evil? One of the arguments made by people who deny the existence of God is this: God created everything, right? So why would God knowingly create evil, something that would do harm to God's people? Wouldn't a true God create only good things? Indeed, God must have created evil, right? Why did God do this? The argument by atheists is that this is a paradox, and so there really

must not be any God. The truth for us, as Christians, is that we simply must accept that God has carefully created a world that gives us the best possible chance of discovering God, learning to live by God's law, and developing the kind of love for humanity that Jesus taught us to have. Somehow, this involves allowing evil to exist in the world as a threatening entity. But there is another argument that is very intriguing.

This argument is due in part to the Christian philosopher Augustine, who lived from about 354 to 430 A.D., near the end of the Roman Empire. His home was in north Africa, although he was a Roman citizen. We are not sure, but it might be that his father was a Roman and his mother was an African Berber. Here is something that he wrote in his autobiographical work, *Confessions*, where he talks about his transition from a man who lived for the corruption of this world but who came to seek God's redemption:

"All of nature, therefore, is good, since the Creator of all nature is supremely good."

Augustine also wrote this in *The City of God*, his mammoth work, where he imagines a world where the love of God is prioritized in the human heart:

"...evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name 'evil'."

Augustine thought a lot about evil and why it exists. Here is his argument: God creating all things. But God would never create evil, so evil is not a thing. Good is a thing, he argued. Or more precisely, he argued that anything that could be said to exist or have some "being" in its nature was made by God and is therefore good. Again, evil isn't a thing, and evil wasn't created by God. Evil therefore, according to Augustine's logic, is

the absence of good. One way of looking at this is that when a human chooses to not take part in the goodness of God's creation, when people decide not to be part of creating and growing a world filled with goodness, evil arises. My take on all of this is that God gave us the power to decide on our own if we want to embrace God's approach of creating only good, of living in a way that leaves no room for evil to arise. We have the right and the obligation to choose. When we fail, when goodness isn't present in what we do, say, or even think, evil fills the void. All that God created is good. We are given the choice to follow in the footsteps of God by deciding that everything we are responsible for is good. If we choose not to do this, evil fills the void left by the absence of good.

This gets me back to the dead man lying face-up in the gutter behind my car on the curb on the perimeter of USC. I remember that he was a big man, young, and well-dressed. His chest had been badly damaged. After the police told me to go on my way, I squatted down, touched the dead man's forehead, and said a brief prayer. When I then asked the officer what had happened, he asked me if I was a student. I said yes. He said that this man was a member of a gang, but a professional gang, with somewhat older members. These men sold weapons. They were very organized, and the dead man was someone who made a lot of the deals to sell guns, and so a lot of people knew him. He was well-known to the police. Apparently, someone had decided to rip him off. The theory was that someone agreed to buy some guns, but that instead of paying for them, that buyer stole the guns and killed the gun dealer. Then the police officer said

something that I happened to remember, and so it inspired me to write this message.

He said that this is what happens when people aren't up to good. Evil things happen to them, he said, when people don't want to live good lives. I didn't think of it back then, decades ago at USC, but it recently occurred to me that this officer was offering the same theory about good and evil as Augustine.

What we should be doing, saying, and thinking at all times is good. We have the ability to create in this world in a much less powerful way than God, but unlike lower animals, we are indeed creative beings. It's part of being made in God's image, the ability to mold and to craft. This is very important. We don't just react to what happens around us. When an animal appears to create a tool, for instance, when a monkey shoves a stick into an anthill so that ants will crawl out of the hill and the onto the stick, the monkey is doing this so it can eat the ants off the stick. Yes, the monkey did fashion a tool of sorts, but the monkey is not driven primarily by the goal of creating a tool, of crafting something useful and interesting. That monkey is in the business of eating ants, not making tools, but we are in the business of making things. We deliberately create all the time. We don't live by reflex; we decide what we're going to do, and we are often motivated by very abstract reasoning. That man who was shot behind my car was out to make money, much like the monkey was out to eat ants, but the man made a deliberate decision to not make money in an honest, godly way. That man made a decision to do something creative, but something that was void of

good. A monkey isn't capable of consciously deciding how God wants it to live. When that man decided to sell guns, goodness was absent from what he created. Evil arose in the vacuum. When we say things about people, when we write things in email, when we find some way to make money, when we work hard within an organization to gain authority and respect, when we are simply coming up with new abstract thoughts, we are creating. All of this can be done with goodness. But if what we create isn't good, then we are choosing to not emulate God, the God in whose image we are made. We are supposed to be the hands and the mouths and the minds of God on this planet. The reason that the world is such a mess, why there are wars and a vast separation of wealth, why there is bigotry, why people are left to starve during a drought instead of being rescued by other humans, is because we choose to create things that have no goodness in them.

God did not create evil. We do not create evil. But when we refuse to proactively create things that are good, evil arises. We can't be passive in life, like that monkey, just struggling to survive, shoving a stick in an anthill to get something to eat. We have no alternative but to be creative as humans. That's our nature. God made us to create. We create every day of our lives. The gift that God gave us, the gift that God gave to no other creature, carries with it a huge obligation. We must think about what we do, what we say, how we behave toward others. We must decide what we think about other people who aren't like us. Imagine if every human in the world decided that they

would only do what God does, and that is create good. There would be zero room for evil to rise up. Here is a particularly important thing to think about. We don't have to consciously think about what we are creating, about trying to come up with ideas that are somehow magnificent. But we do have to think about having goodness in our hearts, and this will lead to the right result. If we do that, if goodness is something that we deliberately hold close, if it becomes an integral part of our natures, then every act of creation that happens in our lives - and there are many of them every day - will be good.

Here is another way of looking at it. Goodness is a very real, literal thing. To make sure that everything we do and say is good, we need a sort of negative filter in our minds. If something has no goodness in it, if the filter cannot find goodness, then that action, that thought won't pass through the filter. We need to give that filter a prominent place in our minds and use it continuously as we proceed through life. An act or a phrase that is empty will cause the filter to find no goodness, and the filter will thus detect evil - and it will not pass through the filter. It will never emerge into the light. It won't have a chance to bury itself in the world, sprout, and grow out of control. We can indeed live in that City of God, written about by Augustine. But we have to work with God to create that city of only goodness.