TGC HARD QUESTIONS

Where Is God in a World with So Much Evil?

Collin Hansen

"The problem of evil is the biggest challenge to Christian faith in every generation. Collin Hansen's short, wise, and thoughtful book is a superb resource for thinking deeply about it and responding with compassion and clarity."

Andrew Wilson, Teaching Pastor, King's Church London

"This is a very helpful book for those who wrestle with the presence of evil in our world. I consider myself one of those strugglers. This book encouraged me to keep wrestling with an eye to the much bigger picture of all that God has done, is doing, and will do."

Randy Newman, Late Senior Fellow for Apologetics and Evangelism, C. S. Lewis Institute; author, *Questioning Faith* and *Bringing the Gospel Home*

"As a counselor, I have seen the desperate urgency of hurting people asking how God could allow their pain. At the heart of this concise, tender, humble, and intellectually honest book is the best answer we can possibly give: 'God is not asking for silence . . . [or] demanding the stiff upper lip.' Instead, he welcomes our cry for justice as the echo of his own. Thoughtful and highly contextualized for our current cultural instincts, Hansen's book is easy to recommend."

J. Alasdair Groves, Executive Director, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; coauthor, *Untangling Emotions*

"The problem of evil, and in particular the Holocaust, is the greatest challenge to faith. From a biblical and pastoral perspective, Hansen tackles this challenge with boldness and compassion. While not offering easy answers, he argues how the Christian faith offers hope and justice amid the greatest evil imaginable."

Sean McDowell, Associate Professor of Christian Apologetics, Biola University; author, *A New Kind of Apologist*

"What I love about this book is that Hansen grapples with evil and suffering not as a notional or abstract concept but by forcing the reader to reckon with some of the twentieth century's most agonizing moral events, particularly Hitler's and Stalin's brutality. Hansen ably communicates how the Christian worldview—chiefly, Jesus himself—helps explain our agonies and ultimately remedies them. What an irony it is that one of Christianity's chief objections—the problem of suffering—can become one of its greatest testimonies."

Andrew T. Walker, Associate Professor of Christian Ethics and Public Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Fellow, The Ethics and Public Policy Center

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WHEN YOU WALK through Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, you're emotionally exhausted by the end. The pain. The suffering. The horror of six million Jews murdered, less than a century ago. Children. Grandmothers. Young. Old. Pregnant. Barren. Gassed and cremated with modern efficiency. In Yad Vashem, you see their faces. You learn their stories. The names. The memories. It breaks your heart.

Shortly before you leave, you see a large photo from the Buchenwald concentration camp. Dated April 16, 1945, it shows inmates sleeping three to a bed, with bunks stacked four high. The bodies are nothing more than skin stretched over skeletons.

Tucked away in the second row of bunks, seventh from the left, is a sixteen-year-old face. I didn't recognize it in the picture, but the face would become famous around the world. It's the face of Elie Wiesel, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. His book *Night* recounts his experience of the *Shoah*, or catastrophe.

The Holocaust.

Night is the story of his experience at Auschwitz and why he never slept soundly again. When Wiesel arrived in Auschwitz, he saw babies tossed in a flaming ditch. How was this possible? How could the world be silent when men, women, and children perished in fires? Wiesel heard his father cry for help as SS guards beat him to death. Wiesel didn't move to help him, and he never forgave himself.

He too was silent.

Wiesel wrote:

> Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp,
> which has turned my life into one long night,
> seven times cursed and seven times sealed.
> Never shall I forget that smoke.
> Never shall I forget the little faces of the children,
> whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of
> smoke beneath a silent blue sky.
> Never shall I forget those flames which consumed
> my faith forever. . . .
> Never shall I forget those moments which murdered
> my God and my soul and turned my dreams
> to dust.

Never shall I forget these things, even if I am
condemned to live as long as God Himself.
Never.[1]

When three Jewish inmates, including a young boy, were hanged at Buchenwald, Wiesel heard a man behind him ask, "Where is merciful God, where is He?"[2]

Silence. The details they witnessed are too gruesome for me to share. The man asked again, "For God's sake, where is God?" A voice answered to Wiesel: "Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows."[3] It was the voice of Wiesel's own conscience. Wiesel became the accuser. God the accused.

Wiesel survived the camps. And so did his belief in God's existence. But his doubt lingered. He could no longer trust God's justice.

How do we account for God's silence amid the greatest of human suffering? Is God dead? Did we kill him? Or do we just put him on trial and find him guilty of crimes against humanity?

Few can relate to the degree of horror Wiesel witnessed and experienced. But probably all of us, Jew and Gentile, have cried out to God in distress and heard nothing in

response. Or at least we know and love someone who's felt this way.

If you've worked in ministry, or just tried to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with your friends and family, you've probably heard these skeptical questions: Why doesn't God speak up about evil? Why won't he assure us of his presence in those moments when the universe feels cold, dark, and threatening? This is the hard question I'm trying to help us address in this booklet: Can we trust God when he's silent about evil?

To answer, let us begin by considering why we suffer in the first place.

Moral Revolution—from Jesus to Hitler

Sometimes we assure ourselves that others suffer because they weren't careful or thoughtful. In the early years of the modern state of Israel, many Holocaust survivors carried a stigma. The Jews who spent the 1930s and '40s in the Middle East couldn't understand how six million could have died without more resistance. Surely the victims should have done more, fought back harder. They should have known! "It's not God's fault," some said. "The Jewish leaders were responsible."

The sheer scale of the Holocaust, however, overwhelms any such defense mechanisms. Efforts to fight back—such as the 1943 uprising in the Warsaw ghetto—failed against determined Nazi brutality. There's no way to explain away the scope of this horror by somehow blaming the victims.

When I teach students who are training to lead churches, I ask them to write a sermon that incorporates what they believe is the most powerful objection to Christianity. For me, it's the silence of God in the face of suffering, especially the suffering of children who seem to have done nothing wrong. Sometimes when I'm talking with someone who doesn't share my Christian faith, I'll even ask him or her to consider this question. It's not just that most of us can relate to asking for help and hearing no response. It's that this question of God's silence—especially in the Holocaust—has precipitated nothing less than a moral revolution in Western civilization. Historian Alec Ryrie observes that World War II exposed Christianity as setting the wrong priorities: "It now seemed plain that cruelty, discrimination and murder were evil in a way that fornication, blasphemy and impiety were not."[4]

In other words, the Holocaust transformed our standards for evil. In the shadow of Auschwitz, how could

anyone be worried about differences between Christian denominations? Why should anyone care if two adults engage in consensual sex? A little cursing in God's name can't be a big deal when he didn't bother to stop millions of Jews from marching into the gas chambers.

Before the war, Jesus Christ was the most potent moral figure in Western culture. You don't have to look hard for evidence when you travel around Europe today. Just take in the medieval art and visit the ancient churches. In town squares where bells tolled on Sunday mornings, even non-Christians measured themselves according to Jesus's example of love. He set the moral standard in his sinless life.

However, Ryrie argues, the overwhelming tragedy of the war displaced Jesus as the fixed reference point for good and evil.[5] Today the bells still toll, but the pews are usually empty. Art includes Jesus only to be ironic. Across the West today, you can pass nearly every day except Christmas in relative ease and comfort without giving thought to Jesus.

So who replaced Jesus as the new moral standard?

Adolf Hitler.

"It is as monstrous to praise him as it would once have been to disparage Jesus," Ryrie writes. "While Christian

imagery, crosses and crucifixes have lost much of their potency in our culture, there is no visceral image which now packs as visceral an emotional punch as a swastika."[6]

If Christians marched down your street behind a cross, you might shrug them off as eccentrics. But if Nazis marched down your street behind a swastika, you would feel their presence as an existential threat to you, your family, and the entire public order. Or consider a street preacher reading Scripture and proclaiming good news of the kingdom of God. He'll probably be ignored. Now consider you're walking the ancient streets of a venerable European city and you see a young man dressed in khaki from head to toe, with a red arm band. He's reading out loud from *Mein Kampf.* He won't last long before violent opposition forms to silence his hateful words.

In this moral revolution, few would pretend to be proud of everything they've said and done. You don't pretend to be perfect. But at least you know this: You wouldn't put up with Hitler. You wouldn't be silent in your protest. Jew and Gentile alike, we know that we need to speak up against such evil because we can't forget the Holocaust.

Problem is, how do you know who's Hitler today without seeing a swastika?

Grand Inquisitor—Making Ourselves the Standard

When I read Wiesel for the first time, his skeptical questions sounded familiar. I knew I'd heard them before—but not about God's silence in the Holocaust. In fact, the accusations had been delivered by an unforgettable character in the nineteenth-century novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, a classic written by renowned Christian author Fyodor Dostoevsky.[7]

In book 5 of the novel, Ivan Karamazov argues with his younger brother, Alyosha, about God. Like Wiesel, Ivan is horrified by the suffering of innocent children. Like Wiesel, Ivan protests against God for allowing injustice. Here's the riveting passage:

> And if the suffering of children goes to make up the sum of suffering needed to buy truth, then I assert beforehand that the whole of truth is not worth such a price. . . . Imagine that you yourself are building the edifice of human destiny with the object of making people happy in the finale, of giving them peace and rest at last, but for that you must inevitably and unavoidably torture just one tiny creature, that same

> child who was beating her chest with her little fist, and raise your edifice on the foundation of her unrequited tears—would you agree to be the architect of such conditions?[8]

Dostoevsky calls this chapter "Rebellion." No wonder. Ivan says, "It's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him the ticket."[9] That's the famous line. Never has a more powerful argument against God been mustered than this: "I believe in him. I just hate him." Turns out there may be something worse than God's silence. It's God trying to offer an explanation we reject as unjust.

In the next chapter, with Ivan's poem "The Grand Inquisitor," Dostoevsky puts Jesus on the literal witness stand. But the trial ends in an unexpected way.

> When the Inquisitor fell silent, he waited some time for his prisoner to reply. His silence weighed on him. He had seen how the captive listened to him all the while intently and calmly, looking him straight in the eye, and apparently not wishing to contradict anything. The old man would have liked him to say something,

> even something bitter, terrible. But suddenly he approaches the old man in silence and gently kisses him on his bloodless, ninety-year-old lips. That is the whole answer. The old man shudders.[10]

Silence, and a kiss.

Is that the best Jesus can do? A kiss?

Why won't God speak up and defend himself? Maybe it's because even if he did, we wouldn't listen. No matter what he said, we'd still declare him guilty.

That's why Fyodor Dostoevsky let Ivan put Jesus on trial. He was warning us that when we judge God, we don't replace him with a superior morality. Instead, anything goes. *We* make the rules. But no one's in charge. In Dostoevsky's story, Ivan learns his lesson the hard way. With all of his ranting against God, someone takes Ivan seriously and kills his father. When the killer hands Ivan money stolen from his murdered father, the implications of "anything goes" in a world without God begin to crush Ivan.

Without knowing it, Dostoevsky warned us about how the twentieth century would unfold. It's a fate worse than God's silence. It's a life where we no longer get angry at

God's silence. It's a world where God's voice is a forgotten echo.

It's the Second World War on the Eastern Front.

Where Is Evil Located?

I caught a glimpse of that world through the eyes of another Russian writer, Vasily Grossman, and his epic novel *Life and Fate*. A Jewish journalist in the Soviet Union during World War II, Grossman was one of the first writers to observe a Nazi death camp when Treblinka was liberated in eastern Poland.

I was overcome with emotion when I read one of the novel's scenes where a young child is separated from his parents during the selection for the Treblinka gas chambers. I can hardly write about the story without weeping. A Jewish doctor could have avoided immediate death due to her profession. Instead, she elected to hold the panicked child's hands through the horrifying process, all the way until death. The childless woman had one final thought before she perished: *I've become a mother*.[11]

Life and Fate depicts the evils of Nazism like no other work. I've never seen such a vivid description of the banality of evil in building and operating a gas chamber.

But Grossman didn't depict the Soviets as paragons of virtue just because they weren't Nazis. Despite Grossman's acclaim as a writer and battlefield witness, *Life and Fate* almost didn't survive the Soviet censors. Grossman refused to valorize Stalin for fighting against Hitler. So the Soviets wanted to shut Grossman up, just as they had tried to silence God through state-mandated atheism across Russia and its neighbors.

Grossman, however, retained an objective standard of evil that allowed him to judge both sides. He helped the world to see that communism and fascism weren't so much two ends of a left-right spectrum as mirror images of totalitarian evil. They might have been mortal enemies in ideology and war. But in morality, they were partners in crime. They shared a common goal of silencing God's voice of judgment against their plans for world subjugation.

Grossman died in 1964, nearly a decade before Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn published his *Gulag Archipelago* about the evils of the Soviet state. Solzhenitsyn's shocking account of Soviet prison camps explains why "don't be a Nazi" morality hasn't stopped evil. "I'm not as bad as Hitler" is too low a bar for the justice we expect when

someone robs our home or rapes our neighbor. It's too low a bar when innocent children are at stake. We're right to cry out for greater justice.

Anti-Nazi morality also fails because it shifts evil from something *inside* us to something *out there* among our enemies. It leads us to sanctify ourselves and demonize our enemies, moving us from defendant to judge, as if we've become righteous merely by virtue of being born after Hitler's death. Solzhenitsyn, as a Christian, saw evil not just as something "out there" but also "in here." He famously observed, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart."[12]

I watched the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics with my children. They delighted in the courageous, gorgeous performances on ice and snow. During the closing ceremonies, my older son asked for a crash course in geopolitics. He saw Russian president Vladimir Putin standing as the honored guest of Chinese president Xi Jinping. I explained that soon many Ukrainian families would be fighting for their lives and homes against invaders from Putin's Russia. Within days Putin launched

the largest land war in Europe since the end of World War II.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wouldn't be fooled by Vladimir Putin's pretensions as defender of the Christian faith in our day. Putin justified his invasion of Ukraine—home of Grossman and his mother, who died when the Nazis massacred the Jews of Berdychiv in 1941—as "de-Nazification." The rockets Putin has sent raining down on apartment complexes across Ukraine should remind us: all manner of evil begins when we underestimate the human penchant for self-deception.

We shouldn't miss the point. We need an objective standard of morality bigger than "not Hitler." When we externalize evil to an out-group, we deceive ourselves in self-righteousness. When we don't listen to God, demagogues emerge to speak as if they are gods. Dictators from Hitler to Putin promise easy answers to difficult questions about what's wrong with the world—*The people we already hate are to blame!*—and they promise a godlike ability to enact justice. They build a new kingdom by shedding their enemies' blood.

Maybe the problem isn't the silence of God. Maybe we're just not listening. Or maybe we prefer the sound of our own voices.