

A Man's Battle

When I was 14 years old, I began attending a Catholic high school about an hour away from the small town where my family lived. This was a seismic shift in my life. I had rarely ventured beyond the town where we lived, which boasted a population of 5,000 souls, and then usually to visit relatives. Now there would be a long commute each day, a new school and entirely new classmates.

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We had a family friend who taught there, and my parents knew another couple who sent their son to the school. Instead of my old class of 60-odd students, most of whom I had known since kindergarten, my incoming freshman class would have approximately 200. The prospect was at once hugely exciting—new frontiers, adventure—but also, to my young self, daunting.

Football, Jake and Loss

I signed up to play freshman football, a sport I had been playing since I was nine. Being part of the team gave me the opportunity to meet new people in a smaller setting and identify a group of friends early on to call my own.

One of the people I met first on the team was Jake. He was a big guy, tall, even as a freshman. He was always smiling, but on the football field he was tough and hit hard. We became fast friends, for freshman year and the rest of high school.

He was a devoted Christian, one of the first people I knew who was comfortable talking about his spiritual life. I spent a

goodly amount of time at his house, where I was treated like another son. He had seven siblings—two brothers, five sisters—and his house hummed with activity.

Something began to go wrong as college ended. I had invited Jake to a family get-together of mine in Arkansas, a hiking trip, and toward the end of the weekend he said to me cryptically, “I don’t know if this med school thing is going to work out.” I was surprised, but I didn’t pursue it. I wish I had.

Ten months later, after graduation, I left to spend a year teaching in England. Jake stayed on for a fifth year of college. We talked very little, but he seemed down, uncertain about medical school and uncharacteristically bleak. I recall a stray comment he made, “I don’t want you to lose whatever respect for me you have left.” It was a strange statement. There was no one I respected more.

While I was back home in Missouri for spring break, the phone rang. Even now I can remember the exact spot where I was standing, leaning against the kitchen counter that was topped with green tile. On the other end was the father of another of my close high school friends.

“Josh, you’re home,” he said, surprised I had been the one to pick up. “Have you heard about Jake?”

I knew immediately. He didn’t need to say anything more. I knew at that moment my friend was gone. He had put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger. He was 22.

Face to Face with Darkness

His death was shattering in many ways, and among the things it destroyed in my life was any illusion that all is well with the world, or with me. The world is not as it should be, nor am I, nor is any man. There is darkness in the world that resists what is good and strains to destroy it. There is

darkness within us. This is a reality each man must face. This is his battleground.

Our modern, Epicurean culture has trouble facing it. It wants to insist that human nature is inherently good and that evil, if there is any such thing, is a product of corrupt social systems. It's the fault of "the patriarchy" or systemic racism or capitalism or the like. By the same token, Epicurean liberals flee from trial and pain. They have nothing useful to say about these things—other than to avoid them. The Epicurean idea of character formation comes down to this: ignore your vices, pursue pleasure and prioritize happiness—and be a generically "nice person" who won't stand in the way of anyone else pursuing self-gratification.

One of the reasons the Bible is so out of favor with the left is that it takes a very different view. The Bible has much to say about evil, and much more to say about a man's duty to confront it, in himself above all. Man's commission to subdue the earth's chaos and bring forth its potential means confronting the evil that chaos conceals. The battle with evil is the proving ground of a man's character. That is truth today's men need to hear.

The Duty to Guard

God assigned Adam two tasks when he brought him to Eden. The first was to work the garden. The second was to "keep" it, as in to guard. A perimeter needs guarding only when there is danger, and God's instruction to Adam to "keep" the garden indicates danger waits beyond Eden's boundaries. This is the reality of evil. It threatens us and what we hold dear. It threatens the good work of God. Someone must stand between the ever-present threat of evil and the gift of life. That someone is a man.

The Bible does not shy away from powerful men. On the contrary, it teaches that powerful men are necessary. Genesis

says that God gave Adam power: strength to be used in the holy task of expanding the garden. But God gives Adam no authorization to dominate or destroy. Even as He delegates Adam (and Eve) “dominion,” He charges Adam to guard carefully the good things in his care. Adam has power for the purpose of defending others. So do we. But what happens when we do not use it that way, or do not use it at all?

The Power of Our Choices

In the face of evil, we can choose to confront the darkness or we can choose to go along, to compromise. Adam chooses the path of least resistance, which is to say he does nothing, as men are often tempted to do. He does not place himself between his family and danger; he does not challenge the dark impulses of his soul. The consequences are disastrous—for him, of course. But Adam led a consequential life, and so do you. His choices are disastrous for the world.

The serpent was widely portrayed in cultures across the ancient Near East as an agent of destruction and evil. It lives up to that billing in Genesis. The snake convinces Eve to disobey God’s instructions and eat from the tree of knowledge, one of the holy trees planted personally by God. The choice of tree is significant. God planted the trees of knowledge and life together, suggesting the way to life everlasting comes by way of knowledge, and knowledge by way of obedience to God. The trees represented God’s promises, but the humans were not to eat of them until God said so.

The serpent is the voice of envy and resentment, the voice of selfish ambition. The serpent is there because Adam did not do as God instructed. He did not guard the perimeter. His negligence exposed his wife to darkness.

Things go rapidly downhill from there. Eve accepts the serpent’s invitation. Rather than resist, confront the snake or push back, Adam does the same. He gives in. He chooses

himself. The darkness that was once outside the garden comes rushing into the garden itself. Genesis says that for the first time, Adam feels anger and shame—and promptly shifts blame and lies. Confronted by God, Adam first hides, fleeing responsibility, then accuses his wife.

Adam's decisions embolden evil, and let it loose in the world in a new and powerful form. And this is a warning to every man. Your choices matter, for better or worse. For Adam, in this instance, it was worse.

When we choose evil rather than confront it, when we coddle it and side with it, we bring ourselves and those we love closer to death. There is a kind of death in lying, in blaming, in living in resentment. It is a slow death of the soul. Adam's choices brought him into this place of death, to live in the midst of it. One of Adam's sons will kill the other, and the entire human race, as it grows, will be vexed by vice and misery, part of its inheritance from Adam.

This is the chaos and darkness in which every man lives, the disorder that ate away at my friend Jake's hope and that I never felt more deeply than when I lost him.

In the days after Jake's death, I observed a strange pattern in myself. On one hand, I dreaded any invitation, however well-meaning, to "talk about it." On the other, I resented those of my friends and colleagues who failed to inquire about or at least acknowledge what had happened. How could they just go on, I wondered, as if nothing was changed, as if all of this was somehow normal?

I remember returning home after Jake's funeral and thinking my room looked strange, as if the furniture had been shifted around. Nothing had in fact changed, not physically. Only in me—facing the evil that haunts all our lives.

Fleeing Responsibility

The question is what we are going to do about it. Our modern culture absolves us of personal responsibility and urges us to blame someone or something else—society, perhaps, or “the system.” This is because modern liberalism views evil very differently from the Bible. As a result, it instructs men to mold their characters into a different shape.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an 18th-century Frenchman whose ideas helped inspire the French Revolution and much later liberal thought, considered himself a kind of Epicurean. It was his contention that man in the state of nature was good, blissfully simple and free. Man’s freedom consisted in the fact that he knew no distinction between his desires and his duties. In fact, he had no duties, not to speak of. He could live for himself: his duty was to satisfy his needs.

Suffering came along only when society intervened, Rousseau said. According to him, society made man self-conscious. It imposed on him arbitrary standards and intolerant moral precepts. It spoke of God and duty. It encouraged man to look on himself and criticize.

You have no doubt heard this line of reasoning before. The worst sin is the sin of intolerance, we are frequently told. The worst thing you can be is judgmental. Rousseau argued society was at fault; society made man judgmental and this caused man pain—it divided him against himself. This inner conflict in turn produced misery, and miserable men did miserable things. Evil, Rousseau said, sprang from a divided soul.

What was needed, Rousseau said, was to liberate man from the moral shackles society had forged for him by getting him back in touch with himself. Christian writers down the centuries had advised men to turn inward to hear the voice of God. Rousseau advised man to grow quiet and look within to . When you look in your soul, Rousseau said, you discover your inner goodness. In the end, the character they lionize is

relentlessly focused on self.

From Self to Sacrifice

The Bible takes a different view. Faced with evil and pain, the answer is not to set yourself free but to give yourself up, to make yourself expendable. The Bible urges different qualities of character: self-renunciation and sacrifice. The Bible says meaning is found, and the soul is formed, in confronting the darkness and setting oneself against it, standing between other people and evil.

Does this explain why there is evil in the world to begin with? Of course not. But it tells a man what he is supposed to do about it. It tells him that his pain and hardship can be turned to good if he will take up his post and stand in the gap.

For this very reason, many societies press boys through rites of suffering as a gateway to full manhood, so that the boy will learn that to become a man is to become self-sacrificial, to be willing to give one's life for others. This was true of the Romans. For them, a "male was transformed into a man by the willful expenditure of energy"—more specifically, by the willful, voluntary expenditure of his life.

When I was five or six years old, I was out one summer day in the fields with my grandfather Harold, struggling with the laces on my work boots. They were thicker than the laces of my shoes, harder to hold and harder for small hands to tie. I had to ask for my grandfather's help, and as he bent down to take hold of the laces, I complained vaguely about having to wear boots at all. He replied, "You need to learn to tie your boots. You have to know how to get them on right." And then added, "You know, soldiers wear boots." Still a little sullen, I replied to this that I wasn't a soldier, so I didn't need to put on the boots. He replied, "You may be, one day. If your country calls, you'll go."

He had something specific in mind. One of his sons, my uncle Gene, had been drafted for service in the U.S. military at the height of the Vietnam War. It was a point of pride in my family that despite potential grounds for deferment, he had served in the 101st Airborne. My mother showed me the newspaper clippings my grandmother had carefully preserved from the county paper with pictures of Uncle Gene leaving for Vietnam. That's part of what it meant to be a man—to go stand on the line, to go and defend. To confront evil and do something about it. To forge the kind of character that can be a solution to evil. We will have better families, better churches and places of work—a better nation—when we have men with character like that.

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Josh Hawley is a New York Times best-selling author, constitutional lawyer and U.S. Senator for the state of Missouri, elected in 2018 as the youngest senator in the country. He also served as Missouri's Attorney General, the state's top prosecutor, from 2017-2019. Josh is married to Erin, and they live in Ozark, Missouri, with their three children.