

British rail crash kills 13

Crushed motorist
clashes as train slams
into his car on tracks

By Caroline

Four are killed

by suspected

drunk



AIDS taking horrific toll in Africa

By Frank Brown

Disease may kill up to half of young adults

Why Does God Allow SUFFERING?

Israelis, Arabs bury child victims

The Israeli and Arab governments have agreed to bury the bodies of the child victims of the Sabra and Shatila massacres in a group of their own.

Battles punctuate African peace efforts



Epidemics may be next blow for quake victims

By Chris Tomlinson

Associated Press

KOTADI, India — In a destroyed town near the Pakistan border, Dr. Anurba Ghose treated the sick and injured Saturday, providing the first medical care the

survival. Pakistan — has responded to the quake with a massive aid effort. But social complaints of the because of a lack of organization, help is just starting to reach remote areas.

U.S. Air Force C-17 cargo planes brought tons of help, including blankets and food, to the quake zone.

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Why Does God Allow **SUFFERING?**

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A World Plagued With Human Suffering

Suffering. It's not a pleasant subject to discuss, but a necessary one. A dictionary defines *suffering* as the state of anguish or pain of one who suffers—the bearing of pain, injury or loss (*The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary*).

Suffering plagues our world. In its many forms it affects us physically, psychologically and emotionally. Whatever its manifestation, extended suffering can crush the body and spirit.

Suffering falls on the just and the unjust. It afflicts innocent victims. This uncomfortable fact makes it difficult for us to reconcile such obvious unfairness with the existence or fairness of an intelligent divine being.

Some are so disturbed by this state of affairs that they try to remedy the situation. They devote much of their energy to performing charitable works aimed at relieving undeserved suffering. They long to make the world a more just and equitable place to live.

But, commendable as these efforts are, good works don't solve the world's problems. It appears that our efforts to stop suffering at best only delay the inevitable. And nobody, it seems, has a believable explanation of why so much human misery persists.

What is the answer? Why is suffering so indiscriminate? Why isn't it meted out to only those who deserve it? Why do the innocent suffer from



The barbarity of war has caused incalculable suffering not only for direct participants but for families, loved ones and entire societies. Human history is one long chronicle of war.

actions and events they have no control over and often cannot foresee?

Thinkers and philosophers have weighed in on the issue for years, but they have failed to provide a satisfying rational answer. Those in pain—including many reading this booklet—need answers to their questions.

The Bible view: Realistic and encouraging

Let's examine the causes of suffering from a biblical perspective. God's Word is the key source that can help us discover the reasons people suffer.

The biblical view of life is realistic and encouraging. The Bible explains why pain has always been with us and why it will remain, at least for a time.

At the same time the biblical view is also encouraging, especially when we expand our thinking to see life in terms of God's plan and His purpose for mankind.

Jesus Christ tells us that His mission includes the offer to us of an abundant life (John 10:10). Psalm 16:11 tells us that "at [God's] right hand are pleasures forevermore." The Bible also reveals how God will lighten our burdens and how relief will one day come to the whole world. It also tells us of a time even further beyond when suffering will completely disappear.

But that is not the condition of humanity in our age.

Jesus understood that suffering is an inextricable part of this physical life. He reminded His followers, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33, New International Version).

A Front-Row Seat for Suffering

Technology has presented us a gift of dubious worth—the ability to see people suffering on live television from news spots almost anywhere on the planet.

We see people in pain not only in our own neighborhoods, but we have front-row seats to watch multitudes in misery all over the world. Our media-mad world makes this kind of news coverage available and sometimes almost inescapable.

Through the wandering eye of modern communication, we see the brutality of mankind in living color. We're served the horror of war in the convenience of our living rooms. We watch the depravity of twisted individuals played out on the world stage.

In recent decades the media have force-fed us with accounts of thrill killings by psycho-

paths. Serial killings and mass murders that once were rare now seem almost commonplace.

What is the effect on us of the persistent exposure to such decadent and depressing fare? One effect is that we mentally suffer, whether we realize it or not. Constant exposure to the rampages of deranged people is hard enough on adults, but it inflicts far greater damage on the minds of youth in their formative years.

Although it is impossible to shield our children from every unpleasant side of society, exposure to so much gratuitous violence early in life can emotionally damage them. Repeated exposure to violence—real and feigned—in news and entertainment hardens us to the real suffering of others.

Suffering won't go away—yet

Suffering strikes rich and poor, religious and irreligious, small and great. In this life virtually everyone will experience it. Disease and health problems seem to strike most people at some time or other.

In centuries past common diseases caused immense suffering. But in spite of advances in medical science that have greatly lengthened the average life span, we know we will still die. Rather than having our lives cut short by the killer diseases of earlier years, now many of us will expire at a greater age from such debilitating afflictions as cancer or heart disease. Many will lose their mental faculties long before their bodies wear out.

In poorer nations, suffering and death from diseases that are largely preventable still cut an enormous swath of misery and despair.

Barbarity is responsible for much mental and physical suffering. Nothing reduces man to brutal cruelty more quickly than war, and man is always fighting his fellow man. A few decades ago historians Will and Ariel Durant wrote that in 3,421 years of recorded history "only 268 have seen no war" (*The Lessons of History*, 1968, p. 81).

War causes not only deaths and crippling injuries on the battlefield but heartbreak, the destruction of families and poverty. It sows the seeds of enmities that last for centuries. Jesus prophesied that the period immediately before His return would see the greatest suffering of all time, much of it directly attributable to warfare (Matthew 24:6, 21-22).

After the terror of the wars of the first half of the 20th century and the worldwide disruption they engendered, mankind has enjoyed a moderate reprieve in the sense that wars since then have been regional rather than global. Yet nothing has changed in human nature that offers much enduring hope for the future.

Where suffering is a constant

Suffering exacts its greatest toll on people in poorer, backward countries. In many countries people struggle simply to have enough to eat. United Nations statistics explain that more than 800 million people suffer from the effects of constant hunger, and a child dies of hunger or hunger-related ailments every five seconds. According to the World Bank, almost a billion people earn less than a dollar a day, and almost half the world's population survive on less than \$2 per day.

"You have the poor with you always," said Jesus (Matthew 26:11). This is depressingly true not only in pockets of poverty in Africa, Asia and Latin America, but virtually everywhere. What makes the existence of the abject and underfed more tragic is that much of this kind of suffering is *avoidable*.

Political ineptitude, corrupt leadership, war and rapid population growth that outstrips food supplies fuel hunger and starvation. Inefficient farming methods and inadequate transportation and food-delivery systems are factors that contribute to chronic shortages and man-made famines. Conditions beyond human control also play a part.

Starvation and disease are problems that are going to get worse even if short-term relief measures are successfully implemented. Jesus foretold a time of unprecedented trouble in the “last days” that will include widespread famine. He prophesied of “famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places” (Matthew 24:7).

Pestilence—disease epidemics—often accompanies famines. When destructive earthquakes strike, particularly in poor nations, a ravaged infrastructure prevents the flow of food into the afflicted areas. Disease and hunger soon take their deadly toll.

Although wars make the headlines, the number of deaths from armed conflict is small compared with those who die from disease. According to some estimates, AIDS kills 10 times as many in Africa alone as die in wars worldwide.

Mankind willfully spreads suffering

Although the toll of suffering from food shortages and disease is monumental, raw greed brings yet more suffering. Slavery, for example, is an ancient and supposedly obsolete institution, yet it remains a cancer in many countries.

The United Nations estimates that more than 12 million people are enslaved today. Other organizations believe the true number is more than double that. *Time* magazine describes the situation: “Millions of people around the globe, including children as young as six, are working in bondage—in dangerous and degrading conditions that often involve 18-hour workdays, beatings and sexual abuse” (March 22, 1993).

Many more, although not held against their will, live in virtual slavery, trapped by economic circumstances and long work hours while eking out a meager living. Such conditions crush the human spirit. Imagine a life bereft of joy, an existence in which people never enjoy such simple pleasures as the sound of beautiful music, the fun of good humor, the feel of a new garment or the comfort of a secure roof overhead.

Greed takes a deadly toll in hundreds of more subtle ways. Advertisers hawk products that can ruin our health and eventually kill us. Entertainment promotes selfish, arrogant lifestyles that focus on short-term pleasure even as they ultimately destroy personal relationships and ruin opportunities for long-term happiness. Some businesses, manufacturers and governments poison the air, land and water with toxins that threaten

others’ health and safety. The list goes on and on.

Will the picture change?

When Jesus Christ came to earth two millennia ago, He saw His share of misery. He witnessed the plight of outcast lepers, widows in need and people with debilitating mental disorders. He reacted with compassion to alleviate misery.



In spite of great advances in medicine, health care and sanitation, which have eliminated many of the devastating epidemics of the past, we still see much suffering and death from disease.

Jesus’ concern and compassion were evident when He wept openly as He approached Jerusalem for the final time (Luke 19:41-44). He could foresee the anguish that warfare would bring on the beloved city and its people in A.D. 70 when a Jewish rebellion would result in Roman

armies laying siege to the city, with horrible consequences.

He proclaimed that part of His mission was “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” (Luke 4:18). Such a time has not yet occurred for all mankind, but God promises He will bring an end to suffering in general during Christ’s millennial reign and will eventually banish it (Revelation 21:4).

In the coming pages we’ll discover how and when this will occur. But, to understand how suffering will end, we must understand how it began—and why it continues.

Why a Loving God Allows Suffering

British author and historian Paul Johnson writes of one of mankind's greatest theological dilemmas in his book *The Quest for God*, stating, "I suspect that the problem of evil drives more thoughtful people away from religion than any other difficulty" (1996, p. 61).

Many people believe that if God is truly the God of love and mercy, He would be bound by His own character and principles to prevent suffering in the world. This brings up a good question. Why doesn't God intervene to prevent suffering?

The evil that God allows, and the tragedies He chooses not to prevent, leads many to question the wisdom, goodness and even existence of God. Some atheists cite the reality of evil as their trump card in the argument about the existence of God. Julian Huxley, one of the 20th century's leading proponents of evolution, opined that the existence of evil "is a challenge to God's moral character" (*Religion Without Revelation*, 1957, p. 109).

Huxley concluded that divine revelation and a divine Revealer do not exist. (For proof that God is indeed real and evolution a fable, please request our free booklets *Life's Ultimate Question: Does God Exist?* and *Creation or Evolution: Does It Really Matter What You Believe?*)

Why does God allow evil? Anyone who has ever felt pain or experienced tragedy wonders about this. Theologians, philosophers, historians and scientists have mused over the issue. Let's consider some of their conclusions.

An evil God vs. a good God?

The second-century gnostic teacher Marcion, who was declared a heretic because of his views, believed that "there were two rival Gods: one, the tyrannical creator and lawgiver of the Old Testament; the other, the unknown God of love and mercy who sent Jesus to purchase salvation from the creator God" (*Webster Encyclopedia*, one-volume edition, 1985, p. 561).

In Marcion's view the lawgiver God was responsible for the existence of pain and evil, and the work of the Savior was to deliver the world from the pain and evil caused by that God. Ironically, this erroneous outlook was modified and refined by others and gradually took root in the

body of the doctrine of the mainstream church, where its influence has fostered confusion and misunderstanding to this day.

Many assume God angrily intervenes to punish us whenever we step out of line, when in reality He generally allows us to suffer the consequences of our own selfish, shortsighted behavior (see Jeremiah 2:19; 10:23). Most people fail to recognize that God doesn't have to directly intervene every time we sin; the spiritual laws He set in motion are



Much of the world's suffering has been caused by corrupt and cruel leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-tung, whose tyranny led to the deaths of millions of human beings.

of the moral evil of the Universe is that this chamber of horrors cannot be any God's handiwork" (*A Study of History*, abridged version, 1957, Vol. 10, p. 300).

Toynbee recognized that much of the world's suffering is caused by the misrule of tyrants. Scripture shows that God can remove wicked men from power (Daniel 2:21). He humbled and removed Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar, the mightiest ruler of his era. As an emperor over many conquered peoples, Nebuchadnezzar "executed whomever he wished" (Daniel 5:18-19). Yet God brought him down to size, neutralizing his influence for seven years.

So why doesn't God do this more often? Nebuchadnezzar, in his pomp and arrogance, caused only a fraction of the misery inflicted by some dictatorial rulers of our era.

Physicist Paul Davies reflects on this side of the good-vs.-evil argument. He considers the issue of why God, if He truly is all-powerful, does not simply intervene and stop all evil. "Is God free to prevent evil?" Davies

self-enforcing, bringing their own punishment in the form of painful consequences when we break them.

Is this God's handiwork?

Historians have addressed the seeming contradiction of a world created by God but replete with evil. The English historian Arnold Toynbee noted that "one of the conclusions that have been drawn by human spectators

wonders. “If he is omnipotent, yes. Why then does He fail to do so?” (*God and the New Physics*, 1983, p. 143).

Davies’ questions are reasonable. Is God powerless in the face of suffering? If He exists, why doesn’t He act to remove evil and pain from the face of the earth? The questions are troubling, though not because they are hard to understand. They are unsettling because the answers are not what we would want them to be.

The truth of the matter forces us to reconsider our ideas about God and His plan and purpose for us. When we understand those, we understand that God has His reasons for not acting now.

A greater purpose?

Why doesn’t God simply ban evil? To understand the answer, we must consider the consequences such an action would bring.

Understanding why God allows evil and its resultant suffering requires a fundamental understanding of one of God’s greatest gifts—as well as how man has continually abused that gift.

The gift is *free will*—or, as it is more popularly called, *freedom of choice*. God granted this freedom to our first human parents, Adam and Eve, at creation. But over the millennia we have proven ourselves to be woefully inept stewards of this precious gift and its far-reaching responsibility.

As God explained to ancient Israel, the freedom to make choices is essential to developing righteous character (Deuteronomy 30:15-19). Without freedom to choose, we would be little more than robots, with our behavior either preprogrammed and unchangeable or dictated in all its details by an outside force such as God Himself.

But that is not God’s intent. He has different expectations of us because of His much higher purpose for us. He wants us to *choose to obey Him from the heart*. He wants us to enthusiastically love and cherish His values and standards, which are based on two overriding principles



God allows suffering to continue for several reasons. Answers emerge when we put together many scriptures on the subject. Among the major causes of suffering are our own decisions and actions.

—loving Him with all our hearts and loving others as much as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:35-40).

As we will see, choosing to obey God and learning to love others when we have the freedom to do otherwise is vital for the future God has planned for us.

Different levels of decision making

Of all the earth’s physical creatures that God has made, man alone can exercise free will. Simpler life-forms, such as microbes and insects, are preprogrammed to react in certain ways to certain stimuli. They behave in accordance with their environment and have virtually no independent decision-making abilities in the sense that man does.

The actions of more-complicated life-forms, such as mammals, are also largely governed by instinct, though they do make rudimentary decisions when reacting to stimuli and adapting to situations.

Human beings alone among earthly creatures have an advanced sense of time. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God “has put eternity in [our] hearts.” In other words, we can contemplate the future. We make far-reaching decisions and plan our lives months and years in advance.

We also study the past; we have a sense of history. We learn lessons from our experiences and the experiences of others. God gave the capacity for advanced decision-making abilities only to man among His earthly creation.

God designed human beings to *make choices*. Yet we have never learned how to make consistently *wise* and *properly informed* choices. Nor have we learned how to effectively manage our emotions, motives and desires and their influence on our decisions.

The first exercise of man’s freedom of choice

Our freedom to decide what we want to do can result in acts of good or evil. God gave us freedom both to reach out and help our fellow man and freedom to act self-servingly and in ways that harm ourselves and others.

We frequently exercise our freedom of choice in wrong ways, and we reap the consequences—which take the form of often-unexpected penalties. This is nothing new; it occurred in the Garden of Eden with the first human beings, Adam and Eve.

God had placed two trees in the garden. One was the tree of life and the other the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:9). God told Adam he could eat of the former, but he was not to partake of the latter: “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (verses 16-17).

As the book of Revelation explains, the tree of life symbolized obedience to God that would ultimately lead to eternal life (Revelation 2:7;

22:1-2). The other tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—represented rejection of God’s direction by determining good and evil for oneself. This choice would eventually lead to death.

Eve, tempted by the serpent, exercised her free will unwisely and was deceived (2 Corinthians 11:3). She rationalized her way around God’s instruction. Although the apostle Paul tells us that Adam was not deceived (1 Timothy 2:13-14), he allowed his wife to persuade him to join her in disobeying God (Genesis 3:17).

Adam’s full realization of his actions made him all the more guilty for what happened; God held him responsible even more so than Eve. Nevertheless, acting together they chose to listen to and follow the serpent (Genesis 3:1-6), identified in Revelation 12:9 as the devil and Satan. (To better understand Satan’s influence, be sure to request *Is There Really a Devil?*)

Adam and Eve reaped the consequences of their sin. God told them they would die—and eventually they did—but the immediate consequence was that God expelled them from the garden and cut them off from the tree of life.

Now they had to make their own way in a difficult world (Genesis 3:22-24). They were left to their flawed wisdom—their own judgment (verse 6). Life from that point would include sorrow, pain and toil because of their rebellion against God’s clear instruction (verses 16-19).

Since that time “all have sinned” (Romans 3:23; 5:12) and reaped the penalties Adam and Eve incurred.

Many people disdain the Bible because it includes many accounts of people’s bad behavior. Yet we should understand that Scripture, in part, is a historical account of the sinful way of life man chose when he rejected God’s commandments and reaped the resulting consequences.

God inspired the recording of the lessons in the Old Testament so that we might learn from the experiences of others (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11; Romans 15:4). Although the New Testament includes similar lessons for us, its focus is mostly on the message of the Kingdom of God and the good news that God sent His Son to save us from our sins (John 3:16). It also reveals how suffering and sorrow will eventually cease.

A choice of blessings or curses

About 2,500 years after Adam and Eve, God offered tangible relief from suffering to the Israelites. He began working with them while they were still in bondage in Egypt. He promised not only to free them from slavery but to give them the opportunity to be a model nation others would want to emulate (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

As a part of God’s agreement with them, they were to become His obedient people (Exodus 19:5). He instructed them in the 10 cardinal points of

His eternal, spiritual law—the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). He gave them additional laws and statutes, which we find primarily in the books written by Moses (the Pentateuch).

That law, He told them, would be their “wisdom” and “understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (Deuteronomy 4:6).

God told the Israelites they had the freedom to choose between the two ways of living: “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*, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

He informed them that if they obeyed they would reap many blessings (Deuteronomy 28:2), but if they disobeyed they would be accursed (verse 15). Many of the curses God said would result from disobedience (verses 15-68) are virtually identical to the pain and suffering that wrack modern nations. Some of these troubles would affect the nation as a whole. Others were to be personal afflictions, both physical and mental.

Regrettably, Israel disobeyed and reaped terrible misery that God foretold. These included agricultural catastrophes, poverty, family problems, ill health, crime and violence, military defeats and eventual captivity.

After the Israelites’ centuries-long experiment with freedom of choice—during which they consistently chose to ignore God and do things their own way—they were returned to a state of national enslavement.

Cause and effect: often overlooked

God has often tried to impress on man the crucial principle that *every effect has a cause*. But we have difficulty grasping this truth, so we continue to suffer the debilitating effects of our transgressions.

We can trace many tragedies and much suffering to our own all-too-human actions and decisions. In a world of freedom of choice, some choices inevitably lead to harmful and painful results.

Actions yield consequences. Many people recognize the saying “You reap what you sow,” but they do not realize that it comes from the Bible (see Galatians 6:6-7). Proverbs 22:8 says that “He who sows iniquity will reap sorrow.”

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

When we look for the main causes of suffering, we often need look no

Can We Explain All Suffering?

Perhaps the suffering most difficult to understand is that which seems to come out of nowhere and for no discernible reason. We must realize that individual tragedies may occur over which we have no control and that are impossible for us to foresee. In such instances the Scriptures encourage us to pray, asking God to remove or relieve the problem or help us deal with the difficulty and learn from it.

Our Creator in His wisdom doesn't always give us the answer we want. Rarely does He reveal the specific reason for the decision He makes. Yet He always has a good reason.

For example, God delivered the apostle Paul from many trials, but in at least one He declined to intervene in spite of Paul's fervent prayers (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). On this occasion the response to Paul was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for *My strength is made perfect in weakness.*"

In this instance, strengthening an aspect of Paul's spiritual perspective or character was ultimately more important than his personal comfort.

This example should help us understand that God's perspective is different from ours (see Isaiah 55:8-9; 2 Peter 3:8). He sometimes places the character lessons we should learn in difficult circumstances above our physical and mental comfort. At such times we may think God doesn't hear our prayers, but He does. It's just that we often don't want to accept that His answer is "no" or "not yet"—or, as in the case of the apostle Paul, "I have something better in mind for you."

We need to be aware of God's promise never to test us beyond our ability to endure (1 Corinthians 10:13). Paul set a wonderful example. He simply trusted God's wisdom and determined to continue

doing the work God had called him to do.

If we are ever burdened with suffering that God does not soon reverse—especially if it is caused by circumstances beyond our control—we should follow this sound biblical advice from Peter: "Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good" (1 Peter 4:19, New Revised Standard Version).

Notice the particular area of suffering Peter had in mind: "If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name" (verses 14-16, NRSV).

If each individual's suffering could be traced directly to his own transgression of a specific law, it would be easier to understand and accept as a just consequence. But it is rarely that simple.

In giving us freedom to choose, God has given us room to accept or reject His guidance, to choose rebellion or submission, to make foolish decisions or wise ones. In doing so He has given each of us an undetermined future.

We are free to drive carelessly or after drinking too much, free to dump toxins into our environment, free to eat unwisely. Each of us has that freedom, as do our neighbors and everyone else around us. All of our actions—and theirs—bring consequences. Sometimes we suffer because of our *own* decisions—and sometimes because of our *neighbor's* decisions. The reverse is also true. Freedom to choose is a wonderful gift, but we have seldom handled this responsibility well, as evidenced by our

sorrowful, suffering world.

This gives us some understanding of why the innocent, including little children, at times suffer as a result of the poor choices of others. It is during these times that we most need the comforting help of a loving God and support of family and friends.

None of us is immune to the conse-



Although the causes of suffering can often be traced to specific choices and actions, sometimes in this life we simply cannot know why tragedies take place.

quences of actions—ours or others'. The person who develops a disease that is not traceable to his specific personal behavior and the infant born with a congenital birth defect both suffer, though not necessarily because of anything they did.

Those who are injured or killed in accidents or natural disasters are often innocent victims too. Not all suffering is the result of personal disobedience or irresponsible behavior by the one who suffers. Even in the Ten Commandments God reminds us that the consequences of wrong actions can affect one's descendants for several generations (Exodus 20:5).

Often the specific cause of instances

of suffering simply cannot be precisely explained—at least not in this lifetime. Sometimes the best we can do is to accept it as explainable only by what the Bible calls "time and chance" (Ecclesiastes 9:11). Although God does not cause accidents, neither does He micro-manage the lives of every human being to prevent them all. Paul tells us that in this life we see through "a glass darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV). We will never fully understand some things during this life, but we will in the world to come.

We should realize that even suffering that is a result of time and chance is not causeless. If it cannot be connected to a specific behavior, it is often nevertheless a consequence of one or more behavioral patterns followed by the human race since creation.

Adam chose, by sinning, to turn away from God. The rest of mankind has taken the same path: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, . . . death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

One of the consequences of humanity's decision to live contrary to God's instruction is a world subject to the capriciousness and vagaries of "time and chance" and the actions of others. This pattern will prevail until Christ returns to establish God's Kingdom on earth. The entire world will then be filled with the knowledge of God and His righteous laws (Isaiah 11:9). All of humanity finally will thrive in a world that is just and fair.

further than ourselves—the decisions and actions of individuals and humanity as a whole. In one way or another *sin* is usually the underlying cause, and *suffering* is the effect.

Causes of misery

Nations and individuals suffer many miseries because of ignorance of and disobedience to the same spiritual laws of God that Israel disobeyed. God's commandments are living laws, with *universal* application, providing benefits for obedience and punishments for disobedience. His inspired Word tells us that those who love His law have "great peace" (Psalm 119:165), but the way of the lawless and unfaithful is difficult (Proverbs 13:15).

The Bible points to many agonizing human experiences that are direct results of sin. One such example is military aggression. The apostle James wrote of the origin of armed conflict: "Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war" (James 4:1-2).

These words apply to nations as well as individuals, since nations are simply groups of people looking out for their own interests. Aggressors go to war out of a desire to enhance their power, prestige and wealth. In so doing they thrust aside law, ethics, morality and peace. They kill and maim to further their ends, putting into practice the might-makes-right principle and the maxim that to the victor go the spoils.

Will and Ariel Durant understood this human tendency when they wrote in *The Lessons of History*: "The causes of war are the same as the causes of competition among individuals: acquisitiveness, pugnacity, and pride; the desire for food, land, materials, fuels, mastery" (1968, p. 81).

Ironically, nations that freely choose violence, including warfare, often inherit a fate similar to that of the countries they crush. Jesus understood this when He said: "All who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). History is a chronicle of the succession of empires conquering and being conquered. Mankind is doomed to repeat the cycle as long as disobeying God remains our chosen way.

Decisions have consequences

Many forms of suffering are simply the inevitable consequences of personal decisions. For example, in many advanced nations pockets of poverty persist in spite of billions of tax dollars spent to combat the problem.

Often that poverty can be traced to individual decisions. Students drop out of school, cutting short their education and consigning themselves to lifetimes of difficult jobs, low wages, financial hardship and frustrated ambitions.

Many teenagers become sexually active, with millions of girls giving birth out of wedlock to children who may never see their fathers. Studies have shown that children abandoned by their fathers are far more likely at an early age to turn to drugs, alcohol and tobacco, adopt criminal behavior and become sexually promiscuous in their own turn, bringing suffering on themselves and others.

Many young mothers—often unmarried because the fathers ran from responsibility—find themselves trapped in low-paying jobs with young mouths to feed and forced to rely on handouts, usually from the government or charities, to survive. The pattern repeats itself in a cycle of poverty spanning generations—usually because of shortsighted personal choices and actions.

Health and choices

Untold health problems plague us because of our individual decisions. We eat poorly, fail to exercise, consume harmful substances and carelessly injure ourselves and others in accidents. Many suffer from mental afflictions as a result of violating the principles governing relationships that the Bible clearly spells out.

Physical and psychological problems result from the abuse of alcohol and other drugs. Such abusers not only risk taking years off their own lives, but their habits exact a huge toll on their families and friends. Even more tragically, many abusers are involved in accidents that cripple or take the lives of innocent bystanders.

The physical harm caused by smoking is solidly documented. Smoking-related illnesses take 400,000 lives each year in the United States and millions more worldwide. Many of these deaths are excruciatingly painful and slow. We readily acknowledge that the best cure for the grief caused by smoking is simply to quit, yet many are so addicted they spurn this obvious solution.

Smoking is but one of many behaviors that cause pain. Dr. Paul Martin notes that instances of seemingly innocuous behavior can add up over time: "There are plenty of commonplace behavior patterns that kill people gradually but in huge numbers" (*The Healing Mind*, 1997, p. 58).

In a book with Philip Yancey, Dr. Paul Brand reported that, at a major national health conference, he began a list of the serious behavior-related health problems on the agenda that take a serious toll on Americans' health. They include "heart disease and hypertension exacerbated by stress, stomach ulcers, cancers associated with a toxic environment, AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, emphysema and lung cancer caused by cigarette smoking, fetal damage stemming from maternal alcohol and drug abuse, diabetes and other diet-related disorders, violent crime, automobile accidents involving alcohol. These were the endemic, even epidemic concerns

Satan's Role in Human Suffering

Belief in Satan the devil as a literal being is not fashionable in many circles. Even in the United States, where belief in the devil is common, polls have shown that most Americans do not believe in Satan as a literal, living entity. Many conceive of the devil as merely symbolic of man's inhumanity to man or the embodiment of evil in general.

The Bible, however, presents Satan as a real being—a spirit presence possessing great power to do harm. Because so many reject the existence of an actual devil, he is an unrecognized cause of much suffering. Whether we realize it or not, his deception of humanity is the major cause of anguish and grief.

The extent of Satan's influence and power is clearly revealed in the Bible. Revelation 12:9 tells us he "deceives *the whole world*." John writes elsewhere that "the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one" (1 John 5:19). When Paul proclaims that "the god of this age" has blinded the minds of many so that they do not believe the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:4), he refers to the devil.

In the parable of the sower and the seed, Jesus tells us 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). This wicked being wants mankind blinded to the comfort, encouragement and deliverance of God's truth.

Through the spiritual blindness and ignorance Satan has foisted off on the world, he is the instigator of incalculable suffering. He has blinded humanity to the reason for our existence. He has deceived people into believing that his way—the way of selfishness and sin—is better than obedience to God's commands. Regrettably, humanity has fallen prey to Satan's ploys, not realizing the ultimate grief that sin brings.

Satan is called "the tempter" (Matthew 4:3). Throughout history he has succeeded in tempt-

ing people to indulge in an unlawful and immoral exercise of their physical appetites. He employed this strategy in the Garden of Eden, and his game has worked marvelously ever since. Everyone has suffered because of it.

Yet Satan's influence goes beyond mere deception. Paul refers to him as "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2)—apparently "broadcasting," as it were, wrong moods and attitudes to receptive human minds.

Jesus described the devil as "a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44). Satan's intent has always been to make human life miserable and ultimately destroy us (1 Peter 5:8). His very nature is destructive, and those who commit destructive acts unwittingly follow him. Revelation 9:11 labels Satan as "the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, but in Greek he has the name Apollyon." These two names mean "destruction" and "destroyer," respectively. In contrast to God, who is the creator, sustainer and giver of life, Satan is the ultimate destroyer and murderer.

Satan is the agitator of war and other conflicts. The book of Revelation depicts demonic spirits at the end of the age that "go out to the kings of the earth" to "gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty" (Revelation 16:14). Satan and his demons will instigate a time of distress that will be more terrible than any devastation human beings have ever experienced (Matthew 24:21-22).

We can see from these passages that Satan exerts a pervasive power over mankind. God, however, sets limits on Satan's power (Job 1:12; 2:6). God will not allow Satan to thwart His master plan for the salvation of humanity. God will never relinquish His ultimate control over mankind and the rest of His creation. (To learn more about Satan's role in human affairs, be sure to download or request your free copy of *Is There Really a Devil?*)

for health experts in the United States" (*The Gift Nobody Wants*, 1993, pp. 226-227).

In making decisions that lead to such problems, our bodies often alert us to the dangers. Brand and Yancey note that "an astounding proportion of the health problems stem from behavior choices that show disregard for the body's clear signals" (p. 226).

We reap what we sow

The conclusion should be obvious. Much suffering is caused by wrong choices. The Bible offers guidance as to how we should live. Yet as far back as Adam and Eve we have repeatedly spurned God's instruction and brought enormous pain and sorrow on ourselves.

The Bible offers practical advice on virtually all aspects of life. Many of its principles reveal how to avoid—and to some extent relieve—suffering. (We have compiled much of this guidance in *Making Life Work*, a booklet showing that many things in life go better if we simply apply principles God reveals in His Word. Be sure to request your copy from our office nearest you, or download or request it from our Web site at www.ucg.org/booklets.)

We cannot live substantially free from suffering until we are reconciled to God and His commandments: "My son, do not forget my law, but let your heart keep my commands; *for length of days and long life and peace they will add to you*" (Proverbs 3:1-2, emphasis added throughout).

Were we to follow God's instruction on a national scale, we would see immediate and drastic reductions in crime, disease, hostilities between nations, pollution, accidents, mental illness, broken families, shattered relationships and many other phenomena that cause us grief. God's law is not harsh or onerously restrictive. It is a law of liberty (James 1:25) that would eliminate most of the world's pain if it were universally obeyed.

How Good Can Come From Suffering

Sigmund Freud worked as a counselor to deliver people from psychological difficulties. Yet he was honest enough to admit that his ability to help was limited. He confessed that he “cured the miseries of the neurotic only to open him up to the normal misery of life” (Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 1973, p. 271). Freud was right: There is no such thing as a trouble-free life.

Since we cannot avoid all suffering, we must keep in mind that it can and often does produce good results. It’s easier to endure suffering and pain when we view them as challenges than when we think of them as unbearable curses.

It has traditionally been a tenet of Western culture, and rightly so, that some difficulties are beneficial in that they can help us mature and become better people. However, author Richard Kyle reminds us that much of Europe, Britain and the United States has entered the *post-Christian* era, in which “Christianity is no longer the definer of cultural values” (*The Last Days Are Here Again*, 1998, p. 25).

The post-Christian mind-set rejects the traditional biblical view that hardship and pain—though unpleasant and undesired—can work to ultimate good. Expressions such as “By standing firm you will gain life” (Luke 21:19, NIV) and “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22, NIV), though true, are no longer widely accepted.

The Bible plainly teaches that adversity can produce beneficial results. Even though Christ was the Son of God, He, too, “learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (Hebrews 5:8-9). Even secular history provides many examples of individuals and nations that, under conditions of duress, overcame difficult circumstances to achieve greatness. Sometimes one determined individual has provided the spark needed for nations to endure hard times and achieve praiseworthy objectives.

A prime minister powerfully serves his country

Sir John Keegan observed this to be true with Winston Churchill and Britain in World War II. In 1940, during the darkest days of the conflict, Churchill stood valiantly to rally the beleaguered British people. “In a series of magnificent speeches, appealing to his people’s courage and

historic greatness, he carried Britain with him.” Through his powerful words, he imposed his “will and imagination on his countrymen” (*U.S. News and World Report*, May 29, 2000).

Stiffened by their prime minister’s resolve, Britons withstood a horrific pounding by Hitler’s bombers in the Battle of Britain and turned a time of trial and impending defeat into triumph in what Churchill called his country’s “finest hour.”

Keegan writes that the British, under the threat of invasion, “wholly exemplified how a finest hour should be lived. They dug the dead and the living from the rubble, manned their beaches [and] tightened their belts” (*ibid.*).

In *The Lessons of History*, Will and Ariel Durant observed that “a challenge successfully met . . . raises the temper and level of a nation, and makes it abler to meet further challenges” (1968, p. 91).

The British experience demonstrates the necessity of pulling together and supporting each other during adversity. Dr. Paul Brand tells how he prepares for the worst: “The best single thing I can do to prepare for pain is to surround myself with a loving community who will stand beside me when tragedy strikes” (Brand and Yancey, p. 236). He notes that “suffering is only intolerable when nobody cares” (p. 257).

God reveals that suffering carries with it a noble purpose: It should help us to grow in brotherly love. “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ,” writes Paul (Galatians 6:2).

When our concern flows out toward others, suffering, as undesirable and painful as it is, can be a profitable experience. We learn the reality that “no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11, NIV).

Facing difficulties

The belief that affliction can yield considerable benefits has almost disappeared in Western culture. It is largely replaced by the idea that suffering or any unpleasantness is unfair and to be avoided at any cost.

Perhaps this notion is partially bequeathed to us by our living in a quick-fix society that teaches us we deserve to have a pill for every ache and a fast solution to every problem. It is also part of a victim mentality—a refusal to take responsibility for one’s actions or circumstances—that can weaken a society that succumbs to it. Any society that recognizes that sometimes life is not fair and definitely not always easy—and courageously responds to challenge—grows stronger.

In the modern view, pain is sinister, an enemy that must be avoided. We can view it that way, or we can see it as a warning that we need to change a behavior. If we cannot avoid it, then perhaps we can accept its challenge and become a stronger, better person.

Sometimes we can do little but endure a trial and let it polish our character. Counselor Norman Wright wrote that “crisis is not always bad. It can become a turning point in your life for the better . . . [It] carries with it opportunity for growth and change” (*How to Have a Creative Crisis*, 1986, p. 15).

The Bible reminds us that in trials we should look beyond the present and focus on the potential benefits: “Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:4, NIV).

Don't let trials overwhelm

We are not saying that one should suffer if he can avoid it. But when we cannot avoid it, we need to learn how to deal with suffering and, if necessary, accept it. If we do not learn to do this, our trials can lead to greater problems should we make life-altering choices as a result of the anxiety brought on by the trials.

As Dr. Paul Martin writes in *The Healing Mind*, “Stress and anxiety . . . can prevent us from sleeping properly and make us more inclined to smoke, drink excessive amounts of alcohol, eat too much of the wrong sorts of food, omit to take our medicine, neglect physical exercise, consume harmful recreational drugs, indulge in risky sexual behavior, drive too fast without wearing a seat belt, have a violent accident, or even commit suicide” (p. 55).

The high suicide rate in many nations may in part reflect people's inability to accept that life can be difficult.

A message of good news

The Bible tells us that God allows suffering to serve a divine purpose. Christians know that their Savior, Jesus Christ, suffered and died for them and that they must follow in His steps, which include suffering (1 Peter 2:21). Jesus endured agony and died so God could forgive us of our sins and grant us eternal life, during which we will reign with Christ (Revelation 5:10). Knowing this can enable us to better come to grips with life's struggles.

“If we endure,” Paul reminds us, “we shall also reign with Him” (2 Timothy 2:12). Christ will return to earth to rule—and eventually bring an end to sadness and suffering.

Jesus' message was one of fundamentally good news that focused on the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15), which Christ will establish at His return. He will institute a time of worldwide peace and happiness. Through the prophet Isaiah, God foretold the peace and joy of that coming Kingdom: “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

When the knowledge of God is restored to humanity, and Satan's influence is banished (Revelation 20:1-3), the pain that resulted from following

the devil rather than God will cease. The earth will at last find enduring peace. (For more details be sure to download or request our free booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom*.)

A marvelous future

God is now calling only a few, relatively speaking, from the masses of humanity to be a part of His Church. He regards them as the *firstfruits* of His spiritual harvest (James 1:18)—chosen, if they remain faithful, to reign with Christ in His Kingdom. But He does not call everyone now (Romans 11:7-8, 25-26). “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent Me draws him,” said Jesus, “and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:44).

How Events Molded the Character of One Future President

Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th president of the United States, was strengthened by his suffering. He was blessed with a quick and able mind, but he had a sickly body, suffering from debilitating asthma.

When he was about 12 his father said to him: “Theodore, you have the mind, but you have not the body, and without the help of the body the mind cannot go as far as it should . . . You must make your own body . . . It is hard drudgery to make one's body . . . but I know you will do it” (David McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback*, 1981, p. 112).

Teddy, as Americans would come to affectionately call him, later related to a friend the impact his father's admonition had on him. From his father's remarks he saw himself as a weak human specimen, so he had to make himself strong.

He began an immediate program of physical development, working out at a gymnasium with weights and punching bags. Teddy was religious in his devotion to improving his health. His determination paid off; he developed a powerful body no longer disabled by asthma.

Later in his life Teddy Roosevelt would

suffer an even greater trial when his mother and his young wife died on the same day. His wife had given birth to a daughter just two days before. He was at a loss to explain such a tragedy.



He said he knew of no answers save “God's will” or “strange and terrible fate” (ibid., p. 285).

Although some biographers say he never completely recovered

from this calamity, he did respond to its challenge and triumphed over the depression that enveloped him.

Though the death of his wife at age 22 was crushing, he bounced back and went on to national greatness. Some have observed that had he not suffered in this way he might never have become president of the United States. Theodore Roosevelt, as have many others, responded to trials and suffering by accomplishing more than he would have achieved had those tests never happened.

When Jesus spoke of raising up His own at the last day, He was talking about His second coming. Paul offers these additional details: “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18).

When we understand and accept God’s plan of salvation, we find great comfort in this truth. When Jesus comes, those who have repented and accepted Him as their Savior and yielded their lives in loving obedience will find comfort. Their suffering will be no more. God will give them eternal life in a new body—a spirit body—that will know no suffering (1 Corinthians 15:35-54).

We will then realize something we can understand only in part while alive in the flesh, that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

Those who come to understand the great purpose and calling of God still find that life at times is painful (verse 23), but they understand why. They look forward to the time when God will give them eternal life and enable them to reign with Christ in the Kingdom of God. Paul encourages us to “comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

Painful lessons

Paul notes that Christians, like Christ, must suffer: “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).

Peter reminds Christians that they should expect to suffer because God can use suffering to help purify us from error: “Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God” (1 Peter 4:1-2).

As Christ explained, His followers can expect to suffer. But God sometimes allows us to suffer because pain teaches us *to refrain from sin even under the most difficult circumstances*.

When God allows us to suffer because of our wrong choices, He is actually acting mercifully. Why? Because the consequence of continuing in sin when we know better (if not repented of) will be death for all eternity.

“Before I was afflicted,” says the writer of Psalm 119, “I went astray, but now I keep Your word” (verse 67). He reminds us that suffering is a reminder of the consequences of sin, that suffering can produce long-term benefits we

may not discern while we deal with our physical or emotional pain.

Pain’s important purpose

Dr. Brand worked for years treating leprosy patients in India and America. During his labors he arrived at an astonishing conclusion concerning the pathology of leprosy.

Leprosy victims suffer the curse of having their extremities—fingers, toes, feet and even nose and ears—deteriorate and waste away, but no one knew why. Before Dr. Brand’s research, doctors assumed lepers were cursed with “bad flesh.” Brand’s remarkable discovery was that the problem lies in leprosy bacilli, which attack the nerves of body parts, triggering a process that leads to the death of the nerves. When this occurs, a patient who incurs the slightest wound—even a bruise—to an afflicted area feels absolutely no pain. Consequently he continues to use the damaged body part. This repeated use aggravates the wound. Eventually the tissue becomes so damaged that the flesh actually dies and sloughs off.

Dr. Brand began treating the wounds of lepers by protecting them, sometimes with casts. The wounds would often heal and not suffer further damage. The protected flesh would become sound again, even though the leper did not regain sensation in the affected body part because the neural tissue had permanently deteriorated.

Brand concluded that pain is a gift from God that alerts us to the fact that something has gone wrong.

The doctor’s determination applies to most diseases, not just leprosy. When we hurt, we should respond to our body’s signals and take measures to relieve the pain and eliminate the underlying cause. “I had no idea how vulnerable the body becomes when it lacks a warning system,” he concludes (Brand and Yancey, p. 121).

Spiritual lessons from suffering

We can draw a spiritual parallel to Dr. Brand’s discovery. Some suffering is the result of our own sins or foolishness. Sometimes the result is the automatic trigger of negative and painful consequences in our bodies. God sometimes allows such discomfort—and suffering—to cause us to pay attention to what we are doing and change our behavior, attitude or convictions.

Much mental and physical pain is the result of breaking God’s commandments, knowingly or unknowingly. As a psychiatrist said, “Half the people who go to clinics with physical complaints are really saying, My life hurts” (ibid., p. 251).

Sometimes we sin but we do *not* immediately hurt. God may bring the sin to our attention by allowing a subsequent painful trial. “The Lord

“It Is Appointed for Men to Die Once”

We seldom want to contemplate death—either ours or someone else’s. When a loved one dies, we grieve—as we should.

It is obvious, however, that our bodies weren’t designed to last forever. As Hebrews 9:27 tells us, “It is appointed for men to die once.”

God did not design our bodies to last more than a few decades. Psalm 90:10 reminds us that “the length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength” (NIV). With the medical advances, hospitals and technology developed over the last century, our life span is about the same as it was when this psalm was written several thousand years ago. Some will live more and some less, but that’s about what most of us can expect. Life is short, too brief to waste time on things that, in the end, are not all that important.

We shouldn’t be surprised when death knocks at the door. It’s simply the way we were made. As the grass that grows up and then withers, and the flowers of the fields that bloom for a few days and just as quickly fade, so do we flourish for a time before we wither and die (Isaiah 40:6-8). Our physical bodies will age and wear out. God did not design them to be permanent.

However, that is not to say that this is the end. Faithful Job knew that he would rest in the grave until a coming resurrection. “If only you would hide me in Sheol [the grave], conceal me until your anger is past, and only then fix a time to recall me to mind! I would not lose

hope, however long my service, waiting for my relief to come. You would summon me, and I would answer; you would long to see the creature you have made” (Job 14:13-15, Revised English Bible).

Though death is sad, by no means is it the end of hope. God promises a resurrection to immortality for His faithful servants to reign



In spite of major medical advances and increasing life spans, our bodies were never designed to last forever. Yet God offers all the hope of life beyond the grave through a resurrection of the dead.

with Jesus Christ and help Him administer God’s Kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:50-54; Revelation 20:4-6; 5:10).

For those who have not known or accepted Christ, God will bring about a different resurrection at a later time so that they, too, can learn the truth of His plan and receive His gift of salvation. (You’ll learn more about this in the last chapter of this booklet.)

For greater understanding of what the Bible reveals, be sure to download or request your free copies of our booklets *What Happens After Death?* and *Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?*

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disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts” (Hebrews 12:6, NRSV). The Scriptures contain many examples of men and women whose lives demonstrated this principle.

In allowing discomfort to bring mistakes and character flaws to our attention, God is no different from any other loving parent. Fathers and mothers who love their children invest time and effort teaching and enforcing lessons for their good. God does the same because He wants us to learn (Hebrews 12:5-11).

God sometimes allows us to suffer so we will learn right from wrong and will realize our dependence on Him and His instruction. Therefore we should not be surprised when life, even for a Christian, includes stress and trials (1 Peter 4:12-13).

In other circumstances suffering may occur not as a result of sin per se, but because God sees a need to refine and strengthen a part of our character. As a muscle will atrophy without use, so can our faith and character atrophy if not properly exercised.

Peter writes of the value of trials when he explains: “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:6-7, NIV).

Learning to depend on God

We should realize that, although God allows trials, He is not indifferent to us when they come. God is a Father. Even more than a loving human father, He finds no joy in seeing His children in pain. How does He feel toward us at such times? “You can throw the whole weight of your anxieties upon him, because you are his personal concern” (1 Peter 5:7, New Testament in Modern English). These words let us know that sometimes we must depend entirely on God for the strength to endure.

When we hurt, God wants us to come to Him. He promises He will help us when we do. Paul wrote that God comforts the downcast (2 Corinthians 7:6), but we must *ask* Him for that help. He promises that He will not allow us to be tested beyond our limits and will provide us either with the relief or the strength we need to endure (1 Corinthians 10:13). We need to take God at His word and go to Him with this promise, especially when we sense we are near our breaking point.

We need to realize that God often protects those who seek Him: “If the LORD delights in a man’s way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand” (Psalm 37:23-24, NIV).

Read the whole of Psalm 91 with this in mind. We should ask God to protect us and our loved ones. He hears the prayers of the righteous (James 5:16; 1 Peter 3:12), and He does protect and bless His people. However, the Bible also makes it clear that God will allow difficult and hurtful circumstances to befall us at times, within limits. All of His faithful servants had to endure trials. When those come, we should ask Him to shelter us from suffering that exceeds our ability to endure and to give us the strength to endure what we must.

God remains in control

Studies have shown that a person's ability to endure pain is aided by a sense of control over it. We should do what we can to ease, manage and gain control over our suffering. Then we can realize we are not pawns subjected to the whim of pain, and we can choose to retain control over our attitudes and our responses to our pain.

As God's servants we must learn that ultimately God is in control, and He is merciful. He is willing and able to deliver us. His ears are open to our prayers (1 Peter 3:12).

But He expects us to rely on *His* judgment and timing and trust Him implicitly. "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia," wrote Paul. "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us" (2 Corinthians 1:8-10, NIV).

Life free from pain?

In the meantime, perhaps we can grasp the wisdom of James' words: "When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realize that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you will find you have become men of mature character with the right sort of independence" (James 1:2-4, NTME).

James' words may sound unrealistic to inhabitants of the Western world because so many live with the illusion that we should be able to abolish pain. James lived in a society in which people regularly and frequently confronted suffering. They were more accustomed to the benefits of suffering than we.

A pain-free life is impossible. We need to face the reality that God can

teach us valuable lessons through our suffering. This does not mean suffering will ever be pleasant. Even if we consider the prospect of pain in advance and mentally prepare ourselves for it, when it actually arrives we experience a rude awakening. Pain intrudes into our life with stabbing reality. It is the unwelcome enemy, or so it seems.

But suffering and trials can be helpers, in the spiritual sense, in preparing us for God's purpose and His Kingdom. Sometimes our reconciliation to suffering occurs more fully after the fact—after we have endured it and understand the spiritual maturity it can produce in us.

The only ultimate deliverance from pain and difficulty comes from God, from praying to and trusting Him. Just before Jesus suffered the torment of His crucifixion, He prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39).

Peter reminds us to remember the benefits of facing adversities: "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast" (1 Peter 5:10, NIV).

Focus on the future

When we realize the benefits that can accompany our suffering, we can better endure it. Viktor Frankl, a psychotherapist who survived the Auschwitz death camp in World War II, discovered the importance of finding meaning in life, especially in the worst of circumstances. He observed that prisoners who could focus on a goal were far more likely to survive.

Though we may find it difficult to grasp the spiritual benefits of suffering, we will ultimately be able to fully comprehend them when we receive eternal life in God's Kingdom (2 Peter 1:11).

In that Kingdom we will gain immeasurably more than we ever lost through suffering in this life. We noted earlier what Paul says about this: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18, NIV). He further reminds us that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (verse 28, New American Standard Bible). God inspired Paul to write this, and can trust it as certain!

Suffering helps us fulfill our potential as children of God (1 John 3:1). With God's help, good can result from it. A poet puts it this way:

You have each been given a bag of tools,
A formless rock and a book of rules;
And each must make, ere life has flown,
A stumbling block or a stepping stone.

That stepping-stone is the way to God's Kingdom.

Preparing for an inheritance

Paul tells us that, in addition to being children of God, we are “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:16-17). If we are heirs, then we have an inheritance. The Bible reveals our inheritance not as a future of idleness and leisure but one of *great responsibility*.

The Scriptures reveal that we will, in a real sense, *inherit our Father’s property and business*. We have much to learn from our Father. He wants to give us time to grow. He wants to teach us what we will need to help us develop the character we must have.

No shortcut to this process exists. Knowledge is not enough. Character cannot develop overnight; it takes time and considerable effort. That is why Paul tells us that “indeed we suffer with Him [Christ], that we may also be glorified together” (verse 17). Even as Christ learned and was perfected by the things He suffered (Hebrews 5:8-9), so we learn and become perfect through our adversities, to the end that we will share an inheritance with Him in the Kingdom of God.

The awesome promise of this shared inheritance—sonship in God’s eternal family (Romans 8:14-23)—helps explain why we must suffer. If our future were simply to lie around heaven and gaze upon God for eternity, as some imagine, then He could take us now or leave us here and protect us from any kind of adversity and pain. Such a role would require nothing on our part.

But our future is much greater than that. The greater the responsibility He has in store for us, the greater are the challenges to get there.

When Will Suffering Cease?

In the preceding chapter we saw that God has a purpose that extends beyond this life. His grand purpose takes into consideration the suffering of each person who responds to His call. However, most members of the human race either are not responding to or are unaware of this fantastic purpose. Therefore in this “present evil age” (Galatians 1:4) God is allowing human beings to learn important lessons.

He wants mankind to know that sin produces horrible consequences and that, ever since the Garden of Eden, we have brought much grief on ourselves by rejecting His instructions. Although swayed by the corrupt and evil influence of Satan, human beings must take full responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The world could have been a place of peace, security and happiness if only man had chosen to follow God’s ways rather than Satan’s.

God is determined that we learn that lesson, painful though it may be. The Bible records that on many occasions He attempted to dissuade people from continuing in their evil ways. But the overwhelming majority have repeatedly rejected His commands, just as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Man’s reaction to God’s messengers

For example, after God delivered ancient Israel from Egyptian slavery, the Israelites made a covenant with Him to keep His commandments. But they reneged on their agreement.

Then God sent many prophets, whose messages are preserved for us in the Bible, to warn them and urge them to repent. “But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, till there was no remedy” (2 Chronicles 36:16).

Instead of listening, they persecuted and often killed God’s messengers. Through Isaiah God spoke of how they repeatedly spurned His offer of help. “I have stretched out My hands all day long to a rebellious people” (Isaiah 65:2).

Because they refused to respond, God sentenced them to national punishment. The Assyrian Empire conquered Israel and removed its people into captivity in the eighth century B.C. (2 Kings 17:5-8). The kingdom

of Judah was subjugated by Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon and removed into exile a little more than a century later (2 Chronicles 36:15-20).

Part of the nation of Judah returned to the Jewish homeland in the fifth century B.C. so that Jewish descendants lived in the land at the time of Christ. When they heard Jesus' message commanding repentance and obedience, what was their reaction? The majority rejected Him as they had the earlier prophets. Then they killed Him!

On occasion God sent prophets to warn gentile nations. In all history we read of only one example of a non-Israelite people temporarily repenting of its sins en masse after God's warning. The prophet Jonah preached to the ancient city of Nineveh, warning its residents, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). The king and the rest of the people responded by repenting of their sins, and God spared them (verses 5-10). Later, however, they returned to their wickedness. As a result, invading armies conquered them in 612 B.C.

The historical record shows that, even when God freely offered His help and guidance to nations, they customarily rejected them—just as Adam and Eve had done.

The same old attitudes

We're no different today. Mankind still rejects God's instruction. His Word—the Bible—is readily available throughout most of the world. Yet relatively few read it regularly, and even fewer obey it. Not only do they disobey its instruction, but increasingly, particularly among those who presume themselves to be intellectual, people hold the Bible in disdain. Even some religious leaders pay mere lip service to the Bible while disputing major portions of it. They pick and choose which parts they will adhere to and which they feel free to ignore.

Israel's king Solomon aptly summed up the human condition when he wrote, "What is crooked *cannot be made straight*" (Ecclesiastes 1:15). Mankind has historically rejected God's instruction and continues to do so. Having rejected God's revelation, we have cut ourselves off from the only lasting solutions to our problems.

The result is a continuation of pain and sorrow among the nations. As a result, God's practice from the first century until now has been to call only a few individuals here and there out of this evil age to become His faithful servants.

The rest of humanity gropes in the dark. They search for understanding and meaning in life but remain largely ignorant of the reasons we are plagued with so much suffering. "Always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" is how Paul expresses it (2 Timothy 3:7). Duped by the devil and captive to sin, mankind as a whole is cut off from

godly understanding and is the unknowing target of Satan's hatred and wrath (Ephesians 2:3).

Humanity consistently blames God for evil and suffering in the world. But it is not God who is to blame. The responsibility rests squarely on us for our decision to reject His guidance and choose a life of disobedient rebellion—and on Satan for his deception of humanity and incitement to sin.

When will it end?

The good news is that *God has not given up on mankind*. Just as He allowed Adam and Eve the freedom to choose, so He lets the nations and the nations' inhabitants go their own way. He allows the world to suffer to teach us *we cannot find lasting peace, security and contentment without Him*.

We are learning the hard lesson that we cannot rightly govern ourselves apart from God and His laws. The eventual result of our efforts is that, just before Jesus returns to the earth, *humanity will teeter on the brink of annihilation*. "If that time of troubles were not cut short, *no living thing could survive*" (Matthew 24:22, REB).

This was Jesus' warning nearly 2,000 years ago. Only in recent times have we entered an age in which we actually possess the power to destroy the world. Leaders of government, science and religion believe that the only way we can avoid destruction is to establish a system of international cooperation.

Michio Kaku, scientist, author and television host, writes that the "sheer power of . . . scientific revolutions will force the nations of the earth to cooperate on a scale never seen before in history." He adds: "In the background always lurks the possibility of a nuclear war, the outbreak of a deadly pandemic, or a collapse of the environment" (*Visions: How Science Will Revolutionize the 21st Century*, 1998, p. 19).

Christ prophesied that the nations, not surprisingly, will fail in their efforts to peacefully cooperate. He warned that warfare will not cease, but will *increase* (Matthew 24:6-8). Suffering will not disappear; it will *intensify* in the years leading up to His return (verse 21-22).

God is allowing people to attempt to rule themselves even as they fumble in spiritual darkness. But because they have cast His commandments aside they cannot succeed. God will bring all people to realize they cannot achieve world peace and bring an end to misery and suffering without His intervention.

As the living and just God, our Creator will not allow an evil and unjust world to continue indefinitely. He will not allow us to annihilate ourselves. He will send Jesus to earth, this time to rule as King of Kings (Revelation 19:16). The Messiah will intervene at the hour of man's gravest crisis (Daniel 12:1).

In effect, God must tear everything down and start over. Once the worldwide destruction described in Revelation 6-19 and other biblical prophecies has run its course, Christ will intervene to establish a kingdom of righteousness and begin to rectify the injustice and unfairness in the world.

How those who suffer will finally find peace

God's plan includes a way to redeem all who have suffered and died in the past without understanding why they suffered. Billions of men, women and children have lived and died throughout history without knowing God or realizing His purpose. The majority of these never heard of Jesus during their lifetimes. They lived and died ignorant of why He came and with no comprehension of God's plan.

The Bible reveals that, 1,000 years after Jesus returns, God will bring back to life all who ever lived but received little or no understanding of God's purpose. He will resurrect them to a temporary physical life and give them a final opportunity to exercise their free will—but this time with an understanding of true spiritual knowledge in a world in which God's way, not Satan's, holds sway.

At that time they will have to choose, or knowingly reject, God's way of life. Their choice will determine whether they will receive eternal life or perish in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

This will be their *first* opportunity for salvation, because they were previously alienated from God through the deception of the devil (2 Corinthians 4:3-4; 1 John 5:19; Revelation 12:9).

With Satan blinding them, they never comprehended God's purpose. When God resurrects them into a world in which His truth will be freely available (Jeremiah 31:34; Isaiah 11:9), they will reflect on the immense suffering that sin caused down through history and can choose anew, this time with full understanding of the consequences of sin and the suffering it brings. Most will begin to make right choices and accept Christ as Savior—a path that, if chosen, will lead them to eternal life.

Revelation 20:12 describes this resurrection: "And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books [books of the Bible, revealing



Jesus Christ will return as King of Kings to rule the world in a kingdom of peace, prosperity and purpose for all. This gospel of the Kingdom of God was at the heart of His teaching.

photo illustration by Shaun Venish/Corel Professional Photos

the right way to live] were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books" (Revelation 20:12).

God will resurrect these people, and they will then be judged by biblical standards according to how they respond to the spiritual enlightenment they will have now received for the first time. (For more details about the resurrections described in the Bible, be sure to download or request the free booklets *What Happens After Death?* and *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.)

This present evil world is not just and never can be. As we have seen, it is Satan's world, not God's. But God is perfectly just, righteous, merciful and fair. His plan provides for a transformed world, a way for all mankind to be redeemed and, when all is said and done, all suffering to be erased.

Revelation 21:3-4 describes the time when suffering will be no more: "And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, '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.'" What encouraging words!

What should you do?

Many people hold to an erroneous concept that was popular in Jesus' day. At that time people commonly assumed that a person's health and wealth were an indicator of his righteousness or guilt. Those who had a comfortable, prosperous life were presumed to be blessed by God while those who suffered from poverty, disease or other adversities were thought to be divinely cursed for their sins.

Jesus addressed this notion when people told Him of a tragedy that had stunned the inhabitants of Jerusalem. On the Roman governor's orders, several men had been brutally killed while bringing sacrifices to the temple.

Jesus asked: "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:2-3).

It was incomprehensible to those who heard Christ's words that such a tragedy could befall people who were in the very act of doing good. They couldn't begin to understand how God could allow such a disaster.

Jesus made the point that no one is immune to the twists and turns of this life. The lesson? Unless we repent we will perish.

Jesus reinforced the lesson with another example. "Those eighteen on whom the tower in 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” (verses 4-5).

Untimely deaths, such as the murder of the Galileans bringing their sacrifices, were simply a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The victims of these tragedies weren't greater sinners than other men and women; they were random victims of random events. They *were* sinners, however, and, as with all who sin, they were destined to die.

The same is true for us. We may not be the victims of random violence or a collapsing building, but we are sinners, and eventually something will do us in. When we realize that, Jesus' warning should pierce our consciousness: “*Unless you repent you will all likewise perish.*”

Knowing that we live in a world awash in misery, in which tragedy can strike at any time, shouldn't we heed Christ's warning to repent and begin aligning our life with His? As Jesus told a man He had healed of a longtime

Walking Through the Valleys of Life

King David wrote in Psalm 23 about walking through “the shadow of death.” This is probably a metaphor for life's trials in general, though it also applies to a person facing his own death or the death of a loved one.

In this life we face trials. We are constantly exposed to a range of strains and stresses. However, we can call on several strategies to lessen the load. Here are a few effective steps:

- *Learn from trials and suffering.* They can help us learn new skills. Jesus Christ learned by His difficult circumstances and experiences (Hebrews 5:8), and so can we.

- *Count your blessings.* When we focus on pain, we often forget how good life has been to us. Paul said we should always be thankful (Philippians 4:6). He also explained that the result of giving thanks is a “peace which surpasses all understanding” (verse 7).

- *Don't be a prisoner of your suffering.* Severe trials can cause emotional paralysis. We need to remain active because inactivity further devastates morale. Dr. Paul Brand, an expert on the subject of pain, said: “When I confront intense pain, I look for activities that will fully absorb me, either mentally or physically. I . . . have found that conscious distraction and the discipline of activity can be

helpful tools in combating pain” (Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *The Gift Nobody Wants*, 1993, p. 254).

- *Find someone with whom you can share your load.* Many people undergoing severe trials make the mistake of trying to handle them alone. Without question, those who reach out to others in times of need benefit from doing so. We need human contact. “Two are better than one . . . But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10).

- *Break the trial into bite-sized bits.* When your difficulty or workload is daunting, divide it into manageable chores.

- *Take life one day at a time.* People battling depression, emotional struggles and difficulties in general often share a self-defeating mindset. Their emotions tell them their trial will never end. In such times we need an attitude that realizes that this trial, too, shall pass—as most difficulties indeed do. Adopt the psalmist's perspective: “This is the day which the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24), in spite of our difficulties.

- *Don't be frustrated by trifling issues.* Learn to put minor problems behind you and make decisions of lesser importance with a minimum

affliction: “*Sin no more*, lest a worse thing come upon you” (John 5:14).

Christ expects us to repent and turn to God. Indeed, God “now *commands* all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). Knowing our time on earth is short, we had better be sure to concentrate on the things that are most important to Him. (To understand what repentance is all about, download or request our free booklet *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*.)

When you suffer

If you are suffering, what should you do? Take your problem to God through prayer in faith and ask for His comfort and encouragement! In the book of Psalms we read of King David asking the Creator many times to relieve his sufferings.

of stress and worry.

- *Eat a balanced, nourishing diet.* Our bodies and minds are much less able to deal with stress and other difficulties if we do not provide them with the nutrients they need.

- *Exercise regularly.* Proper exercise relieves



When dealing with trials, it's vital to keep in mind such important principles as sharing the load with others, guarding your health, maintaining a positive attitude and not losing faith in God.

stress, provides a feeling of well-being and helps us sleep better—all of which are important for our contentment and mental stability.

- *Provide yourself regular rest and relaxation.* God commanded that we rest every week on

the Sabbath day (Exodus 20:8-11). We also need relaxing time on a daily basis.

- *Make a change.* We cannot avoid some distressful situations, and others we *should* not avoid. To opt out of them would be wrong. But don't be a glutton for punishment. If you can escape a trial without being irresponsible, take steps to do so (see Proverbs 22:3).

- *Develop your sense of humor.* “A cheerful heart is good medicine (Proverbs 17:22, NIV). Humor helps us rise above stresses. Viktor Frankl discovered, while imprisoned in Auschwitz, that humor is an innate weapon in the fight for survival. Laughter truly is effective medicine.

- *Realize that ultimately all things are in God's able hands.* Jesus points us to God: “Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit” (Luke 23:46). David urges us to “commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him” (Psalm 37:5). The Hebrew word translated “commit” means

“to roll some object on.” A mental picture that can help make the meaning clear is the thought of flinging yourself upon God—as a child would fall helplessly into his physical father's outstretched arms.

Jesus came to earth to ease our sufferings. He is no stranger to the suffering of humanity. He offers comfort, help and hope to those who suffer. “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden,” He says, “and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-29).

We need not be discouraged by the evil that pervades the world. Knowing that suffering occurs for valid reasons helps us deal with the question of why God allows it in the first place. God is sovereign and ultimately in charge. He has promised to liberate the world from suffering—not now, but when Christ returns to establish God’s Kingdom. He tells us to pray for the arrival of that Kingdom and to wait patiently for that time (Matthew 6:9-10; Luke 21:19). Only then will suffering end.

As for your own life, be sure you have surrendered to God in genuine repentance, as Jesus commanded (Luke 13:3, 5). When Christ came to live on the earth as the Son of God 2,000 years ago, He realized He was coming to a people groaning under the burden of injustice and pain. Of that world He said, “The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Matthew 4:16, NIV). The light Jesus spoke of was Himself and the truth of God that He revealed.

Jesus told the people that their responsibility was to turn to God: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (verse 17). This, above all else, is what we need to do. We cannot avoid suffering in a world full of evil, but when we turn to God we can experience the comfort and hope of looking forward to a world free of suffering.

Take strength, courage and hope from the promises of God. In spite of the sorrows of this life, we can experience great joy in living according to His will today while having faith in His revealed truth about the world to come. As we’ve seen, Paul explained that the sufferings of this age are not worthy to be compared with the glorious future we will experience in God’s Kingdom (Romans 8:18).

So wonderful will it be that, in the scope of eternity, all the pain and suffering of today will seem minor and fleeting, though it is hard to bear for the moment. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 (New Living Translation): “For our present troubles are small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don’t look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.”

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