

Why Does God Allow Suffering?



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“The most overwhelming objection to belief that there is a wise and loving power behind the universe is the existence of so much pain and anguish in the world”—Richard Harries, author

We tend to be comfortable believing in God when all is going our way. But let tragedy strike and we can quickly begin to doubt His very existence.

Look at the spiritual condition of the world. Agnostics—people who declare their skepticism of the existence of a supreme, intelligent Creator who controls the universe—influence educational, scientific and governmental policies. The existence of suffering in the world is one of the most common justifications for agnostics’ lack of belief and faith in God.

Not understanding the reasons that suffering abounds, they conclude that neither God nor religion offers answers to the world’s problems. As British historian and author Paul Johnson observed: “I suspect that the problem of evil drives more thoughtful people away from religion than any other difficulty.”



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in Europe in the age of science repeatedly shows that belief in God can be overwhelmed by suffering” (*The Futures of Christianity*, p. 339). He explained how this came about: “The first world war was the great [religious] catastrophe. It did less physical damage than the second world war—but far more damage to Christianity . . . Very little in the traditions of the European churches had equipped them for the spiritual crisis . . . They all encouraged their members to pray for victory and safety,

In Europe, for example, agnosticism is rampant. There the erosion of religious faith began in earnest when the enormity of the suffering and death of World War I hit home to the millions of surviving Europeans. More than 10 million had died and another 20 million had been wounded in that massive conflict.

As British author David L. Edwards wrote: “The experience

only to find that a cloud of poison gas obscured all the doctrines which had seemed so bright in days of peace . . . It was a war that did great damage to the old style of the churches’ teaching that God was in control like the clergyman in his parish” (pp. 306-307).

Since then most Europeans have come to believe that faith in God is hardly justifiable. Many have expressed the opinion that God was deaf to anguished cries emanating from the rain-soaked trenches of World War I and the Nazi death camps of World War II. This wave of doubt has been so great in Europe that in some areas many ancient church buildings have been sold for use as bookshops, office space and even nightclubs.

How do we reconcile anguish and suffering with the Bible’s portrayal of a loving God? Why would He allow the horrendous miseries that afflict humanity? Does the Bible explain suffering? Does it reveal a God who can exercise control over the universe? If He has that kind of power, why doesn’t He immediately put an end to misery?

Many people, the faithful and the faithless, look at calamities—whether personal, national or global—and agonize over these questions. In this lesson we will see how the Bible addresses this enigma: Why does God allow suffering?

FREEDOM OF CHOICE OR FREEDOM FROM SUFFERING?

If we are clearly to understand why God allows suffering, we must squarely face another important question. How can we have true freedom of choice and still gain freedom from suffering? We desperately want both. But are both possible at the same time?

If there is any single ideal that is practically worshiped in the West, it is freedom. Freedom is the bedrock of our social system. Many would be willing to defend freedom and self-determination with their lives.

God Himself has given people freedom of choice. In fact, such is part of God’s great design. He does not force us down a particular path, but He allows us to choose the way we will go. On the subject of choice, God told ancient Israel, “I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life . . .” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky passionately expressed what may be the West’s prevailing view of the importance of free will. In 1864, in his *Notes From the*

Underground, he wrote of our need for self-determination: “Man needs only his free will, no matter what it costs and where it leads.”

But what are the advantages and disadvantages of man’s free will? We need to keep in mind that freedom of choice allows for both *good* and *evil* outcomes. The cost can be enormous. Our choices can lead to disastrous consequences.

In the early 1900s, as now, people freely made choices. National leaders made fateful decisions. Pride, stubbornness, fear, strategic timetables and entangling political and military alliances all played a part in starting World War I. Once conditions were in place, the nations at war found themselves trapped in a canyon of continual, almost unending slaughter of young soldiers. We see similar patterns throughout history.

But, in all the chaos, the real question is not whether God is alive and listening to the participants, but *whether they are listening to Him*.

Paul succinctly describes people’s condition: “Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known” (Romans 3:15-17). Unfortunately, not all destruction, misery, heartache and suffering come on those who make the bad decisions. Many of the consequences of our choices fall indiscriminately on the innocent. Blameless people can and often do get hurt. All too frequently those who had nothing to do with bad choices suffer most from them.

Moses confirms this principle: “The LORD is long-suffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He by no means clears the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation” (Numbers 14:18). Some sins’ consequences last for generations.

Mankind’s wrong choices are the cause of most of the suffering we see in the world.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Only the Holy Scriptures reveal the true and lasting solutions for people’s suffering. It is to God’s Word that we must look to solve our problems.

Who, according to the Bible, is the ultimate ruler over the nations?

“O Lord God of our fathers, are You not God in heaven, and do You not rule over the nations, and in Your hand is there not power and might, so that no one is able to withstand You?” (2 Chronicles 20:6).

How does the Bible compare the power of God to the power of nations?

“Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket, and are counted as the small dust on the scales; . . . and they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless” (Isaiah 40:15-17, compare verses 22-23).

Does the Bible reveal how God interacts with nations’ leaders to carry out His will?

“Now in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the LORD spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah” (Ezra 1:1-2; compare 2 Chronicles 36:22).

God revealed to the prophet Jeremiah that after 70 years in Babylonian captivity some of the Jewish people would be allowed to return to their homeland. They would rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the temple.



In Europe the erosion of religious faith began in earnest when the enormity of the suffering and death of World War I hit home to the millions of surviving Europeans.

To fulfill this prophecy, God influenced and perhaps controlled some of the thoughts and decisions of Cyrus, king of Persia. He “stirred up the spirit of Cyrus” so that the king would issue an edict allowing Jerusalem and the temple to be rebuilt.

Can God influence the head of any nation at will?

“The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD . . . He turns it wherever He wishes” (Proverbs 21:1).

We can see that the reason God has not stopped human suffering and anguish on the earth is *not* because He lacks control over what human beings do. He can control even those at the highest levels of government. What we see is that He has *chosen* to exercise that control exceedingly sparingly.

God has a plan, a great purpose He is working out. That great design requires that He allow people to exercise free will. We have the option to make choices contrary to His law. God—in carrying out His purpose—permits people to make choices that oppose His perfect will.

WHY SUFFERING?

A famous author pointedly asked: “If God is infinitely good, and infinitely powerful too, why should evil

exist at all?” That question is one we all want answered.

God reveals His purpose for permitting misery during the present era, when we must struggle against our destructive nature and reasoning. It is our free will—our freedom of choice, our free moral agency—that provides the key to understanding why God allows evil and suffering to exist.

What major choices did our first parents face?

“The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:9).

The first book of the Bible talks about two trees God created. One represented the way to life and abundant blessings, the other the way to suffering, anguish and death. He gave Adam and Eve a choice of the two trees. But He did not leave our first parents in the dark. He explained the consequences of the choices they could make and even commanded them not to make the wrong one (Genesis 2:15-17; compare 3:3).

What all-important decision did Adam and Eve make?

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6).

Although man’s Creator had clearly warned the first man not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge

of good and evil, He did not prevent Adam and Eve from making a wrong choice. God had created them both in His own image and gave them freedom to choose.

God is the epitome of holy, righteous character. He has chosen always to do what is wise and good. No power greater than He forces Him to be righteous. Righteousness has always been and always will be His way of life. His nature is love, the highest expression of His perfect character (1 John 4:8, 16).

Because God wants us to be like Him, He did not make us as automatons. If He had done so, we could not build righteous character, the same character He has. He could not fashion us into His spiritual image. To build character, we must evaluate our choices and recognize their consequences. We must choose between right and wrong, wisdom and foolishness, carelessness and vigilance.

What happens when we make wrong choices?

“He who sows iniquity will reap sorrow . . .” (Proverbs 22:8).

Paul explained the principle of reaping what one sows in Galatians 6:7-8. The New International Version’s rendering of this verse is especially clear: “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.”

The biblical record shows that God rarely interferes

Satan’s Role in Causing Suffering

Satan is a major reason for people’s suffering. The Bible tells of “that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan” (Revelation 20:2), who rules over mankind as the “prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). As “the god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4), Satan is the instigator of much of humanity’s misery.

Peter warns Christians that their “adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Jesus tells us, in the parable of the sower and the seed, that, as soon as many people hear God’s Word explained to them, “Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts” (Mark 4:15).

The apostle Paul asked Timothy to instruct and admonish “those who are in opposition” so they could “come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:25-26). Jesus sent Paul to the gentiles “to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18).

We can see from these passages that Satan exerts a tremendous and pervasive power over mankind. How great is his influence? The Bible tells us that “the

whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 John 5:19).

Shortly before Christ returns, Satan and his demons will instigate a time of trouble that will prove to be more terrible than any tragedy human beings have ever experienced (Matthew 24:21-22). The suffering it will bring is unimaginable.

At that time Satan will mislead mankind through a “lawless one” whose influence will be “according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception . . .” (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10).

Satan’s influence is the cause of much of the division and animosity among nations, races, religions and individuals. The Bible calls him “the tempter” (Matthew 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:5). He capitalizes on our weaknesses to tempt and lure us into sin and conflict with each other (1 Corinthians 7:5). By these means he instigates attitudes and behaviors in people that bring conflict, injury, heartache and death.

God, however, sets limits on Satan’s power and influence over mankind (Job 1:12; 2:6). God will not allow Satan to defeat His master plan for the salvation of humanity. God will never relinquish His ultimate control over the affairs of man.

with man's free ability to make choices. We find instances in the Bible in which God temporarily intervened to inhibit either a nation's or an individual's freedom to choose a course of action—in some cases to protect His servants, in others to fulfill prophecy.

On one occasion He caused King Saul to involuntary "prophecy" to protect His servant David. But soon Saul returned to his old ways.

God also intervened to protect Abraham's wife, Sarah, from the illicit intentions of a king. God has frequently intervened in human affairs to assist or protect His faithful servants.

In general, God's purpose is best served by His giving us freedom of choice—letting matters take their own course, even if our hasty and wrongheaded decisions sometimes bring on us enormous sufferings. Otherwise we would not learn the importance of righteous character, nor would we fully grasp the terrible consequences of sinful behavior.

For example, God does not prevent people from overindulging in alcohol. He does not take away their freedom of choice, nor does He prevent them from suffering the consequences of their choices. But, if an abuser of alcohol should earnestly seek spiritual power and help from God to combat his weakness, God is willing, through the intervention of Jesus Christ, to help him (Hebrews 2:16-18; 4:14-16). God's ears are always open to the prayers of people who sincerely desire to obey His commands (1 Peter 3:12).

THE IMPORTANCE OF GODLY CHARACTER

Many people have wondered: Why didn't God in the beginning simply create humans as spirit beings without human nature? Why did He first make us physical—from the dust of the earth—then offer us eternal life only if we vigorously resist the weaknesses of our flesh?

If God can do all things, why didn't He just create us with perfect character? In other words, what is the purpose of this difficult and trying physical life? Couldn't our heartache and suffering have been avoided?

Of course God could have done all of that—if He had been willing to create us without the personal character we need for making personal choices. It all gets back to our free will, our freedom of choice. God Himself had a choice about how man would be created. He could have made us automatons, functioning like programmed robots whose only course of action is to carry out the instructions of their maker. But He chose to create us *like Him*, capable of making choices that are limited only by our knowledge and character. This requires that we learn right from wrong and that our character develop gradually by our decisions under God's guidance and assistance.

Is God actively creating character in human beings?

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

"... Be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and . . . put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24, King James Version).

God is not finished with us. We are still His workmanship. He is creating in us "righteousness and true holiness"—His character.

As long as we are human, our character is not firm; it is not permanent. We can change our minds and behavior. We can make mistakes and learn from them. We can learn from the fruits of our right and wrong choices.

Since we can change our minds—and repent of our errors—God can change us even more and create in us the will and the capacity to steadfastly choose what is right over what is wrong. "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).

Of course, God requires that we first recognize and willingly reverse our wrong behavior by allowing His Spirit to empower us to make those changes. Then we can become a new person "created in righteousness and true holiness."



God does not prevent people from overindulging in alcohol. Nor does He prevent them from suffering the consequences of their choices.

What aspect of our character is most important to God?

"For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

The Bible uses the word *heart* to describe our innermost thoughts, motives and attitudes. God knows what goes on inside our minds. He evaluates our intents and motivations (Hebrew 4:12-13). The *internal aspects of our character* count the most with Him. He considers our behavior in light of what is in our hearts (compare Jeremiah 17:10; Deuteronomy 10:12).

Can God change our hearts?

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them" (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

If we yield our will to God, He will empower us through the Holy Spirit to live by the principles of righteousness as He defines them in His laws. Each of us must be “a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). It is through studying the Scriptures that we “may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). God writes what we learn in our hearts by His Spirit (Hebrews 8:10; 2 Corinthians 3:3), making it a permanent part of our thinking and nature.

How can God be sure what is really in someone’s heart?

“What is man, that You should exalt him, that You should set Your heart on him, that You should visit him every morning, and test him every moment?” (Job 7:17-18).

We face trials and difficulties so God can know how committed we are to His way of life. He has to find out if our character will endure hardship and suffering. Only then can He trust us with the powers that come with eternal life. This life is not only for building character; it is for testing that character.

Why did God test ancient Israel?

“And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was

in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not” (Deuteronomy 8:2, compare verses 15-16).

Does God test the faithfulness of even the righteous?

“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:6-7).

Even the righteous are tested to see how faithful they remain in their commitment to God (Psalm 11:5). When we face difficult choices, God can see how committed to Him we are. Only when we obey Him under duress is the depth of our character fully evident. Paul tells us we should “glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3-4, compare Revelation 2:10).

Will God allow us to be tested beyond what we can endure?

“No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be

Glossary

Anoint: To place oil on the head of a person to request healing of an illness (James 5:14-16). The oil symbolizes God’s Spirit, which is the power of God.

Character: The discernment, willingness and determination to make and carry out proper moral, ethical and spiritual choices regardless of the circumstances, pressures and tendency to do otherwise.

Endurance: The ability to withstand prolonged hardship or adversity. The act of staying the course.

Free will, free choice or free moral agency: The freedom to decide without undue pressure whether to embrace or reject a particular course of action; the characteristic of not being governed by prior causes (such as instinct) or divine intervention but able to decide for oneself.

Fruit: The result of a decision or course of action. The fruit of the Spirit is the consequence of the Holy Spirit at work in a person’s life.

Human nature: The characteristics, tendencies and behavior of a human being. It is fundamentally neutral, although over time self-gratification tends to predominate. As creatures of choice, we are enjoined and expected to resist the pulls of base self-motivation and respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Persecution: Affliction, abuse, harassment or attacks on our person or character. Persecution for obedience to God allows us to suffer for righteousness’ sake. Such abuse may include personal, political, religious and psychological persecution.

Reconciliation: Restoration; the opposite of alienation. We are reconciled to a relationship with God the Father through repentance of sin and acceptance of the sacrifice of Christ. Alienation from God results from sin (Isaiah 59:1-2).

Repentance: A reversal of direction in attitude and actions. We repent when we realize we are headed the wrong way, then stop, turn around and begin moving in the right direction. Spiritually, it involves genuine sorrow for sins and a resolve to do what is right.

Reward: Something God gives to those who please Him. In the broadest sense, a reward is whatever we receive for our actions, good or bad. We cannot earn our salvation, which is a gift from God (Romans 6:23), yet Christ shows through the parable of the talents that some will receive greater rewards than others in the Kingdom of God because of their service to their Creator (Matthew 25:14-30). The righteous reap their ultimate reward at the time of the resurrection of the just.

Sovereignty (of God): The unchallenged rule, power and autonomy of God. The Creator is sovereign in that no one can successfully challenge His supremacy.

Suffering: Pain caused by physical, mental or psychological factors or any combination of the three.

Trial: A test of faith, patience or stamina through being subjected to suffering or temptation. We are tried through the difficulties of life. Such tests work patience and build and reveal our character. “If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small,” wrote Solomon (Proverbs 24:10). Successfully endured trials build holy, righteous character and trust in God.

able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13, New Revised Standard Version).

JESUS CHRIST'S PROFOUND EXAMPLE OF SUFFERING

Why did Christ suffer?

"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God . . ." (1 Peter 3:18).

Christ did not suffer because He deserved it. He endured suffering for our benefit: to help fulfill God's purpose for us.

During His ministry Jesus Christ was ridiculed, despised and rejected by the religious leaders of His day. This was a large part of His personal afflictions before His crucifixion. His countrymen demanded His execution. In the end, even His disciples abandoned Him to suffer His fate alone. "He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). "He came to His own, and his own did not receive him" (John 1:11). He endured the full range of human suffering.

After He had triumphed over death through His resurrection, Jesus immediately explained to His disciples the necessity of His suffering (Luke 24:46). Since He was sinless, He did not suffer for any sins of His own, but for *ours*. No one else has ever experienced the fate of mankind resting upon His shoulders in this way. He took the penalty for our sins upon Himself. That is what made His suffering and death absolutely necessary for our salvation.

Every Christian should readily identify with Christ's suffering. Through it He made our salvation possible. Had He not willingly suffered for our sakes, all of us would perish—never to live again.

How severely did God test the faithfulness of Christ?

"And He was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan . . ." (Mark 1:13).

" . . . In the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, [Jesus] was heard because of His godly fear" (Hebrews 5:7).

Temptation itself is a form of suffering and trial. Jesus Christ Himself had to resist and overpower the desires of the flesh. This He did! In fact, He is the only human being who has ever perfectly resisted all temptations to sin (1 John 3:5; compare Hebrew 12:3-4).

Even with the Father's help, the willpower required to resist the temptations of Satan and the pulls of the flesh was unimaginable. The agony He suffered at Gethsemane is impossible for us to fathom. There He prayed three times to the Father for additional spiritual strength to go through His prophesied suffering and crucifixion. There He prayed so hard that "His sweat became like great drops of blood" (Luke 22:44). He even asked the Father whether there were any way this suffering could

be avoided. But in the next breath He was obediently bowing to what He knew was the Father's will (Matthew 26:36, 39-42).

WHY MUST CHRISTIANS SUFFER?

One of the greatest puzzles for many people is why God allows good people to suffer. What is the benefit, they ask, of trying to live according to God's instruction if we all have to suffer? A best-selling book states the dilemma in its title: *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

The book of 1 Peter deals specifically with the suffering of Christians. Peter understood the significance of the suffering of people who live righteously in the light of Jesus Christ and His suffering. Peter notes two categories of suffering. One is for righteousness' sake and brings us nearer the Kingdom of God. The other is largely unnecessary because it is usually the result of problems we bring on ourselves. We earnestly need God's help, however, during both types of suffering.

Does God have a purpose in allowing Christians to suffer?

"For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

"For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Philippians 1:29).

"For this is commendable, if because of conscience towards God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully" (1 Peter 2:19).

How should Christians view suffering at the hands of others?

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10).

The Bible explains a great deal about why the righteous suffer in this present evil age. Most misery is brought about by Satan's pervasive influence over people and their ideas and attitudes. (See "Satan's Role in Human Suffering," p. E4).

Just before His crucifixion, Jesus explained to His disciples: "If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you . . . If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also" (John 15:19-20).

Paul tells us that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12; compare 1 Peter 3:14; Matthew 5:11-12).

Much of the persecution Christians endure is really directed against Christ Himself. The life He lived and taught is the real target. Peter explained this clearly: "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing

happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy" (1 Peter 4:12-13).

Have righteous people always endured suffering to serve God?

"My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience" (James 5:10; compare Hebrews 11:24-26).



Paul

All of God's prophets suffered for their faithfulness to Him. Some survived; others gave their lives. Daniel was thrown into a den of lions because of his beliefs and practices, but God delivered him (Daniel 6:15-23). His three friends—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego—were condemned to death in "a burning fiery furnace" because they would not bow to an idol, but God miraculously spared their lives (Daniel 3:8-29).

David constantly cried out to God for deliverance from his enemies (Psalm 7:1-2; 18:17-19). But we should especially notice his confidence in God: "Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His mercy, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine" (Psalm 33:18-19). In general, God's will is for the deliverance of His servants. Some, however, have been martyred for the sake of the Kingdom of God, and others are yet to end their lives as martyrs.

Isaiah is traditionally said to be a prophet who was killed by being "sawn in two" (Hebrews 11:37). We read that "others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection" (verse 35), and some "had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment" (verse 36). Stephen, just before he was martyred, cried out to those who were ready to stone him: "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One [Jesus Christ], of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers" (Acts 7:52).

It has always been this way. It began with Cain and Abel. "For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one [Satan] and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous" (1 John 3:11-12).

The Scriptures explain that "he who walks in his uprightness fears the LORD, but he who is perverse in his ways despises Him" (Proverbs 14:2). People whose ways are not of God indirectly express their hostility toward Him by venting their contempt and anger on His servants. Peter describes this attitude so well: "In regard to these, they [who love the ways of this world] think it

strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you" (1 Peter 4:4).

Which apostle learned that his ministry would be filled with suffering?

"... I will show him [the apostle Paul] how many things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:16; compare 2 Timothy 1:11-12).

When God first called and converted him, the apostle Paul learned that a part of his service to Christ would be to suffer. Paul's sufferings were directly related to the great purpose of his calling. He was commissioned by the resurrected Jesus Christ to go to the gentiles "to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God . . ." (Acts 26:18). His mission attracted intense opposition and persecution.

What types of suffering did Paul encounter?

"... Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; . . . in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, . . . in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things which come upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:25-28).

Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-33 for Paul's vivid description of the many humiliations, dangers and injuries he endured in carrying out his commission to spread the gospel far and wide. He records how he suffered continually while proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom of God. Feeding the flock of God, the members of God's Church, was also a vital part of his mission, and Paul's loving care for the churches weighed heavily on him.

Paul tells us to "be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1, KJV). Therefore we too will find that it is not possible to spread the gospel to this chaotic and sin-sick world without encountering opposition and persecution. Not all will experience such resistance in the same way and to the same degree. Christ knows our capacity; He understands the talents and limits of each member. Yet suffering for the sake of spreading God's truth is the lot of all true Christians. It was a constant factor in the life of Paul and his companions (1 Corinthians 4:11-12).

How did Paul's persecution affect his reputation?

"For which [the gospel] I suffer trouble as [if I were] an evildoer, even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not bound" (2 Timothy 2:9).

Paul worked under a cloud of suspicion and false accusation. Most of the Jewish leaders regarded him as a traitor, and the Romans were often uncertain whether to treat him as a misguided Roman citizen, chronic troublemaker or criminal. In the end he died for his beliefs.

Can showing Christian concern for others be risky?

"Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers

*in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life . . .” (Romans 16:3-4; compare Philip-
pians 1:25-30).*

Early Christians risked their lives to assist Paul and other Church members. They suffered for the sake of the Kingdom of God and their service to fellow Christians—for diligently practicing the Golden Rule.

The book of Romans tells us to “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). If we truly love others, we will sometimes suffer *for* and *with* them—vicariously or in painful reality. Since Christians are “members of one another” (verse 5) and part of the same body, this is a way to serve each other and honor God (verse 1). “. . . Your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:9, NIV).

What is the proper Christian response to unjust treatment from others?

*“Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter”
(1 Peter 4:16).*

“Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator” (verse 19).

Jesus explained to His disciples why they should respond to mistreatment with love, kindness and good works. “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:44-48).

Christians are called to be the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). They are always to reflect the character of their heavenly Father, who provides the necessities of life for even the unjust. Christians are to live as examples even under difficult circumstances. “And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe” (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7).

How should a Christian feel about suffering for God’s Kingdom?

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

No one understood a Christian’s lot better than Paul. In addition to the afflictions described earlier, he endured a “thorn in the flesh”—possibly a chronic health problem—that he had pleaded with God to remove on three occasions. Christ’s reply: “. . . My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

Having a clear perspective of the future, and an

understanding of God’s purpose for us, is crucial in facing life’s difficulties. Only when we earnestly look forward to the glories of the Kingdom of God can we view our own sufferings in a proper perspective. Certainly our trials and difficulties are real and cannot be wished away. Yet their long-term importance pales into insignificance when compared with the sure realization of our great calling (Philippians 3:11-14). (For a clearer understanding of God’s purpose for you, be sure to request a free copy of the booklet *What Is Your Destiny?* from our office nearest you.)

AVOIDING UNNECESSARY SUFFERING

Since sin is the major cause of suffering, much unnecessary suffering can be avoided by faithfully obeying God, by keeping His commandments in the letter and in the spirit. Avoiding suffering can also involve following sound principles of mental, emotional and physical health. Such principles are based on the Ten Commandments and can be found throughout the Bible.

Does the Bible caution us not to bring suffering on ourselves by sinning?

*“But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters”
(1 Peter 4:15).*

What happens to those who ignore this advice?

“Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, they would have none of my counsel and despised my every rebuke. Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their own way, and be filled to the full with their own fancies. For the turning away of the simple will slay them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them” (Proverbs 1:29-32).

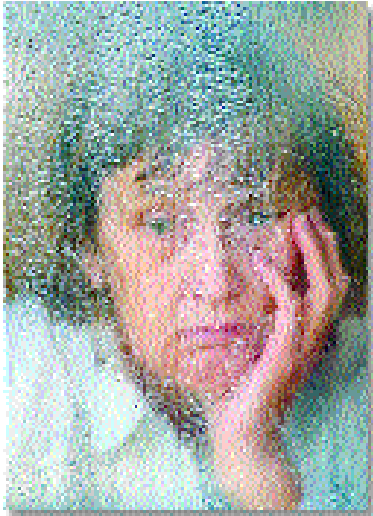
We read of many examples of suffering we can bring on ourselves simply by ignoring the basic wisdom in God’s Word. For instance: “A man of great wrath will suffer punishment; for if you rescue him, you will have to do it again” (Proverbs 19:19). Also: “Laziness casts one into a deep sleep, and an idle person will suffer hunger” (verse 15).



We read of many examples of suffering we can bring on ourselves simply by ignoring the basic wisdom in God’s Word. For instance: “A man of great wrath will suffer punishment; for if you rescue him, you will have to do it again.”

Financial problems are frequently the result of assuming legal responsibility for the debts of others: “He who is surety for a stranger will suffer, but one who hates being surety is secure” (Proverbs 11:15).

Accidents and carelessness contribute heavily to



Prolonged and obsessive guilt is often a major, but preventable, cause of emotional agony.

people’s suffering. Some occupations and activities are inherently more dangerous than others. “He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits wood may be endangered by it” (Ecclesiastes 10:9).

Disease, of course, is another major cause of suffering. The reasons for illnesses are too numerous to list. However, God promised the ancient Israelites that, if they diligently observed His instructions, which included dietary, sanitation and agricultural laws, He would not afflict them with the diseases He had brought on the Egyptians (Exodus 15:26). He warned them, however, that ignoring His guidance would result in sickness and

disease (Deuteronomy 28:58-61). Controlling disease, then, can relate to whether we listen to God’s advice and follow it.

By observing such simple principles as prevention, caution, good diet and sanitation, we can individually reduce a great deal of the suffering that comes from diseases. But it will take entire communities—even

nations—working together to clean up our surroundings and restore sound principles of agriculture, air quality, food processing and other health-related needs to bring humanity to excellent health. Many of these necessary steps will have to wait until Christ rules the earth in His Kingdom.

Prolonged and obsessive guilt is often a major, but preventable, cause of emotional agony. Some guilt is natural and good. But guilt should lead to repentance, which is the remedy for it (2 Corinthians 7:10). God is merciful. The solution is to go to God, in a repentant attitude, for the grace and forgiveness He promises.

We read that even “a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again” (Proverbs 24:16). We need to seek God’s mercy regularly and frequently. As God has promised us, “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be [white] as wool . . .” (Isaiah 1:18-19).

These examples only scratch the surface of the preventable and unnecessary suffering we can bring on ourselves. They also show why we need a balanced understanding of the causes of suffering. Much human suffering could easily be avoided through proper knowledge, understanding, wisdom and obedience.

Where can we find practical instruction on how to avoid unnecessary suffering?

“The proverbs of Solomon . . . : To know . . . wisdom, justice, judgment, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion . . . And a man of understanding will attain wise counsel” (Proverbs 1:1-5).

We should not neglect the book of Proverbs when we seek practical help in understanding principles of sound thinking and living. It can assist us in vastly improving

Cause and Effect: An Often-Overlooked Principle

Many tragedies and much suffering can be traced to their source: our own all-too-human actions and decisions. In a world of freedom of choice, some choices inevitably lead to bad results.

Actions yield consequences. We know we reap what we sow, but we don’t realize the source of that saying—the Bible (Galatians 6:6-7). Thousands of years ago one of the friends of Job—no stranger to suffering—observed that “those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same” (Job 4:8).

Centuries later the Hebrew prophet Hosea looked at the sad spiritual condition of the kingdom of Israel. Idolatry, violence and immorality were commonplace (Hosea 2, 4). Within a few years the mighty Assyrian Empire would sweep in from the east and lay the kingdom waste, slaughtering thousands of its inhabitants and enslaving Israel’s survivors. God revealed to Hosea what was coming and why. “They sow the wind, and reap the whirlwind” (Hosea 8:7). “You have plowed wickedness; you have reaped iniquity. You have eaten

the fruit of lies . . .” (Hosea 10:13). It was inevitable that the people’s sins would catch up with them.

When thousands die in natural disasters—hurricanes, typhoons, tornadoes and droughts—people blame God. Yet, as God told the ancient Israelites, He would bless them with favorable weather only if they obeyed Him (Leviticus 26:3-4; Deuteronomy 28:12). Most chose not to obey. That decision affected not only their own lives but the lives of their children, who fell victim to their parents’ foolish choices. The innocent often suffer for the sins of others. That is one of the tragic consequences of wrong choices.

When we analyze suffering, we can learn a great deal if only we will trace the circumstances back to their cause. Proverbs 22:3 warns us to consider the long-term consequences of our choices: “A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are punished.”

When we look for the major causes of suffering, we often need look no further than ourselves. In one way or another sin is the underlying cause of most suffering.

our human relationships and our Christian living. So much of our suffering and unhappiness stems from mishandling our day-to-day encounters with each other. We often lack diplomacy. We need the wisdom of God in dealing with our fellow human beings.

Even though we bring much suffering on ourselves, God's preference is that we experience just the opposite. To believe that God would take some kind of perverted pleasure in human suffering is to misunderstand His character entirely. He takes no delight in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). He often postpones punishment in hopes of repentance (2 Peter 3:9). He wants the whole human family to achieve salvation in His Kingdom (1 Timothy 2:4). He does not prefer that we suffer.

HELP FOR SUFFERERS

Do Christ and God the Father have compassion for sufferers?

"And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick" (Matthew 14:14).

"But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd" (Matthew 9:36).

"If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:11).

Why doesn't God relieve the suffering of mankind now?

"Now He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. And He marveled because of their unbelief" (Mark 6:5-6).

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those that are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37).

The unwillingness of mankind as a whole to believe and obey God is the real reason for a suffering world. Only when mankind genuinely repents, after Christ's second coming, will all people come to understand the relationship between faith and mercy. God is eager to show mercy and shower compassion and kindness on them. But their repentance and cooperation are prerequisites.

Sadly, for most people that will have to wait until Christ changes the attitudes and behavior of the whole world. In our age people simply are not willing to submit themselves to God's will. As Jesus explained: "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me" (Matthew 15:8). Mankind suffers as a result.

What has Jesus Christ already done to relieve suffering?

"He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses" (Matthew 8:17).

Christ's death paid for our sins so we can be reconciled to God (Colossians 1:21-22). So why do people continue to suffer? Although Jesus took on Himself the death penalty we earn because of our sins (Romans 6:23; Hebrews 10:10, 12), that does not mean that all the immediate consequences of sin are removed. Sin brings enormous suffering of body and mind. Indeed, the two are closely related. A negative mental or emotional state can cause certain types of physical illness.

One of the reasons Christ came into the world was to deal with our physical and emotional afflictions. His personal suffering makes our physical and spiritual healing possible. Before His death by crucifixion, He was cruelly beaten almost beyond recognition as a human being. He took on Himself even the physical consequences of our sins so we, through Him, can be healed (1 Peter 2:24). Also, because of His sacrifice, the time will come when all suffering can be abolished forever (Revelation 21:4).



How did Christ define His mission at the beginning of His ministry?

"The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD" (Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2).

The Father sent Jesus to fulfill this Scripture (Luke 4:20-21), written hundreds of years before by the prophet Isaiah. This was in addition to His primary mission of giving His life for the sins of humanity. The four Gospel accounts all attest to Christ's exemplary life in relieving the sufferings of His fellow human beings.

How did Jesus fulfill this Scriptural mission?

"And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people. Then His fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and He healed them" (Matthew 4:23-24).

So much of our suffering and unhappiness stems from mishandling our day-to-day encounters with each other. We need the wisdom of God in dealing with our fellow human beings.

Did Jesus empower His disciples to heal others?

“Then He called His twelve disciples together and gave them power and authority over all demons, and to cure diseases. He sent them to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Luke 9:1-2; compare Mark 6:13; Luke 10:1-2, 9).

Healing has always been one of God’s blessings for mankind. Yet few have confidence in this wonderful biblical truth. When we are ill, we are instructed to ask the elders of the Church to pray for us, anointing us with oil in the name of the Lord (James 5:14). We are then told that “the prayer of faith shall save the sick” (verse 15). The oil used for the anointing is symbolic of the healing power of God’s Spirit.

When an elder is not always available in a specific geographical area—because the Church has always been a scattered body—God has provided a scriptural way for us to deal with this situation. Specially anointed cloths can be sent to the sick on request (see Acts 19:11-12).

Also, both Christ and Paul instruct Christians to celebrate the New Testament Passover service and to partake of its symbols (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25). The wine we use in this service represents Christ’s blood shed for our sins, and the bread represents Christ’s body, which was broken for us. Jesus Christ took our physical, mental and emotional sufferings on Himself. He is the prophesied “servant” of Isaiah 52 and 53 who suffered for us. Carefully read these chapters to understand the suffering Christ went through for us. Then compare them with the eyewitness account of His suffering in Matthew 26-28.

What other special assistance does Christ’s suffering make available to us?

“Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted” (Hebrews 2:17-18).

Only Jesus Christ set a perfect example of avoiding sin. During His lifetime on earth He steadfastly resisted temptation. He never once gave in to sin (1 Peter 2:22). He remained close to the Father and prayed earnestly in time of need (Mark 1:35; John 11:41-42). Yet He, too, had to cry out to God “with vehement cries and tears” (Hebrews 5:7). When we approach our heavenly Father in prayer for the help we need, we can know that Jesus Christ, our Intercessor, understands the struggles we have with our physical, human weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15).

Since sin plagues us all, we must have help in overcoming it. As Paul explained, “I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find” (Romans 7:18).

Paul knew from whom he could receive the help he needed to fight sin: “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—

through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25).

Over and over again in the Gospel accounts we find Jesus of Nazareth meeting human suffering head on—taking action to relieve it in others. He was full of compassion and set for us a perfect example. Our Savior knows firsthand what it is like to resist the pull of the flesh and to successfully conquer it. He knows exactly when and how to help us combat sin. He wants us to come boldly to Him for relief—for strength to resist—whenever we need it (Hebrews 4:14-16).

In what other important way did Jesus relieve suffering?

“And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things” (Mark 6:34).

The world sorely needs proper education in biblical principles to learn how to live. As the Hebrew prophet Hosea lamented, people’s lives are “destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6).

The principle of cause and effect has never ceased to operate. Suffering is the effect that is so often caused by ignorance and sin. To confront suffering effectively, we must live in harmony with biblical laws and principles. Otherwise we will bring needless suffering on ourselves. (See “Cause and Effect: An Often Overlooked Principle,” p. E10.)

TIME AND CHANCE

The Bible refers to another aspect of human suffering, called “time and chance” in Ecclesiastes 9:11. Many good and bad things occur to people regardless of whether they are good or evil. As Jesus explained, God lets it rain on both the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45).

What was Jesus Christ’s perspective on a tragic accident in Jerusalem?

“... Those eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:4-5).

Jesus acknowledged the principle King Solomon had written about some 1,000 years earlier: “I returned and saw under the sun that—the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all” (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

Jesus noted that the incident at Siloam was not some sort of divine punishment directed at the victims because of their sins. Although other factors such as improper construction and maintenance procedures might have been a part of the picture, it was strictly time and chance as far as the dead victims at Siloam were concerned. Because they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, they died.

But Christ urged those who escaped this calamity to repent of their sin and, by implication, to begin living in harmony with God's plan and purpose. Such tragedies should be powerful reminders to take action now to set our spiritual house in order. Why put off our salvation? Why procrastinate when it comes to repentance? Why not act now? That is the emphasis of Jesus Christ's comments.

What lesson did Jesus draw from the deaths of others in another tragic incident?

"There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, 'Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things?

Learning From the Suffering of Job

The suffering of a man named Job explains much about why character is more important in God's eyes than the discomfort and pain we experience in this life. Job was an exceptionally righteous man. He carefully avoided acts of transgression against God's laws. He behaved blamelessly. But, like all of us, he had weaknesses (Mark 14:38). He was not perfect.

God decided to test Job's character to see how his commitment to Him would bear up under adversity. The account of Job is in Scripture to help righteous people, when they go through discouraging and traumatic experiences, to learn to trust God patiently while awaiting the resolution of their problems.

God boasted of Job's righteous behavior to Satan. (Job 1:8). Satan responded, "... Stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and [Job] will surely curse You to Your face!" (Job 1:9-11). Later events proved Satan wrong. Job's character was not that weak.

God granted Satan permission to strip Job of his possessions and his family and to afflict him with excruciating boils (Job 1:12-19). Job at first accepted his plight, saying, "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

Later "Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, [and] each one came . . . [to] mourn with him, and to comfort him" (Job 2:11). After a week of lamenting with him, they began to discuss his calamities and suffering. Job listed his complaints, showing the inequities of life. Later God agreed with him. Not everything in this life is fair and equitable.

Job's three friends, however, were certain that God was punishing Job for some secret sin, something Job could hide from everyone but God. Job vehemently denied that such was the case, and he was right. God later verified this also.

However, during his ordeal of loss and suffering, Job gradually came to resent God. This often happens to people in the midst of inexplicable calamity.

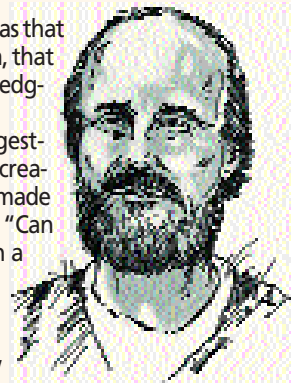
Many chapters relate the faulty reasoning and accusations of Job's three friends and Job's denials. Finally, one of Job's younger friends, Elihu, spoke up. He recognized that Job's perspective was flawed and distorted. Job had convinced himself that his afflictions served no purpose. He decided that God was simply not treating him fairly.

Elihu realized that Job was so obsessed with his innocence (Job 33:8-9) that he was finding fault with God rather than looking for lessons to learn from his trials. To Job's complaints Elihu replied: "Do you think this is right? Do you say, 'My righteousness is more than God's?'" (Job 35:2).

Instead of seeing his adversity as opportunity for patience and for letting God mold him, Job had grown in his resentment toward his Creator. He closed his mind to the possibility that he could learn something valuable from his suffering.

Job's principal objection was that God was unresponsive to him, that He was not properly acknowledging his righteousness.

God challenged Job, suggesting that he try to tame a sea creature, a great beast that was "made without fear" (Job 41:33-34): "Can you draw out Leviathan with a hook, or snare his tongue with a line which you lower? Can you put a reed through his nose, or pierce his jaw with a hook? Will he make many supplications to you? Will he speak softly to you?" (Job 41:1-3, 4-10).



Job

In the end Job saw that the basis of his problem was his lack of understanding and excessive confidence in his own righteousness. Then his view of God's fairness changed. He saw that His critical attitude toward God was wrong: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know . . . I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:3-6).

Job's experience is recorded in great detail so we can learn the folly of holding too high an opinion of ourselves. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud" (Proverbs 16:18-19).

Job's experiences can explain why righteous people may go through discouraging and traumatic times and be tempted to resent God for not obviously and quickly intervening on their behalf. Like Job, we can fail to understand that God sees far more than we see.

No matter how severe a trial is, we should never assume God isn't listening or doesn't care. He sees lessons we need to learn that are beyond our present understanding. We need always to remember some excellent advice from King David: "Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the LORD!" (Psalm 27:14). We should learn from Job's experience to maintain patient respect and trust in God even in the midst of our sufferings (James 5:10-11).

I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:1-3).

In this incident the Roman authorities apparently slaughtered several Galileans who had come to offer sacrifices in Jerusalem. Jesus made the point that these men suffered horrible deaths, not because they were exceptionally bad, but because they were caught up in larger events. In a violent situation innocent people are sometimes injured and killed. It could happen to anyone—unless God were supernaturally protecting the person at such a time.

We should heed the advice of James: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit’; whereas you do not know what will



Jesus Christ Himself promised a future resurrection when “all who are in the graves will hear His voice.”

God or their loved ones. Jesus Christ Himself promised a future resurrection when “all who are in the graves will hear His voice” (John 5:28-29). Our free booklet *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind* fully explains this resurrection with all the essential scriptural details.

Still, we humans must deal with suffering and even death in the here and now. See “Steps in Dealing With Grief,” the final chapter in our free booklet *What Happens After Death?* Your copy is available free of charge.

What fundamental biblical principle can give us a proper perspective when inexplicable suffering occurs?

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children . . .” (Deuteronomy 29:29).

God simply does not reveal a reason for everything that happens to us. Therefore, no human being can provide an accurate answer for every unfortunate circumstance. God may not reveal certain things this side of His coming Kingdom.

But, whatever our circumstances, we are always accountable for obeying our Creator and staying in harmony with His plan and purpose. We must leave the rest to God, patiently relying on Him in faith that “all

happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that’” (James 4:13-15).

In God’s plan and purpose, He will resurrect all victims of fatal accidents and other tragedies. Those who die in such situations are not eternally lost to

things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

As covered in earlier lessons of this study course, the reason for our existence is clear. But that doesn’t mean we understand everything about how God will accomplish His plan for us. We await full knowledge and understanding that will come at the time of the resurrection. Any teaching that aligns itself against our calling and the true biblical knowledge supporting it is ultimately false. We need to be careful not to allow inexplicable suffering to make us bitter and lose our faith in God.

Possibly you or your loved ones have suffered cruelly and unjustly at the hands of others. Such seems to happen to most of us at times. Allowing ourselves to become bitter so that we begin seeking revenge is not a proper Christian response. “‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19). God will put things right in His own way and time.

Always remember that we have only partial knowledge. Full understanding will not come until later. Understanding this principle, the apostle Paul tells us: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

GOD IS ALWAYS FAIR

When they don’t get their way, children often exclaim, “That’s not fair!” People sometimes say the same about God. That was the attitude of ancient Israel: “Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not fair.’ Hear now, O house of Israel, is it not My way which is fair, and your ways which are not fair?” (Ezekiel 18:25).

From our limited view, life indeed may not always be fair. God allowed apparent inequities when He gave mankind the right of free choice. But recognizing that all is not fair in this life is vastly different from accusing God of being unfair. They are not the same thing.

Most of the inequities in life are the result of thousands of years of accumulated human customs and traditions, as well as the uncertainties of time and chance. We cannot justly blame them on God.

God’s Word is truth (John 17:17). His decisions are consistent with His character, which is love (1 John 4:8, 16). Trusting in God and His Word is the only real anchor we have. Nothing else is completely reliable. But, when life is filled with difficulties, people sometimes transfer their discontent from the accumulated shortcomings of people and the unreliability of this life to God. So they falsely and illogically conclude that God is not fair. God revealed to ancient Israel that it is really the ways of man that are not fair.

Did the apostle Paul raise this question in one of his epistles?

“As it is written, ‘Jacob have I loved, but Esau I have hated.’ What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!” (Romans 9:13-14)

Much depends on a proper understanding of the destiny and purpose for the human family. That is certainly true in answering this common dilemma.

It is true that God will have mercy upon whom He will, and He may also choose, under certain circumstances, to harden someone's will against Him (Romans 9:16-18). But all of this is only temporary.

Every Christian should learn God's basic, step-by-step plan as revealed through His annual feast days. The marvelous truth they reveal shows that the time is coming when God will call all people and give them a just and fair opportunity for salvation. At that time He will show them His abundant mercy, and no one will question God's fairness.

This is one of the great truths hidden from the world but revealed to Christians who understand the meaning of God's feast days. They reveal the sequence in which God will address and remove the inequities we experience in this life. You need to understand what these holy convocations reveal. For a detailed explanation, be sure to request our free booklet *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.

What has the Father already done to even out the inequities of this life?

"At that time Jesus answered and said, 'I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight'" (Matthew 11:25-26).

No one is more aware than God of the inequities besetting human beings in this present era through the influence of Satan. But whom is God calling first:

those with great ability or ordinary people?

God reveals that, rather than favoring those who have the material advantages in this life, He first offers His Kingdom to people who are mostly not rich and famous, not the seemingly successful of the world.

"For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence" (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

God has not called the wise, the mighty and the noble in this age. Jesus confirms that "the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light" (Luke 16:8, NIV). Yet the enlightened children of God will be the firstfruits of His salvation.

The prophet Isaiah notes the way of God in fulfilling His plan: "But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isaiah 66:2). God will even things out. None will enter His Kingdom who is not truly humble. Anyone who seeks to exalt himself over others must repent of his selfishness to inherit eternal life (compare Colossians 3:12-13; Romans 12:16; James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:5-6).

Did God design His law to protect those who are less able to provide for themselves?

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall

Historical Insights Into Human Suffering

In London's Westminster Abbey, where the great and famous are laid to rest, two huge candelabra depict biblical figures in cast iron. Among the depicted characters from the Old Testament, two stand out from the others.

At one end of the massive candleholder is King Solomon, portrayed as reclining on a throne in his majestic robes as ruler of a united and prosperous people whose divine blessings pervade the country. His wisdom is aptly summed up in the mysterious Queen of Sheba's comments: "Your wisdom and prosperity exceed the fame of which I heard. Happy are your men and happy are these your servants, who stand continually before you and hear your wisdom! Blessed be the LORD your God, who delighted in you, setting you on the throne of Israel" (1 Kings 10:7-9).

Solomon attained the height of temporal achievements, thanks to God's bounty.

The other end of the candelabra highlights the patriarch Job, depicted as suffering the depths of misery and despair. His throne—to ease his discomfort—is a bed of ashes. Three of his friends visit him from afar,

but not to praise his achievements.

Man's existence includes both suffering and the exaltation of life. Suffering is as much a part of the kaleidoscope of humanity as is the attainment of greatness. The God of Israel was as much a part of Job's life as He was Solomon's, if not more so.

As this Bible-study lesson strives to show from the Scriptures themselves, great purpose lies behind our sufferings. Life gives us time to consider the important questions: Who am I? Why am I? What part do I play in God's master plan?

Suffering is a natural part of our existence. No one can escape it. Suffering can stimulate us to reevaluate the importance of life. It forces us to take the time to consider the vital issues of existence. (Please request our free booklet *What Is Your Destiny?* for a biblical perspective on these topics.)

Our Creator determines to develop His righteous character in us. He is far more interested in the character we can build than in letting us live a life free of suffering. Jesus Christ Himself learned obedience by the things that He suffered (Hebrews 5:8).

HOW GOD SEES SUFFERING

The Bible puts our sufferings into proper perspective. It explains why we hurt, the ultimate purpose for our afflictions and how we play an important role in relieving the agonies of others—not only by personally helping them but in bringing the knowledge of the true gospel to a world mired in anguish caused by sin.

In many ways the Bible, taken as a whole, shows how God is willing to relieve our sufferings in many ways. He particularly looks after His people (Hebrews 13:5-6). “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever” (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Above all, remember that suffering is only temporary, not eternal. After its purpose has been accomplished, God will erase it forever. One of the most reassuring and encouraging prophecies in the Bible talks about God relieving suffering: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:3-5).

To better understand the points covered in this lesson, be sure to request the following free booklets:

- *Why Does God Allow Suffering?*
- *Is There Really a Devil?*
- *What Is Your Destiny?*
- *What Happens After Death?*
- *Making Life Work*
- *The Ten Commandments*
- *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind.*

For your free booklets, contact any of our offices listed below or you can request or download them from our Web site at www.GNmagazine.org.

Points to Ponder

These questions are intended as a study aid, to spur further thought on the concepts discussed in this lesson and to help you apply them on a personal level. We suggest you take the time to write your answers to these questions and compare them to the scriptures given. Please feel free to write us with any comments, questions or suggestions about the course or this lesson.

- Does God force us to conform to His will? Or does He allow us to make our own decisions as to whether we will follow His ways? (Deuteronomy 30:19).
- Does freedom of choice allow for good and evil outcomes? (Romans 3:15-17; Numbers 14:18).
- Wrong choices bring sorrow. What is the result of following the lead of the Spirit of God and making right choices? (Galatians 6:7-8).
- Our innermost character is important to God. What power does He offer us to enable us to follow His ways and have character like His? (Ezekiel 36:26-27).
- Christ suffered so we can be justified and reconciled to God. What do Christians need to learn from Jesus’ sufferings? (1 Peter 2:19, 21; Philippians 1:29).
- Who is behind much of mankind’s suffering? (1 Peter 5:8; 1 John 5:19).
- Throughout history God’s followers have suffered for their faithfulness. What can we learn from their examples? (James 5:10; Hebrews 11:24-26).
- How do our daily sufferings compare with the future that awaits us if we are among the faithful of God? (Romans 8:18).
- Are we told to avoid certain activities and thus avoid bringing on ourselves unnecessary suffering? (1 Peter 4:15; Proverbs 1:29-32).
- God provides help and comfort for sufferers. What is the ultimate comfort and assistance provided by Christ’s sacrifice? (Hebrews 2:17-18, 1 John 1:7-9; 2:1-2).
- What is the permanent reward for those who suffer for righteousness’ sake? (Romans 8:17; 2 Timothy 2:11-12).

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