

# Interactive Sunday

By Rev. Will Nelken

*Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, March 12, 2017*

---

Today, I am going to respond to three questions that have been asked of me. I hope that my responses inform and inspire your faith in our Lord.

## **1. Why did God create a Tree of Good and Evil so Adam and Eve were tempted? Where did evil come from?**

Temptation does not originate in having options. Temptation is the enticement to act apart from God or without His agreement.

The tree in the center of the Garden was the tree of the **Knowledge** of Good and Evil. This is not a merely intellectual and abstract knowledge, but the knowledge that comes from personal acquaintance and experience. Good and evil already existed. Adam had the option to just live with God and know only His goodness. But he was not satisfied with that and chose to acquaint himself with evil also. (Think about your own flirtations with danger and wrongdoing, or your attempts to come as close to the line of some moral limit as possible without crossing over it, and you'll recognize the desire that prompted Adam.)

If we are going to consider evil's origin, let us first agree that evil exists. This may seem to be a no-brainer, but many people who discuss evil do not want to believe that it exists. They want to believe, instead, that "good" and "evil" are merely human concepts that vary from culture to culture and age to age, and therefore cannot offer any universal or lasting moral guideline, or imply what would be called sin.

If you agree that evil exists in the world, then we can speak about its beginning. However, I will not speak of its absolute beginning, but, instead, of its perceptible beginning, as I will explain in a bit.

A familiar symbol of evil is darkness, and this may help us to grasp the origin of evil, for darkness is the absence of light. As soon as light appears, darkness ceases. So also, when goodness appears, evil ceases. Thus, followers of Jesus Christ are urged to "*overcome evil with good*" (Romans 12:21), just as we would dispel darkness with light. So, the existence of goodness makes possible the existence of evil, when people choose to shut out the goodness of God.

The devil himself was once an esteemed angelic leader in Heaven. But he became so enamored with Himself (proud of his beauty and power) that he reduced God to a rival that he determined to overthrow. The result of that game: Devil-0, God-1. He was thrown out of Heaven to wander the earth.

That's as close as we can come (or need to come) to identifying its origin. Beyond that, if we are honest, our search for the origin of evil is usually a cloaked attempt to reframe who God is, so we may excuse ourselves from trusting and following Him and pursue the knowledge of good and evil on our own. Like (first) parents, like children.

## **2. Is it okay if I don't believe there is a Hell (I do believe there is a Heaven, of course)?**

If I say a thing does not exist, does it then cease to exist? A well-known church sign proclaims, "God doesn't believe in atheists; therefore, atheists don't exist."

Disbelieving in Hell may seem to be a convenient way to deal with one's guilt for the past, and one's fear for the future. No Savior required! But will that work?

But what if I already believe in Jesus... is a belief in Hell also necessary?

Does one need to believe in Hell in order to be saved? Apparently not, since it was never presented by Christ or His apostles as a qualification for salvation. God's promise of salvation is based solely upon the validity of Christ's sacrifice on the cross—His death and resurrection. Faith in Jesus Christ—His divine person, His sinless life, His substitutionary death and resurrection, His exaltation to become Lord of everything, and His promised return—is the appointed means of appropriating that salvation to ourselves personally. Plus nothing. You don't need a degree in theology, or perfect attendance at church meetings; you don't need to be able to parse the original Greek, or be fully paid up on your tithes; you don't need to hold a record for fasting and prayer, nor know whether the rapture happens before the Great Tribulation of in the middle or at the end; you do not even need to believe in Heaven or Hell to be washed from your sins and receive the Holy Spirit.

That said, Jesus believed in both Heaven and Hell, and warned people repeatedly about the difficulty of gaining the one and the need to avoid the other, as did many other Scripture writers.

Daniel (12:2) predicted, *"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."*

Isaiah (66:24) declared, *"And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind."* In this Scripture, Hell is described as a place where the fire is unquenchable.

Moses (Deuteronomy 32:22) portrayed Hell as a place where God pours out His wrath, *"For a fire is kindled in My anger, and shall burn to the lowest hell; It shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains."*

Psalms 55:15 illustrates Hell as a realm of the wicked, *"Let death seize them; Let them go down alive into hell, for wickedness is in their dwellings and among them."*

John the Baptist said about Jesus: *"He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire."* (Matthew 3:12)

Jesus spoke about judgment on the last day: *"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'."* (Matthew 25:41)

*"...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might."* (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9)

John (Revelation 14:10-11), speaking of the antichrist, predicted, "He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name."

*"And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."* (Revelation 20:15)

Jesus taught more about Hell than anyone else in the Bible. Jesus described hell as a place of eternal fire, (Matthew 25:41) eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46), and as a place of torment, fire, and agony (Luke 16:23-24). Jesus taught specifically about Hell many times in His ministry (Matthew 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33, Mark 9:43-47; Luke 12:6; 16:23).

Today's emergent theology proposes that we have been "sold a bill of goods" concerning hell-fire, and that there is no such thing as eternal damnation, based on the single truth that God is love. Emergents ask, "How could a loving God send any of His creatures to Hell?" From that question they postulate, that the sacrifice of Jesus was sufficient for all, and therefore, all are saved—if not in this life, then in the next—including the devil.

If this is so, I'm led to wonder why God's Son needed to die at all? Why was such a great price required? What was He saving us all from?

The grace that is truly amazing is grace that first causes hearts to fear and then brings relief—not one that persuades them that there was never anything to be afraid of in the first place.

The love of Christ, as expressed in his death on the cross, is a love that is inevitably misunderstood until it is seen against the backdrop of the crushing issues of sin, wrath, Hell, and divine sovereignty.

### **3. How should we, the church, respond to the political division in our country?**

Jesus knew about political unrest and division. Roman governors and soldiers occupied His homeland and subjugated His people. Political uprisings against Rome were common. Roman politics had invaded the Jewish religion. Political capitulation and corruption were frequent. Jesus suffered a political execution.

How did Jesus respond to the political unrest and division in His day?

He embraced Simon the Zealot and showed him His acts of grace. The he was a political radical, Christ invited him into His inner circle. Simon had different ideas about how to achieve Jesus' aims, but eventually Christ won him over. Jesus never rejected Simon, and Simon never abandoned Jesus. He remained one of the twelve apostles.

Jesus paid His taxes, although they were unjustly applied.

In His meetings with Pilate and Herod, the Roman governors, Jesus did not argue or challenge their authority. (See Luke 13:1-5) Instead, He explained, "*My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world.*" (John 18:36) So, His followers were *not* to fight to defend or protect Jesus or His Kingdom. That would be to use earthly means to produce heavenly goals.

Did He confront the Jewish leaders for their political engagement with Rome? Not directly. His concern was for their spiritual compromises.

Yet, politics was at the heart of Christ's message, for He represented another "kingdom." But His Kingdom was not like earthly kingdoms. It was neither established, nor maintained, by the methods of this world.

The Biblical record shows that Jesus did not try to *reform* human government. Neither did any of His apostles. Instead, Jesus is going to *replace* it.

When Jesus returns, as He will, He will return as King of kings. He will not come to seek the popular vote. He has received a Kingdom from His Father, and He will return in glory and power, bringing His Kingdom with Him. Then, all the kingdoms of this world shall "*become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!*" (Revelation 11:15)

Our citizenship in the United States is both temporary and secondary. The primary “citizenship” of Christians is in heaven, which means that God counts them as citizens of His coming government (Philippians 3:20). We are ambassadors of that coming Kingdom to the people of this world.

The solution to man’s problems is not to reform present governments, which Jesus neither practiced nor suggested, but rather to replace them with the Kingdom of God. This is the path to lasting unity.

Where does unity come from? It comes from the example and activity of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Can we legislate unity? Not effectively. Can we enforce it? Not really. Because it comes from within, from the heart. It is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

“Jesus did not retaliate (return evil for evil).” When He was opposed, abused, or rejected, He did not fight back. He entrusted Himself to God.

He taught us to “turn the other cheek,” “walk the second mile,” and “give them your coat also.”

Don’t let the world’s political strife and division corrupt you. Or your values. Or your methods.

In Jesus’ name, we are to “overcome evil by doing good.”

Note:

I have a lot more great questions that deserve a response, so we will do this again soon. Watch for it!