

Keeping
Your Kids on
GOD'S
SIDE

NATASHA CRAIN



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Dedication

*To my wonderful husband, Bryan,
and our three dear children.
May we continually grow strong
in the Lord together.*

KEEPING YOUR KIDS ON GOD'S SIDE

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Foreword

As a youth pastor, my first class of graduating seniors proved how difficult it can be to keep your kids on God's side. By the time they first returned from university (at Christmas break in their freshman year), most were no longer Christians. I couldn't believe it, and I felt like a terrible pastor. I had these students for their entire senior year of high school, yet nothing I taught them seemed to make an impact on the decisions they made in the first ten weeks at university. It was then that I realized the error of my inaugural year as a youth pastor. I had entertained them, helped them to form friendships in our youth group, and maybe even inspired them to be better human beings. But I hadn't given them sufficient reason to believe Christianity was true.

I quickly shifted gears. I was a part-time pastor and full-time homicide detective; my journey to faith was characterized by a careful examination of the evidence related to the existence of God and the reliability of the New Testament. Why hadn't I taken this approach with the students in my youth group? In many ways I simply got caught up in what has become the norm for many youth ministries. I wanted my group to grow, I wanted my students to like me, and I placed the bar very low in terms of what I required from them. After that first year, I decided my students' future certainty was far more important than their present entertainment.

That's why I love what Natasha Crain has done in her first book. As a parent, she gets it. Youth pastors simply can't do what each of us, as parents, must. The spiritual growth of our kids is our responsibility; we can't assign it to someone else. If you want to keep your kids in the truth, you're going to have to teach them why Christianity is true, and you're not going to be able to teach them unless you are willing to learn. Most of us, if pressed to defend what we believe as Christians, find ourselves woefully ill-equipped. How are we ever going to prepare our kids if we aren't first prepared?

If you're a Christian parent but you haven't yet mastered the rich

case for God's existence and the truth of the Christian worldview, this book is an excellent place to start. In fact, I consider *Keeping Your Kids on God's Side* to be an important, eye-opening "gateway" book. Natasha has done a wonderful job of quickly introducing the important issues and evidences from the perspective of a parent. She's engaging, thoughtful, and she knows how to throw the ball so you can catch it. Take the time to read this book and absorb the evidence Natasha presents; then visit Natasha's website to see her recommendations for additional reading. Let *Keeping Your Kids on God's Side* serve as an introduction to the most important work you will ever do as a parent. Learn the case so you can give your kids reasons to believe.

J. Warner Wallace

Cold-Case Detective and
author of *Cold-Case Christianity* and
God's Crime Scene

What Your Kids Need for a Confident Faith

I remember the exact day I realized I had no idea what I was doing as a parent.

My twins were four months old and were lying on a blanket in the living room. From birth until that moment, I confidently thrived as a new parent. I had two little humans who had predictable needs that I could manage and fulfill in my controlled home environment. I was one of *those* people who piled the books high on various philosophies of infant sleep scheduling, feeding, and development. I wanted to do everything *perfectly*. My twins were sleeping 12 hours per night by 10 weeks old, with 3 precisely scheduled naps and 8 precisely scheduled mealtimes during the day. As a true type A person who gets excited about taking charge, I was totally in my zone.

Then came that day when I stared down at the two four-month-olds lying on the floor. Their eyes expectantly searched mine, as if waiting for me to do something. I ran through my mental checklist of daily baby activities, but it wasn't time to eat, sleep, or poop. (Yes, I even documented every bowel movement for weeks to ensure my kids were within the expected range.) It wasn't until that moment that I realized my knowledge wasn't going to be sufficient for the job much longer. A palpable wave of fear suddenly washed over me: *Now what?*

I had no idea what to do next. My babies were ready for more, but “more” involved a never-ending sea of child development possibilities. It was no longer enough to keep them alive via my poop journal and sleep schedules (gasp!). Now I would have to help them *thrive*. I suddenly realized that day that what I had mastered so far wouldn't be enough.

When our twins were toddlers, my husband and I started thinking

about new areas of parenting with seemingly endless possibilities: how to raise our kids to learn about, love, and follow Jesus. Frankly, I had no idea how to do that beyond taking them to church each week. As someone who was raised in a Christian home yet later spent years fighting spiritual apathy and doubt, I was all too familiar with the complexities of faith. If I had so much trouble figuring out my *own* faith, how on Earth was I going to help my kids figure out *theirs*?

To help me in the process, I casually decided to start a Christian parenting blog (NatashaCrain.com) so I could connect with other parents and share ideas for building a Christ-centered home. That turned out to be a fateful decision. My blog did introduce me to other Christian parents...but it also introduced me to a world of skeptics.

Portrait of a Hostile World

After I had been blogging for several months, I became interested in learning about the creation-versus-evolution debate and spent time studying it in-depth. I wanted to share what I had learned with other Christian parents, so I created and posted a flowchart showing the six major views people have on the subject (see chapter 33).

The post went viral—amongst atheist groups.

Within a few hours, it reached over 26,000 people and received almost 300 comments, most of which were personal attacks against me or the intelligence of Christians in general. Here's a sampling of the responses to my post:

“Yeah, facts and rational thought aren't very important for these crazies.”

“Intelligent and religious are mutually exclusive. There is no god. End of debate.”

“Please, don't tell me people actually believe this.”

“Debating a Christian is impossible. They rely on 'faith' (fantasy) where an atheist relies on evidence.”

“If your children are smart, they will ask for proof...unless you already brainwashed them to the point they won't DARE ask why out

of fear that some imaginary sky being will torture them for eternity for asking such a simple question.”

“Remember, folks, these people are breeding!”

I have to admit, I was *shocked* by these attacks. I grew up in a Christian home and, as an adult, rarely had friends or co-workers who were antagonistic to faith. Once I had kids, my world got even smaller. Without the luxury of significant free time, I found myself limiting friendships to a handful of people who were like me—in the same life stage and sharing the same values. I simply had never been so challenged in my faith as I was the day I received those scathing comments. I’m grateful now, because that day changed my life.

It was then that I realized how utterly unprepared I was to explain to nonbelievers—and, ultimately, my kids—why I believe in Jesus.

I knew that had to change.

I immersed myself nearly nonstop in learning how to make a case for and defend Christianity—a discipline called *Christian apologetics*. Although my passion for apologetics started because of my role as a blogger, I discovered in the process why an understanding of apologetics is even more important for my role as a *parent*. I learned that attacks on Christianity—like those I experienced on my blog—are driving young people away from faith in droves.

Our kids desperately need our help. Here’s what’s happening.

Outcomes of a Hostile World

61% of kids who were involved in church as recently as their teenage years become spiritually disengaged by their 20s—not actively praying, reading the Bible or attending church.¹

This finding, based on the extensive surveys of researcher George Barna, is the alarm that has sent pastors, youth leaders, and young adult ministries desperately searching for answers. Multiple independent groups have since conducted their own studies and have identified the same trend—with some estimates of those turning away from Christianity as high as 88 percent.²

Why is this happening? Having studied the various survey results in depth, I think it's fair to summarize the collective problem in one sentence: *A lack of robust spiritual training has resulted in a featherweight faith for many of today's young adults, and that faith is being blown away by attacks from our secular culture.*

Young people are turning away from faith because they've accepted the popular claims that Christianity is irrational, antiscience, intolerant, and based on an irrelevant ancient book. These claims have compelling answers from a Christian worldview, but young people aren't leaving home *equipped* with those answers. For example, fewer than 1 in 10 Christian families read the Bible together during a typical week, and a study of 11,000 teenagers showed that only 12 percent of youth have regular conversations with their mom on faith issues.^{3/4} Most kids growing up in Christian homes aren't receiving anything *remotely* resembling the spiritual training they need to have a lasting faith.

After young adults turn *away* from Christianity, they're turning *to* atheism or agnosticism. The percent of Americans identifying as Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox has decreased 6 percent *just since 2007*.⁵ Meanwhile, the percentage who identify as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular" has grown by 4.3 percent. This trend is even more striking among young adults. Thirty-eight percent of atheists are now 18 to 29 years old, compared with 29 percent of the general public. The decline in Christians clearly corresponds to the increase in these groups.

Even with steadily rising numbers, the total percent of atheists and agnostics is currently only 5 percent in America. That number is highly misleading, however, when it comes to quantifying their *spiritual impact*. Atheists and agnostics represent much more than 5 percent of the voices kids will hear in the media and see online because so many of them are passionately engaged in advocating their worldview. There's nothing wrong with that, of course. They're as free to share their beliefs as we are. But it does mean young Christians are actively being drawn into a worldview battle that wasn't so prominent even 10 years ago. Unfortunately, they're losing their faith in that battle because they haven't been equipped for the fight. If you want to keep your kids on God's side, you'll have to make sure they're armed.

Solutions for a Hostile World

So what should Christian parents do? We need to raise our kids with a faith that's *specifically prepared* for the challenges they'll face. Let me explain.

We take this idea of *specific preparation* for granted in our everyday lives. If we're going to the beach, we bring a beach ball. If we're going out in the rain, we bring an umbrella. If we're going camping, we bring a tent. And if we're aiming to do something highly challenging, we make *extra* sure we're prepared. For example, imagine you want to climb Mount Everest. If you don't know and physically prepare for the specific challenges you'll face—for example, the temperatures, the oxygen level, and the elevation gain—there's no way you'll make it to the top. *No one* would blindly show up at the mountain having done a few jumping jacks.

How much more important is the goal of raising kids to know and love Jesus? Yet most Christian parents are doing the spiritual equivalent of a few jumping jacks at the mountain of their kids' faith development. They have little idea of the spiritual challenges their children will face, and consequently aren't doing what is *specifically needed* to prepare them for those encounters. Simply taking them to church each Sunday isn't going to cut it (nor should it).

Here's my call to action: We have to stop winging our Christian parenting and start getting in shape to prepare our kids for what's ahead.

Consider this book your personal trainer.

How This Book Will Help You

Based on my experience engaging with skeptics of Christianity, I've selected what I believe are the 40 faith conversations parents most urgently need to have with their kids (over time, of course—I'm not suggesting that "urgently" means in the next couple of weeks!). This "training plan" will (1) introduce you to today's hot-button topics of faith, and (2) give you concise, easy-to-understand answers that will prepare you for these discussions with your kids.

What this book does *not* do is actually script the conversations you should have. But there's a good reason for that: Every family has a

unique set of personalities, ages, interests, relationships, and spiritual histories, so an *effective* one-size-fits-all conversation plan would be impossible to create. In order for dialogue to be meaningful, you'll need to tailor your discussions for your own family.

Although the chapters are somewhat independent of one another, I recommend that you read them sequentially, from chapter 1 to 40. The conversations have been arranged in a framework that will help you build your knowledge in the most logical and impactful way.

On a final note, in case you're wondering how you would ever have time to talk with your kids about the subjects in this book, rest assured that I completely understand how you're feeling. I have three young children. My time is also sucked away by explaining for the one-millionth time why sharing is important, shuttling kids to sports events, and figuring out how to get my kids to (please, please) stop fighting. I get it. The thought of talking with your children about challenging issues of faith in the midst of all that can sound unrealistic or flat-out impossible. But it's not. It's *really* not. You'll be surprised at how often opportunities arise to talk about faith once you're on the lookout for them.

So let's get to it! First up: What evidence is there for God's existence?



PART 1:
Conversations About
GOD



1. What evidence is there for God's existence?

A pastor I know asked his Facebook friends one day, “How do you find God?” Here’s a representative sampling of the 70-plus responses:

“I find Him through worship music.”

“In my husband and children.”

“In the everyday moments of life.”

“That still, small voice within.”

“By being quiet.”

“I just know He’s there.”

Not one of the people who responded mentioned finding God in any objective sense. Why does it matter? Personal experience, while meaningful to a Christian, is of limited value for discussing God’s existence with nonbelievers—or with kids who are being challenged in their faith. To understand why, consider how easily a skeptic could counter each of the answers above.

“How you feel while listening to music has nothing to do with God’s existence.”

“Science shows that your husband and children are a product of blind evolutionary forces, not a loving God.”

“The everyday moments of life are filled with horrible events for some people. That’s evidence against a god, not for one.”

“That still, small voice within is just you talking to yourself.”

“When I’m quiet, I *don’t* find God. So how do you know you’re right?”

“I just know He’s *not* there based on scientific evidence.”

Consider how you would respond if *your kids* made statements like these. Would you be able to offer evidence for God’s existence outside of your personal experience?

Melanie, one of my blog readers, faced that situation with her teenage son. She emailed me one day about his conversion to atheism:

A year ago, when my son was 17, he told me that Christianity is the dumbest, lamest, and most ridiculous religion there is! He turned into a full atheist who has a scientific or philosophical answer to everything. All I had was a faith

that I knew was real and true because I felt it and I believed it. That's it! I had nothing to offer him—no knowledge of the answers he needed. The atheist worldview and philosophies won the battle. I didn't have the answers for my son. They did.

As Melanie said, if we don't have the answers our kids need, atheists will be happy to fill in the gaps.

This chapter will introduce you to three major arguments that provide compelling, objective evidence for God's existence: the cosmological argument, the design argument, and the moral argument. Chances are, your kids won't hear about this kind of evidence in church. *It will be up to you to share it with them.*

The Cosmological Argument

The cosmological argument states that the universe couldn't have just popped into existence on its own—its existence had to have been *caused* by something else. More formally stated:

1. The universe had a beginning.
2. Anything that had a beginning must have been caused by something else.
3. Therefore, the universe was caused by something else, which we call God.

Let's briefly look at each part of this argument.

Part 1: The universe had a beginning.

I know that sounds like a no-brainer: “Of course the universe had a beginning. How else would it have gotten here?” That's the logic of our everyday experience. We know everything around us had a beginning and hasn't just existed forever. But scientists for many years believed the universe *itself* was eternal.

Everything changed in the 1920s, however. Astronomer Edwin Hubble discovered that the universe is expanding. He observed that other galaxies are moving away from us, like spots on an inflating balloon. *If the universe is expanding, it implies a beginning.* Why? If you

rewind the process of a thing expanding (think of *deflating* the balloon), you eventually get back to a single point—the moment that thing *began*. Hubble’s findings had huge significance. They provided scientific evidence that the universe had a beginning after all.

Part 2: Anything that had a beginning must have been caused by something else.

The second part of this argument is somewhat less debated than the first. Almost everyone agrees that things with a beginning are caused by something or someone else; things don’t pop into existence out of thin air. This premise is constantly confirmed by our experience in the natural world.

Part 3: Therefore, the universe was caused by something else, which we call God.

Let’s recap what we have so far: (1) widely accepted scientific evidence that the universe had a beginning, and (2) knowledge that anything with a beginning is caused by something else. That leads us to the conclusion that the *universe* had to have been caused by something else. The million-dollar question: What could that have been?

A skeptic can’t dismissively state, “It could have been anything.” Knowing the capabilities it would take to create our known universe greatly narrows what kind of cause it could have been—for example, it *couldn’t* have been a dog!

Dr. William Lane Craig, a leading Christian philosopher, concludes that the cause of the universe would have to match the following profile: personal (that is, able to choose to create), uncaused, beginningless, changeless, immaterial, timeless, spaceless, and enormously powerful.¹ That’s consistent with what many people call *God*.

But if everything needs a cause, what caused God?

It’s important to understand that the cosmological argument doesn’t say *everything* has a cause. Rather, it says everything *that has a beginning* has a cause. In order for a cause to create a universe of space and time, that cause has to be *outside* of space and time (eternal). Whether you

call that God or anything else, it cannot have had a beginning itself. It has to have been the original “uncaused cause.”

In a nutshell, the cosmological argument provides evidence for God based on the need for a cause of the universe. Now we’ll look at evidence for God based on the *design* of the universe and the life it hosts.

The Design Argument

Generally speaking, the design argument states that a designer (for example, God) must exist because the universe and living things show evidence of design by an intelligent agent. The most famous explanation of this is the watchmaker analogy given by theologian William Paley in 1802. Paley stated that if you were to find a watch in an empty field, you would instinctively conclude that it was designed and not just the result of accidental formation in nature. Similarly, when we look at the universe and life, it’s natural to conclude that there’s a designer because they appear to be so intentionally formed.

Almost all scientists—atheists and theists alike—acknowledge that the universe and life at least have the *appearance* of design rather than the appearance of formation by chance. The question is whether they demonstrate *actual* design attributable to a *designer* (such as God). More specifically, this question is debated in the context of certain areas of biology and physics. We’ll now look briefly at those subjects.

Design in Biology: The Language of DNA

Our bodies are made up of trillions of cells (the basic biological unit in living organisms). Each cell contains DNA, which carries all the information needed to direct the functioning of the human body. The volume of information in human DNA is staggering: It’s roughly equivalent to 12 sets of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*—384 volumes!²

This complex information works amazingly like a computer code or language. *That’s significant because all known codes and languages were created by an intelligent agent and not by chance.* This strongly suggests that the information in human DNA *also* came from an intelligent agent—a “designer” such as God (see chapter 40 for more on this).

Design in Physics: The “Fine-Tuning” of the Earth and Universe

To understand the meaning of “fine-tuning,” Christian apologist and author Sean McDowell suggests imagining that you just stumbled upon a cabin in the woods.³ When you enter it, you discover that your favorite music is playing, your favorite video game is on the television, and your favorite drinks are in the refrigerator. Would you think a cabin like that existed by chance, or would you assume someone prepared it for *you*? It would be hard to imagine that a place so perfectly tailored to your personal needs would have formed that way by chance.

In many ways, our Earth is like this cabin. It appears to have been uniquely designed to support human life—it’s as if the Earth knew we were coming. A planet, its planetary companions, its moon, its star, and its galaxy have dozens of parameters requiring precise values in order for physical life to exist.⁴ For example, if the Earth were tilted a little more or a little less, its surface temperatures would vary too much to support life. Similarly, the physical constants of nature (things like the strength of gravity) have extraordinarily precise values. If they were just a *hair* different, life couldn’t exist.

The two arguments we’ve looked at so far—the cosmological and design arguments—are based on the nature of the physical world around us. The third and final argument is quite different: It considers the knowledge *within* us.

The Moral Argument

The moral argument states that (1) objective moral standards exist outside of personal opinion, and (2) the best explanation for the existence of those standards is the existence of a moral law giver (such as God). Again, let’s look at each part of the argument.

1. Objective moral standards exist.

We all have a moral intuition that immediately tells us certain things are wrong regardless of opinion—for example, torturing someone for fun. It seems obvious we’re born with that moral understanding. However, there are two major objections to the claim that objective standards actually exist.

Objection 1: Cultures have different ideas of right and wrong, so there must not be an objective morality. This sounds reasonable at first, but it's actually a weak objection. To see why, imagine ten people counting how many marbles are in a jar. If four people give the wrong number, does that mean there is no correct answer? Of course not. Similarly, it doesn't logically follow that there's no objectively correct morality just because cultures sometimes disagree over what's right and wrong.

Objection 2: Morals are just a matter of personal opinion. Some people would object to the marbles example because they claim morals are just a matter of personal opinion and don't *have* correct answers. This idea is pervasive in our culture, but it's easy to see the contradiction in such a belief. If morals are just a matter of opinion, you can never legitimately say anything or anyone is objectively wrong. But if you steal a car from a person who claims that morals are just a matter of opinion, you can bet they'll still say you did something bad. Telling them that, in your opinion, stealing is just fine won't go over very well. While it may be convenient to claim morals are just a matter of opinion, no one actually lives as if they believe that's true. The fact that at least *some* objective moral standards exist is hard to deny.⁵

2. The best explanation for the existence of objective moral standards is the existence of a moral lawgiver.

If there's an objective set of moral laws that, to some degree, guide all humans, where do those laws come from? *Laws imply a lawgiver.* Therefore, the existence of objective morality is best explained by the existence of a lawgiving God.

Before we conclude, it's important to note what the moral argument does *not* suggest. Many people erroneously believe Christians think non-Christians can't be "good" without God. Not so. The Bible says God gave *everyone* a moral compass (Romans 1:18-23). Anyone can exhibit good behavior in relation to those objective standards, whether they choose to acknowledge the Source of those standards or not. The question is not whether people can be good without believing in God, but whether anything can legitimately be *called* good without a God who defines objective standards.

Three Powerful Lines of Evidence for God’s Existence

Contrary to the popular claims of atheists, there *is* powerful objective evidence for God’s existence (see chapters 8 and 11 for more on this). In this chapter, we looked at the three most frequently discussed arguments that provide this evidence: the cosmological argument, the design argument, and the moral argument.

To be clear, these arguments don’t show that the creating, designing, and moral lawgiving God is the same as the biblical God. In fact, some people have come to believe there’s a supreme being based on this evidence but continue to reject any revealed religion.⁶ That means this kind of evidence is *necessary* but not *sufficient* for demonstrating the truth of Christianity. It should be valued for what it is: the critical starting point that opens the door to discussing the topics covered in the rest of this book.

2. How could a good God allow evil and suffering?

My daughters are both strong-willed. As parents of strong-willed children know, that’s a euphemism for “they can quickly drag me to the very edge of my sanity.” The good side of this challenge (or so I tell myself) is that it gives me plenty of opportunities to talk to them about how we can work with God daily to have a “good heart” and to “want the things that God wants.”

One night, I was tucking my oldest daughter into bed after a particularly difficult day. I didn’t have to tell her just how hard it had been. Unsolicited, she cried, “Mommy, I tried soooo hard to be good today. But I just kept messing up. I don’t know how to be better like God wants!”

I empathetically smiled at her, thinking of how the apostle Paul felt the same frustration of not being fully transformed in this life (Romans 7:15-20). But before I could dispense my motherly wisdom on why we’ll never be perfect, she took the conversation in another direction.

“Why doesn’t God just stop me from being mean before it happens? Like, right before I’m mean, why doesn’t He just make me be nice?”

My son, listening with interest from the other room, yelled over, “Yeah, like I don’t understand why He doesn’t just stop bad guys before they do bad stuff. Why wouldn’t He just want good things to happen?”

There it was. My young twins had already sniffed out a perceived contradiction in their budding faith: If God is perfectly good, how can there be evil in the world He created? My kids were in good company by identifying the issue. It’s a question that’s been asked for thousands of years and continues to be one of the most significant challenges to Christianity today.

Millions of pages have been written on the problem of evil. This chapter will introduce you to *one* major framework Christians use to address the issue. If you’d like to do further reading, I highly recommend the resource in this chapter’s endnotes as a starting point.¹

Defining the Problem of Evil

In chapter 1, we looked at the claim that there’s no evidence *for* God. Here, we’re looking at a very different kind of problem. We’re looking at what atheists assert is evidence *against* God: the existence of evil.

Why is the existence of evil such a difficult problem for Christianity? The heart of the issue is this: If God is all-good, He *would* eliminate evil. If God is all-powerful, He *could* eliminate evil. But evil exists. How, then, can the existence of evil be reconciled with the existence of God?

Christians often run straight to Genesis 3 to answer any and all questions of this nature. This is the passage that describes what is often called “the fall of man.” When Adam disobeyed God by eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God said:

Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, “You must not eat from it,” cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return (Genesis 3:17-19).

Many Christians believe all evil and suffering in the world can be traced back to this “fall.”² That said, there are a couple reasons why we need to address the problem of evil beyond a pat response of, “The Bible tells us we’re a fallen people in a fallen world.”

First, when the problem of evil is raised by an atheist, keep in mind that person doesn’t believe in the truth of the Bible. In order for our kids to engage with nonbelievers on this issue, they need an understanding of how it can *logically* be possible for God and evil to coexist.

The second reason is that the problem of evil can be a very emotional one—one that’s often tied to a tragic personal experience. It can be difficult even for Christians to understand how the bad choice of one person—Adam—led to all the evil and suffering in our world. It’s all the more impossible to imagine for nonbelievers who have experienced tragedy closely. Gaining a deeper understanding of how God and evil can coexist helps everyone—believer *and* nonbeliever—make further sense of this difficult problem.

Let’s look now at one framework many Christians use to address the problem of evil.

Did God Create Evil?

There are many aspects of the problem of evil, but the starting point for discussion is typically this: If God created everything, and evil is something, doesn’t that mean God created evil? Because Christians believe God is perfectly good, and that God created only good things (Genesis 1:31), it can seem impossible to answer this question without admitting to a major contradiction. But the premises of the argument aren’t quite right. Let’s see why.

There’s no doubt from the Christian perspective that God created everything (Genesis 1:1; John 1:3; Colossians 1:16). Christians also believe that evil is very real. (The reason it’s important to state that seemingly obvious point is that there are some religions, like Christian Science, which claim evil is *not* real.) The tricky part is what we mean when we say that evil is “something.” *We need to understand that evil is*

real, but it doesn't exist as a "something" by itself. Instead, evil is the *corruption* of a good thing.

That's not as hard to understand as it might seem at first. Think of rot in a tree, for example. Rot doesn't exist by itself—it only exists as a corruption of the formerly good tree. Another example would be a wound on your body. Thinking about evil in this way means that God created only good things, but evil is the corruption of His good creation.

So Where Does Corruption Come From?

So far we've established that God didn't create evil, but evil (the corruption of a good thing) does happen, and God obviously *allows* it to happen. So where does corruption come from? First, let's consider human corruption, or moral evil. Later in this chapter we'll consider corruption in nature, or natural evil (for example, tornadoes and hurricanes).

Why didn't God make perfect humans who *can't* be corrupted? The traditional answer is free will, which is our ability to make choices without external coercion. It's one of the good things God created. God made moral evil *possible* by giving us free will, but we are the ones responsible for making it *actual*.

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis took this a step further and proposed why free will might be so important to God that He would choose to make free creatures despite knowing the evil that would inevitably result from their choices:

Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating. . . . Of course God knew what would happen if they used their freedom the wrong way: apparently He thought it worth the risk.³

In other words, God wanted us to *freely* love Him. A forced love is no love at all.

But Why Doesn't God Just **Stop** Moral Evil?

At this point, many people ask why an all-good and all-powerful God doesn't just stop the moral evil that's *possible* before it *happens* (this is what my twins effectively asked). To answer this, we need to be careful about how we define *all-powerful*. Christians often say, "God can do anything!" But that's actually not true. For example, it's impossible for God to lie (Hebrews 6:18). Lying would be contrary to God's very nature. In addition, God can't do anything contradictory, like make a square circle or a stone so heavy He can't lift it.

Given that God chose to create us with free will, is it possible to destroy moral evil without destroying our present world? Actually, no. This is one of those contradictions—like creating a square circle—that makes something impossible: God can't *force* us to *freely* make good choices. The only way God could destroy evil would be to destroy our freedom.

To conclude our discussion of moral evil, it's important to note that Christians believe the story doesn't stop there. Christians acknowledge that this is the current state of affairs, but that one day God will defeat evil by bringing this world to an end and creating a new Earth (Revelation 21–22). This new Earth will be free from evil, suffering, and death.

What About Natural Evil?

Let's return now to the question of where corruption *in nature* comes from. Most theologians agree that natural evil is more difficult to address than moral evil. While skeptics might admit that God need not be responsible for the free will actions of humans, they are quick to point out that humans don't choose devastating natural disasters.

The most common response to the problem of natural evil is that it's actually the *byproduct* of good processes. For example, earthquakes are the consequence of plate tectonics, or the movement of giant plates under the ocean floor. Without these plates, we would have no continents. They're a necessary prerequisite to human survival on the only planet known to have life. Occasionally, however, these same processes hurt or kill people. Author Dinesh D'Souza notes, "Our planet

requires oxygen and a warming sun and water in order for us to live here, and we appreciate this, even though we recognize that people can get sunstroke and drown in the ocean. So, too, it seems that plate tectonics are...a ‘central requirement for life’ as we know it.”⁴

In other cases, things that appear to be natural evils are actually the result of moral evils. For example, millions of Africans die of starvation because their corrupt governments don’t allow the necessary food to reach them—*not* because the Earth doesn’t produce enough food. In such cases, the problem circles right back to individual free will.

Ultimately, we can’t explain every instance of natural evil. What we *can* say is that God must have *morally sufficient reasons* for permitting the natural evil we do see.

The Problem of Evil Is Tough but Not Insurmountable

While the problem of evil is undoubtedly a difficult challenge to Christianity, that doesn’t mean there are no answers we can offer. As we just saw, moral and natural evil can both be viewed as byproducts of God’s perfectly good creation. We can best help our kids in this area by honestly acknowledging the enormous difficulty of the issue, introducing them to thoughtful answers like those discussed here, and pointing them back to the overwhelming evidence for God discussed in chapter 1.

3. Why would God command the genocide of the Canaanites?

When I was a kid, my favorite church song was “Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho.” If you grew up in a Protestant church, you can probably hear the tune in your head right now. I was fascinated by the thought of how the “walls came a-tumblin’ down” after the Israelites marched around the city of Jericho seven times. And I *loved* falling to the ground with my friends when we shouted the last “down” in the song together.