

“Quintessential Evil!”

Genesis 6:5-8

The Tenth Anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001

Dr. Richard J. Alberta

Cornerstone Evangelical Presbyterian Church

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Genesis 6:5-8 (NIV) ⁵ The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. ⁶ The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. ⁷ So the Lord said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth--men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air--for I am grieved that I have made them." ⁸ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.

The Word of God is brutal at times. If ever we human beings, men and women, begin to compliment ourselves too much, we will be quickly brought short by this statement:

⁶ The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.

Grieved that he had even made man? Even *us*? First, let us pray.

Our sermon title today is “Quintessential Evil.” “Quintessential” is an ancient Latin word meaning “fifth essence” referring to the almost mystical element of each thing in creation in its purest form. For example, we could say that Jesus was and is the quintessential Holy man. Pure Holiness. But the Word of God tells us and experience shows us that some people are *quintessentially...and purely evil*. Thoroughly wicked. Devoid of conscience and morally numb. The kind of people who can herd other people into ovens ... the kind of people who rape and murder without hesitation...the kind of people who can fly airplanes loaded with innocent non-combatants into buildings killing thousands of other innocent non-combatants. In fact, quintessential evil is so purely 100% evil it even hates and destroys those who employ it...so that they destroy themselves as they commit their evil acts.

A decade ago, we Americans got a much closer look at quintessential evil than ever before. Other people in other countries have seen wars and genocide. We had Columbine and Oklahoma City but those events were somehow... boundaried. The evil seemed oddly contained and aberrant. But 9-11 was different. It was wholesale evil. Evil on steroids. It was as shocking as any new experience can be. And even if we did not say it out loud, here was our question: “Why Oh God? Why allow such evil?”

We all remember where we were and what we were doing ten years ago this morning. September 11, 2001. Thirty six hundred and fifty mornings have gone by and we are still wondering...what happened? Why did it happen? At this point, we're almost asking ...should we still be in mourning or should we celebrate our nation's responses to that day? Is it ok to feel ok about it now...or are we still very uneasy about putting it behind us? What kind of anniversary seems so hard to understand?

In preaching about quintessential evil as it relates to that day, I will leave it to others to comment on the wars and politics that have unfolded since then. Others may speculate about all of the many issues that touch on everything from economics to Presidential choices. Rather, I am led of the Lord to speak of Him and His nature on this tenth anniversary. That is because we as Christians received a much more terrible jolt on 9-11 than the attacks themselves. I am not minimizing the horror of the World Trade Centers crashing down or the Pentagon being hit by a plane going five hundred miles an hour...or the lives lost in a field in Pennsylvania. But we as Christians in a terrible way were far more vexed by 9-11 than unbelievers. Why? Because unbelievers do not expect anything from the God in whom they do not believe! But...for us as Christians...for us who have experienced the reality of the love of God and who have been re-born by the Holy Spirit and who are looking forward to Paradise...for us there was an additional horror that left our souls screaming for reassurance. It was the horror that God allows things to happen that even we would not allow!

Indeed, the soul-wrenching question that we feel uneasy about asking is "If we would not allow it...why would he?" "Why Oh God? Why allow such evil?" Think of it this way. Who among us knowing that those men were getting on airplanes in Boston to bring about the deaths of thousands...who among us knowing that and with the ability to stop that from happening...who among us would not have done so?

For us as Christians, worse than the images of the airplanes crashing into the towers was the spiritual fallout. In short, we were left with nowhere to hide from this fact: God allowed evil in its purest form... its quintessential form... to visit us and we could not do what we usually do. We could not change the subject and avoid the question of "Why?" We could not avoid skeptical friends saying "Do you still believe in a caring and all-powerful personal God? If you do, can you explain His actions in allowing such a thing?"

It is far more comfortable to analyze the decisions of Presidents and Congresses and armies than to analyze the ways of God. It's been ten years. Have we as his church grown in our faith? Have we come to understand Him and His ways any more clearly? These seem to me to be the right questions to ask of ourselves as we worship God thru His Son the Lord Jesus Christ.

Go back for a moment in your mind...when you heard the news. What did you feel and think? Pain? Horror? Fury? How could men sin with such depravity? I am a sinner with no inherent righteousness of my own. Yet, ten years ago this morning I sat in my office here at the church and I was stunned at how evil some men are. I was speechless as I considered what I had just heard. Like all of you, I recall perfectly where I was and what I was doing. One of my colleagues on the staff looked in and said “An airplane has hit the World Trade Center in New York City.” I thought “Amazing....that such a thing could happen! Who was not on the job at one of the three airports?” I phoned my sister who lives in New York. Her son, my nephew Glenn, was the General Manager of the restaurants at the top of the World Trade Center but she did not answer. She called me later to say that he was safe. A few minutes went by and I heard someone say “A second plane has hit the other building.” I recall thinking one thing: “This is *deliberate!* But...who would do such evil things? Such people are not human and they have no right to live on the earth!” My heart was filled with pain. But then I remembered that God described all of humanity that way. Sorry...but *all of humanity*...me too. Us too. But the thing is...we expect more from ourselves and somehow...we expected more from God. After all, they attacked *us*.

We Americans give out more foreign aid than any other nation and we, despite our flaws, are really the good guys...but they attacked *us!* America stepped in and helped Muslims in Kuwait and other places...but they attacked *us!* America put Europe back on its feet after World War Two and America is feeding the starving masses in Africa but they attacked *us?!* The truth is, we all wondered somewhere deep down inside “Where was God that He let them attack *us?*” So, yes! When evil draws near we Christians wonder about the thing we have kept at a distance...namely why does God allow it? And why does God allow it in the lives of his own children? And why does He allow it to come upon ...*us?*

You may remember the scene from **Fiddler on the Roof.** Rektevia is walking home after the Cossacks have ruined his daughter’s wedding reception. Rektevia has tried to be a good and faithful Jew. He is generous with his neighbors. He is a man who fears God and loves Him...same thing if you think about it. But the authorities have decreed that the Jews of Anatevka need to be humiliated so they send horse soldiers to break in upon the modest wedding feast of Mottle and Zydel. They smash the gifts and over run the tables and ruin the celebration. They leave the bride and groom and family stunned and weeping as they look into the faces of men who could do such evil. And on the way home Rektevia sees all of this in his mind and he looks up and cries out “Why?” Perhaps he was crying out “Why Oh God? Why allow such evil?”

As a student of the Word of God, I suspect that I have never fully grasped evil deeply.

It hurts too much to contemplate and we in our setting a quite shielded from it. As a teenager, I found my mother nearly in a coma from a suicide attempt. I saw the films of President Kennedy being murdered in front of his wife and the whole

nation...I learned of friends coming home from Vietnam in coffins. Like many of you, I saw the photos of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. lying in a pool of blood. But for the most part evil was an incidental to my pleasant life. No more. Because of wide-screen technology I was there and you were there right on the street as those buildings came down ironically on the corners of Liberty and Church Streets in New York City...leaving a thousand people running from the gates of Dante's Inferno. Could it be that God *wants* us to come this close...to evil?

But when we do, we are not only stunned but even surprised! We've been reading about it in the Bible but we've always quietly thought "Well, evil is bad but most people are pretty decent and evil is just out there somewhere..." Only soldiers in combat and police on patrol see it for real. But sooner or later we come face to face with it. Our son JJ was a new cop in Phoenix and on uniform patrol some years back. On night his team arrested a young hot rodder. He had driven his Mustang a hundred miles an hour past a mall killing a twelve year old girl who was running with her friends to cross the street. And our son who was raised in church and knows the Scriptures said to me "You know Dad...it's pretty hard to believe in a caring and loving all-powerful God when you're picking up the body of a dead twelve year old girl whose neck is broken and...you're carrying it back to her parents on the sidewalk who are screaming with shock and grief." People can lose their faith over such things. "Why Oh God? Why allow such evil?" That's morally irresponsible evil but quintessential evil is the worst kind.

What kind of people can kill others not by accident but deliberately? A Catholic Priest preached a sermon after 9-11 at a funeral in New York. I happened to hear part of it. He was profoundly correct when he said we have now seen the pure unadulterated and unvarnished reality of evil in human form. After all, what kind of people can walk down the aisle of an airplane and look into the faces of mothers and fathers and small smiling children...and business people simply doing their necessary travel...what kind of man looks into those faces and knows that in minutes he will kill them all by turning their airplane into a missile? And nothing inside of him says "Wait! Stop! This is an immoral and wicked act!" No. Nothing at all like that rings in his mind. He is evil incarnate and God is sorry that he even made him.

So, we try to catch him. We want him and the others who could do such a thing found and put on trial. We locate dozens of these evil men and execute them or send them to Guantanamo or drag them to court. We catch up with Sadaam Hussein and eventually with Osama bin Laden and we put them to death. We'd like to get everyone who is responsible for 9-11 and all the other acts of terror and put them on trial. But what we will not admit because we do not know how to say it...is that some men...perhaps even us...would put God on trial!

After all, He made man. He allowed man to become evil. And worst of all, He knew the night before and from all eternity that wicked men would fly four hijacked airplanes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and into a field in Pennsylvania...He knew what they were planning...right? And He knew what

Hitler was about to do and He knew about the Tsunamis and He knew about the plagues of the fourteenth century and He knew about Lee Harvey Oswald...come to think of it God has known before their crimes about the evil every man would commit. All the way back to Genesis Chapter Four when Cain sneaked up on his brother Abel and murdered him...God was there. So...why not, as C.S. Lewis asked years ago...why not put "God in the Dock?" Why not indict God Himself for creating and allowing such a world?

That is the question that unbelievers ask...men who hate God and will not worship Him. And let's face it...we sometimes ask it with tears because we know He is only Holy and only Righteous and only Good...so yes...it is in some ways worse for us because our struggle is deeper. We know His heart and His power...so why did He even allow evil...right from Cain killing Abel to Khalid Sheik Mohammed planning the 9-11 attacks?

The reality of evil hurts those who know and love God more than all others because again...unbelievers expect nothing from God. But we know what the Psalmist meant when he said:

Psalms 10:1 (NIV) ¹ "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"

Theologians have written a billion words on this question. But it is really simple. Did God make the world with evil as part of his design or did He make it perfect hoping evil would not come in? Well, we recoil and reformed theology argues "No! God desired all men to live in Paradise and He mercifully reacted when sin came in, by revealing Himself to Israel and eventually sending Christ!" But it hardly matters friends. God made Adam and Eve knowing in advance that they would fall and that evil would come into the world. In fact, sin in its quintessential form came into the creation before Adam when Satan fell! And God knew Satan would fall! So, in the end, we must admit and accept that God is sovereign over evil but somehow not its author.

Why? Please...please...do not email me and ask me why an omnipotent God did not make a world to his liking without allowing evil. I do not know. But there are a few things we do know about the reality of quintessential evil and we will look at them as we move towards closure. A few thoughts of my own that help me to rest in the Lord knowing that one day in His presence all such questions will be put to rest.

FIRST, I NEVER LOVED GOD AS MY CREATOR. I ONLY CAME TO LOVE HIM AS MY REDEEMER! God is the only eternal being. He has always been. No one made God and His Holiness and Glory are so far beyond our grasp that we might as well try an explain quantum physics to a mouse. So I wonder if God allowed evil for our own good in that only because of evil and the pain it brings do we seek Him. It may be that in order to grasp the deeper things of God I must come face to face with the work of Satan himself. Let me put this another way. When I was an unbeliever I did not love God or know God.

You may say that I should have loved Him and known Him but I only thought of Him as my Creator. And, if pressed, I might have said “Oh yes...it was nice of God to create me thru the natural processes of my parents. Sure. No big deal. I’d say thanks a lot God. Have a nice day.” Like a son who takes his patents for granted until he gets into trouble and needs them.

When I came face to face with my own personal evil...my sense of emptiness and my fear of death itself...my realization that this world and what it offers is a façade like a Hollywood set...buildings propped up with nothing behind them...when I realized the evil of life without God...I sought Him! I cried out “Oh God I seek you!” And He revealed Himself to me and saved me! So, while I could not love God as my Creator I could love Him and know Him as my Redeemer! A created being should love God for creating him or her...but because of sin they do not. But when we realize our need for redemption and deliverance from sin and the evil inside of ourselves, we will truly love God...as REDEEMER! So...perhaps we have always needed evil in the world to drive us towards God.

SECOND: GOD MADE THE UNIVERSE AND ALL OF US THAT HE WOULD BE GLORIFIED! And perhaps evil was needed to bring him Glory. An unbeliever would be offended at the idea if a God who needed suffering so He could do rescues and thus be glorified. True, if a man started a fire just so he could be a hero putting it out, we’d say he was depraved! But God is Holy and He does not start fires...but He allows them just so His Glory is revealed to us...FOR OUR SAKES! To be truly happy we need to not only be redeemed but to get a glimpse of God’s glory and nothing brings that about as much as the contrast with evil!

The Apostle Paul once speculated that this may be the reason God only saved a few people thru predestination. Paul wrote:

Romans 9:21-23 (ESV) ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?
²² **What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—**

In other words, God is glorified in that evil displays His MERCY in saving those He saves.

THIRD: EVIL IS A TOOL IN THE HANDS OF GOD!

We need only remember Joseph who was the victim of evil when his brothers sold him into slavery. Years of suffering and finally Joseph is raised up. Like Jesus,

Joseph is exalted after his suffering. When Joseph meets his brothers years later, they tremble realizing the extent of their sin against him. But Joseph replies:

Genesis 50:20 (ESV) ²⁰ “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

Even the Crucifixion of our innocent and sinless Lord was the ultimate evil. Yet, Peter preached to the crowd in Jerusalem:

Acts 2:23 (ESV) “... this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”

Were it not for evil used by God there would be no Cross and we would not be saved. Leading to our last point:

FOURTH: EVIL WAS CONQUERED FOR ALL ETERNITY...AT THE CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST!

Like an election when the polls close, it takes a while to declare the winner. Jesus defeated evil on that day upon the Cross and the victory was announced three days later at the resurrection. Evil is not only defeated but there is a great unfolding of the victory to come...when He is ready. We must just be patient!

In 1982, I attended the Missions Conference at the University of Illinois. Thousands gathered to hear Billy Graham speak that last night. And what piece of music did they choose? It was a well-known melody that had been put to words years before. They called it “I Cannot Tell.” And its message was simple: yes there is evil in the world but God is making it right thru the Cross and Resurrection of Christ! I cannot tell how He will ultimately fix His creation...but this I know! The Word of God promises that those who belong to Christ will live eternally in a new world where sin and evil cannot be found! We read:

Revelation 21:1-4 (ESV) ¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

The song that night cried out:

**I cannot tell how all the lands shall worship,
When, at His bidding, every storm is stilled,**

**Or who can say how great the jubilation
When all the hearts of men with love are filled.
But this I know, the skies will thrill with rapture,
And myriad, myriad human voices sing,
And earth to Heaven, and Heaven to earth, will answer:
At last the Savior, Savior of the world is King!**

Let us pray.