



Chapter One

Life's Most Intriguing Question

*A*s I glanced up from a great cup of coffee in the hotel café, I noticed an attractive young woman quickly approaching. She walked with intent, stopped at my table, and introduced herself, “My name is Laura, and I am the hotel manager,” and proceeded to recite what sounded like a speech from the local tourism board. She was the consummate professional, with every hair in place and each stroke of the makeup brush carefully applied. She completed her introduction to the hotel and began to walk away. Although impressed, I lowered my head back toward the newspaper and continued to enjoy my café latté—the moment’s top priority!

The click clack of expensive high heels as she made her way back to my table interrupted my latté festivity. “What do you do, Mr. Vines?” Laura asked. At first, I thought, *are you serious?* Up until that point her conversation had been, although extremely articulate, mostly impersonal. Giving her

the benefit of the doubt, I informed her of my profession and waited for a response. I was surprised when I saw the sudden smirk on her face. With no verbal response she did an about face and simply walked away. I thought, “Wow! What was that all about?” Minutes passed, and again, those little high heels marched toward me for a third time. As my latté rapidly cooled, Laura said, “Mr. Vines, I would like to extend an invitation to you to join my staff and me for dinner tonight. Would you kindly accept my invitation?” I am not sure what shocked me the most: Laura’s invitation to a free meal, or the manner in which she invited me. I learned later that Laura ran such a tight ship that she dined with her staff each evening in order to keep a close eye over all the activities and to discuss the day’s successes and failures while giving the imperious orders to the coming shift.

Moreover, I was later informed that no outsider had ever been invited to this ‘knights of the round table’ discussion group, and the fact that I had been issued such an invitation was nothing short of a miracle!

Perhaps I should have been more concerned about her motivations, but the possibility of a fine dining experience overshadowed any concern I might have had about her intentions. After all, having looked deeply into many of life’s questions, I have come to understand some answers will always elude us. However, one area is extremely clear to me. It concerns the question, “What is life really about?” My conclusion? And I think you will agree—free food! So, I accepted the invitation.

6 P.M. The night at the round table begins . . .

When I arrived at the banquet, my suspicions intensified. A designated place at the end of a long table with my name engraved on a flowery card pointed clearly to my place in the arena. Laura took her seat at the opposite end, made the necessary introductions, and smugly glanced in my direction. With everyone looking intently my way, I took one sip of Diet Coke,

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breathed deeply, and waited for the trouble to begin. I was certain that something unpleasant was brewing.

Only seconds passed before Dan, a police officer employed by the hotel as a part-time security director, broke the silence. As soon as he spoke, I got the feeling he had drawn the short straw and had been designated as the one who would 'get the ball rolling.' After taking a big gulp of his Australian beer, he slammed his glass down on the table, winked at his peers, then turned toward me and dropped the bomb!

"So, Jeff, how can you believe in God with all the evil in this world!? Have you ever heard of the Holocaust? Stalin? Lenin? War? Starving children? Tsunamis? Earthquakes? Wake up, man! There is no God!"

Stunned, I thought, *Wow, so this is what this is all about.* While Laura seemed proud of the manner in which Dan had delivered his philosophical dart, the look on Dan's face and his Barney Fife-type grin exposed his pride and revealed his lack of expectation for any kind of logical response. In his eyes, this was a fail-proof accusation. No comeback was possible. His statement (although formed as a question) was the end of the matter—so, let's eat! Laura, on the other hand, apparently craved a night of entertainment in the form of God-bashing. At the time I did not know their reasons or motivations for wanting to do away with God. One thing was certain: in Dan's mind the conversation was over. Nothing more needed to be said.

I reviewed Dan's assumption as I took another sip of Diet Coke. According to Dan, war, death, and the devastation of people and this planet could not possibly be harmonized with the existence of a "higher being." The two could not possibly coexist. His statement seemed incredibly similar to the words of David Hume, an infamous eighteenth-century skeptic who complained:

Were a stranger to drop suddenly into this world, I would show him as a specimen of its ills a hospital full of diseases,

a prison crowded with malefactors and debtors, a field strewn with carcasses, a fleet floundering in the ocean, a nation languishing under tyranny, famine or pestilence. Honestly, I don't see how you can possibly square with the ultimate purpose of love.³

Similarly, from Dan's perspective, he had made his statement, no defense was possible, and that was the end of that!

Where Is God?

I cleared my throat, gathered my thoughts, and looked toward Dan to ask him a question he was not expecting: "Dan, can you and I interact on this issue for a moment?"

"What do you mean?" he responded.

"Well, you have asked a great question, but I think the question itself needs to be analyzed. Would you help me with this issue?"

Hesitantly, but confidently, Dan said, "Sure. What do you want?"

"Well, first of all, once you admit that there is such a thing as 'evil' in the world, are you not also assuming that there is such a thing as 'good'?⁴ After all, how can anyone know the definition of 'evil' unless he knows the definition of 'good'?"

Puzzled, Dan took another sip of beer and responded, "If you are asking me if I know how to tell the difference between 'good' and 'evil,' then my answer is, 'Yes, I think we all can.'"

I agreed and continued, "So then, if we admit 'good' as a category and 'evil' as a separate and distinct category, how do we know what event goes into which category? Who or what tells us what is 'evil' and what is 'good'?"

Dan's response was both quick and typical, "Jeff," he replied, "I already said that it is not rocket science! We all know the difference between 'good' and 'evil.'"

Time Out!

Now before we continue let us make sure we understand Dan's presupposition. He is implying that the ability to distinguish between 'good' and 'evil' is universal and that such ability is innate.

Dan claimed we all have a sense of right and wrong. Although Dan did not use the words 'moral law,' one would be hard pressed to deny that this is exactly what he meant: that inside all of us is a moral law which enables us to distinguish between 'right' and 'wrong' and grants us the ability to categorize both the corporate and the individual's actions as either 'good' or 'evil.'

Back to the Story

I seized the opportunity and rebutted, "But, Dan, if there is a 'moral law' somewhere that tells us what events, actions, or reactions should be filed under the category of 'evil' and what events, actions, or reactions should be filed under the category of 'good,' then would that moral law not have to be 'absolute' or unchanging?"

"What do you mean?" Dan quickly parried.

"Well, for evil to be evil, it must be evil in all times, places, and circumstances," I said. "Otherwise, God could give a defense to your accusation by saying, 'Dan, you accuse Me of allowing evil in the world, but the reality is that if you just wait long enough, what you see as evil will one day become good.'"

"Are you saying that there is no such thing as good and evil?" Dan angrily replied.

"No," I said, "I agree that there are categories of 'good' and 'evil' and that men and women everywhere have a basic understanding of these categories; but I want you to understand that, unless these categories are absolute, then any accusation made against anyone becomes indefensible."

Hitler's Rationale

A crucial argument in a postmodern world rejects absolute morality and then attempts to invoke an absolute moral law on the Hitlers, Stalins, and Lenins of the world. You should have seen the look on Dan's face as I described the following scenario.

"Suppose we could board a time machine, travel back into Nazi Germany where we could obtain permission to hold a one-on-one interview with Adolph Hitler. As we sit in the chair adjacent to his Evilness, suppose we say, 'Hitler, you are an evil man! You took the lives of innocent men, women, and children. You wreaked havoc upon humanity and committed all kinds of atrocities against the human race. You murdered over six million Jews and are responsible for the deaths of many others. You are a bad man! Internally, I have placed your deeds into the category of evil! Shame on you!'"

"Now, what if Hitler responds (and there is a good chance he would say precisely this) by saying, 'I beg to differ. In fact, as I see it, I am a 'good' man who tried to rid my country of a race of people who had tarnished and poisoned humanity with its corrupted blood line. I employed the "final solution" in an attempt to purify and protect my people and advance the evolutionary cycle toward perfection and the survival of the fittest. How can you say that I am evil? I am highly offended by your accusation and acknowledge that your limited understanding of the universe has narrowed your thinking.'"

"What is your point?" Dan asked, confused.

"Clearly," I said, "unless there is an absolute moral law somewhere that classifies as 'evil,' murdering children in gas ovens, shooting entire families at point blank range, and exterminating an entire people group through starvation and torture, then Hitler would have a point to make, would he not?"

I continued, "Do you see the irony of the university professor who claims that morality is situational, that 'right' and

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'wrong' are left up to the individual, and then states categorically that Hitler was wrong to commit his horrendous acts upon humanity? An absolute accusation requires an absolute moral law to which everyone must conform."

This was the argument given by an American lawyer at the Nuremburg trials. The generals of the Third Reich who assisted Hitler in carrying out the "final solution," said they were only obeying the law of their land and therefore could not be held responsible for their actions. After hours and hours of their ridiculous defense, the American lawyer finally threw his hands up in frustration and asked, "Is there not a law above our laws? Is there not an authority higher than our authority to which all men, regardless of the mandate of any political leader, must be held accountable?"

Self-Evident Truths

The origin of the moral law within every human heart is perhaps one of the greatest objective proofs of God's existence. No matter where you travel in this world, absolute moral law exists within every culture. Equally astounding is the fact that even in communist, war-torn countries where God has been thrown out of the public arena, the masses continue to live in testimony to His existence in private. In fact, people in communist countries possess a moral law that is astonishingly similar to those nations in which religion is not restricted, where God is alive and well. Well-known apologist Ravi Zacharias, in his book, *Cries of the Heart*, illustrates a strikingly consistent moral law that both transcends culture and is written deep within the human heart.

It (the play) was a story of a young peasant who married a lovely young village woman. As they were blissfully on their journey to another village to set up their own home, the prince of the land traveling with his soldiers was captured by her beauty and demanded that the peasant give

her to him as a palace concubine. The peasant resisted valiantly, and so by force, the prince grabbed the woman and took her away with him.

Dismayed and heartsick, the peasant hastened to the palace to beg the king to intercede for him and to return his wife. The king was outraged by the poor man's charge and contended that the woman came by her own volition to live with the prince. To prove his point the king ordered the woman to be brought to the palace hearing. When she was led before him, he demanded that she acknowledge who her real husband was. The moment of truth came and all were gathered in the palace hall to hear her words.

Behind the scenes, of course, the king had threatened the woman that if she admitted that the peasant was indeed her husband, he would be taken away and killed. The woman therefore, in great fear, when challenged by the authority in court softly but with evident trepidation pointed to the prince as her actual husband. The court went into uproar, cheering the king, and the peasant cowered under the weight of his rejection.

The priest watching these proceedings demanded an inquiry and then announced to the people that something seemed wrong with the whole scenario. "Why would an ordinary man risk the rage of the king by claiming that the prince's wife was his? I have the perfect solution to get the truth," he said. He then proceeded to lay out a simple plan based on what he claimed was a foolproof truth serum. "I will give both the prince and the peasant an equal dose of the serum, and within ten minutes the effect will take place. Knowing that one of them is telling a lie and will be punished by death for the crime, I suggest that each of these men be given five minutes alone with the woman, with no physical contact between them."

A huge barrel suspended from the midpoint of a pole held horizontally was brought to the stage. It was so large that it took two people, one shouldering each end of the pole, to carry this unwieldy equipment. The instructions were given. The woman was to carry one end of the pole while each of the men in turn was to carry the other end, separated by the barrel. They could walk away to a seclud-

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ed setting prior to returning for the verdict. Each had five minutes with the woman.

During the time she had with the prince, he did nothing but harangue her and threaten her with her husband's death if she ever spoke the truth.

When the time came for her to be alone with her husband, it was fascinating to watch even the subtle hints of his love for her. He did his best to position himself so that he would carry the brunt of weight of the barrel and protect her from any strain. During the time they were alone she wept and spoke of her undying love for him and explained that the only reason she had lied was to spare his life. "If they had threatened my life, I could take it, but I could not bear to see you die," she said. He understood her plight and said that he would only speak the truth.

They returned to a suspense-filled courtroom, and, I might add, to an audience filled even more with anticipation, all of us sitting at the edge of our seats. As all was readied for the serum to take effect, the priest announced that the truth would now triumph over the lie.

At that moment the barrel burst open and out jumped a little boy who had been hiding inside. He carried a pen and a pad in his hand and had copied down all he had heard during the private conversations the men had when each was alone with the woman. The young boy turned over his notes to the priest. The priest read what they contained, and as he watched the prince lower his head and the peasant's face shine with the radiance of returned love, he declared the truth. The audience in the auditorium could not contain its jubilation and roared with approval, only to see tragedy strike as the king ordered his soldiers to kill all who believed the young boy's version of the conversations.

"Anyone in Cambodia knew the double-edged tragedy of the play." Ravi continues, "The voice of truth had been silenced, and cruel men ruled the land, inflicting fear on the people." As Ravi remained seated in contemplation long after the conclusion of the theatrical production, he tells how he began to reflect on "how behind the drama lies some common values

that bind humanity: the purity of marital love; the value of truth; the cry to protect the innocent; the wickedness of unbridled power and the undying yearning of a people to see justice roll on like a river.”⁵

In one line of summation, Zacharias delivers a powerful thought when he concludes: “These were not conferred culturally. The truths were self-evident even in a Marxist-dominated land.”⁶

Time Out!

Though we protest absolute moral law, we invoke it when we feel as though we are on the receiving end of injustice. I once debated a professor in Hawaii who prided himself on denying absolute moral law of any kind until I asked him to give me a situation where it could be considered “right” for someone to invade his home at night, kidnap his little granddaughter, rape, and torture her until death. As his granddaughter waited intently for his answer, he found it hard to offer a situation for such an ethic.

Back to the Story

After hearing that ‘good’ and ‘evil’ as absolute categories can only exist if an absolute moral law is present to sustain them, I asked Dan if he knew anyone who had the knowledge and authority to give this absolute moral law to which all humanity must conform.

“Well, it’s sure not the religious hypocrites of this world or people like you!” Dan responded in anger.

In wholehearted agreement, I confirmed that all men were tainted by their finiteness and could not possibly give an absolute moral law under which the rest of humanity should live. Such absolute law could only originate from an absolute moral lawgiver. Only the creator and sustainer of all things would have the authority, knowledge, and power to implant

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within all creatures the ability to distinguish between 'good' and 'evil.'

What is most interesting is the fact that no matter where you go in the world, the basic understanding of right and wrong exists, and only when evil men set out to tarnish and corrode such understanding do the atrocities of our world occur. Creating a 'killing' culture as Hitler successfully achieved required years of propaganda, brainwashing, and, in fact, an unlearning of the basics of right and wrong. Rome was not built in a day; neither was Germany. You and I look at the horrific acts associated with Hitler's "final solution" with great disdain and judgment. Indeed we should. But we should remember that before Hitler could build his edifices, the old foundations of absolute moral law had to be destroyed. With the absence of absolute moral law, Hitler created a killing machine.

Reminding Dan of this lesson from history, I moved toward a summary of my response.

"Dan," I exclaimed, "without an absolute moral law which defines the absolute categories of 'good' and 'evil,' the world would not be able to stand up and shout, 'Stop! This is wrong! This is unjust! This is evil!' Without this absolute moral law we would have no foundation on which to stand when screaming out against the atrocities and injustices of our world. You have admitted that such categories exist, but in the next breath deny the existence of the only One who can give this absolute moral law. Dan," I said, with a kind and gentle voice, "without God there is no such thing as 'evil,' for only the One who has created all things holds the right to give the rules by which creation should be governed. Yet God is the one you are trying to disprove. This faulty logic is similar to using a butterfly to disprove the existence of a caterpillar. One cannot exist without the other."

Looking for an Exit!

At this point, Dan wished he had never been born, or at least had never come to this dinner. Fidgeting and noticeably disturbed, Laura sat at the other end of the table with a look of deep concern. The entertainment (me) had not fulfilled her hopes and ambitions. While every staff member around the table sat in frustration, Dan asked a question that could not have been scripted more perfectly. His query served as the most logical next step in our journey toward God. He demanded, "OK, Jeff, then you tell me what kind of God allows so much evil into His world?"

Wow, I thought, in a matter of minutes Dan had made the journey from "There is absolutely no God!" to "Perhaps God exists but He is not kind!"

In a much softer voice, I placed my hand on Dan's shoulder and responded, "Dan, I think, down deep inside, the real issue you are struggling with is not God's existence, but the manner in which He governs His creation. In short, you are trying to harmonize the existence of God with all the evil, pain, and suffering in our world. Your first assumption that 'God' and 'evil' cannot coexist lacks sufficient understanding of both God and evil. Without God, there is no need to ask the question of evil. In fact, there is no reason to ask any question. The 'why' question can only be asked when God is assumed."

Evolution's premise, that we are simply a collection of chemicals bouncing to-and-fro reminds us that nature is red in tooth and claw and you and I are at the mercy of natural selection. Make no mistake, as soon as you assume evil, you assume God. As soon as you ask, "Why?" you imply purpose and meaning in the universe. Such valuable commodities cannot exist without a higher cause.

Dan's failure to debunk God led to a long moment of silence and deep contemplation. It soon became clear, however, that Dan's failure meant that others must now attempt an

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offensive of their own. In no way had I intended to embarrass him but his pride got the better of him, and he began to drown his sorrow in his glass of beer. Dan, in fact, would end up being my only regret of the evening. His opening remarks and the ensuing conversation sparked a change in everyone around that table, except for perhaps himself. For Dan, it was not a battle for corporate truth, but a far less important battle for intellectual bragging rights. If only he had not spent the rest of the evening sulking, he might have had the life-changing encounter we all were about to experience.

A Quick Application

The questions we ask about life, meaning, purpose, and even the predicament of the universe, presume so much. The next time you are having a moment of deep reflection that sparks a troubling question, stop and think for a moment about the question itself. Our questions are often built upon primary assumptions. For instance, the question, "Why am I experiencing this tragedy in my life?" is built upon two inescapable assumptions.

Assumption one is that a reason for your suffering exists; that your pain is not the result of merely bad luck. Somehow, somewhere, in the deepest regions of the universe, reason and purpose do indeed exist for the trials of your life.

Assumption two is that the reasons for your pain are discoverable; that you are capable of seeing beyond the temporary pain into eternal purposes and plans which bring ultimate meaning to every experience of your life, good or bad. The questions we ask about pain are seldom rhetorical. We ask questions because we desperately seek meaningful and coherent answers.

The point is that both of the assumptions listed above go a long way toward helping us find the answers. For instance, finding purpose to the tragedies of our lives is possible only when there is meaning and purpose to this universe in the first place! This is something that an accidental, blind, dumb-luck planet cannot give you. In reality, if there is no God, there is no reason, purpose, or meaning to anything.

Ah! But when God exists, as our intuitive questions and assumptions often verify, we can find the answers to life's most penetrating questions. After all, will the One who placed these assumptions within us not also help us discover the answers? Otherwise, why lodge the questions deep into our consciences?

When all is said and done, I think you will find that part of the Creator's way of communicating His existence to us is by placing an internal desire and need to find an answer to the "whys" of our lives—answers which can only be found in a world that has arrived by intention. For the God who allows tragedy into our lives is the same God who desperately desires to explain the origin and purpose for suffering and the way to live above and beyond our pain.