

# Why Do People Suffer?

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If God is so powerful and so loving, why does He allow so much pain and misery in the world?

What terrible scenes of human suffering we have witnessed recently! Readers may well ask, Why does God let these dreadful things happen? Is He really a God of love? Is He as all-powerful as He claims to be? If so, why doesn't He move in and prevent suffering?

Down through the ages, even devout Christians have had trouble answering these questions. The problem is easier to solve if we divide suffering into seven kinds.

### Self-inflicted Suffering

First there is the suffering we bring on ourselves. A person jumps out a window on the fifty-sixth floor of a skyscraper and dies when he strikes the street below. A cigarette smoker bums three packs a day for 20 years and develops terminal lung cancer. A skier attempts a slope too steep for his skill and breaks a leg,

God could prevent this kind of suffering by making it impossible for us to do foolish things. In doing so, He would have to deny us freedom of choice. He doesn't want to do this, and we don't want Him to either. So should we blame God for the suffering we bring on ourselves by our own choices?

### Discipline

Second is the suffering that God allows to correct some problem in our character. Good parents discipline their children. The Bible says plainly, "Whom the Lord loves he chastens, and scourges every son whom he receives." Hebrews 12:6. Read also verses 5 to 11.

God told Adam and Eve that if they ate the forbidden fruit they would die. They ate, and they would have died that very day, for their disobedience had made them unfit to live in the society of heaven, where all are in perfect harmony with God's will. God in His great love for these two children of His delayed the otherwise inevitable result of their sin. For the time being, He put Adam and Eve out of the garden and cursed the ground for their sake (Genesis 3:17), so that the loneliness of the expulsion coupled with their sweat as they toiled to cultivate the reluctant ground added to their tears when they should see their firstborn son kill his brother—all would work together to develop in them characters that would fit again into the society of unfallen beings. Moreover, the extra time God gave them provided them opportunity to evaluate Christ's promise to die in their behalf.

Adam and Eve received their discipline in the spirit in which God gave it, and we expect to see them received back into Eden when Jesus comes again.

The Bible records many instances of this kind of disciplinary suffering. David committed adultery. The subsequent death of his baby son taught him to pray, "Behold, thou desires truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shall make me to know wisdom. Create in me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me." Psalm 51:6-10.

King Nebuchadnezzar boasted, "is not this great Babylon, that I have built by the might of my power?" Daniel 4:30. God took away his sanity for seven years to teach him that his success came from heaven. Read the whole of Daniel 4.

When God takes us in hand to make us the kind of people He wants us to be, shall we ask Him to hold off, to refrain from disciplining us with this kind of suffering and treat us, instead, like homeless, unwanted orphans?

### Drawing Closer to Christ

Third, the suffering that makes us cling to Christ. We have all noticed how bravely little children get along without their parents when everything is safe, routine and familiar. But let a clap of thunder sound above them or a strange dog bark, and they run quickly to Mother and hug her tight.

So it was when Peter found he could walk on the water. He looked back to the boat in triumph to be sure his fellow disciples were watching him. At once Jesus let him begin to sink. Peter cried, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus put an arm around him, and the chastened Peter held Him fast. Read Matthew 14:22-33.

In the story of "A Love Stronger Than Tornadoes," notice how fervently Dan Voth prayed while the tornado was blowing his home away. Don't we all pray more often and more fervently when we are afraid or when a loved one is ill? Shall we find fault with God for the suffering that draws us closer to Him?

## **Our Imperfect World**

Fourth is the suffering that comes because we live in all imperfect world. When God finished creating our world, He declared everything "very good." Genesis 1:31. Since then, sin and men's unwise decisions have marred His perfect work.

More and more we can see what our use of various toxic chemicals has done to our environment. Frustrated Pelican parents whose thin shelled eggs smashed instead of hatching suffered because we humans had used DDT. Should God be blamed. This was a result of man's work, not God's.

Smog. Erosion, Polluted lakes and streams. Man causes these things not God, though the animals living in them suffer and die and we suffer in consequence.

An airliner collides with a private plane and crashes, killing all on board. Why? A dam gives way and the resultant surge of water drowns hundreds in its path. Again. Why? Probably because someone blundered.

In Christ's day a tower fell killing 18 people. Contemporary Israelites called the disaster a punishment from God on 18 very bad sinners. Jesus disagreed. "They were not," He said and went on, "unless you repent you will all of you come to the same end." Luke 13:4, 5, N. E. B.

No doubt the tower had been badly built. The contractor may have taken shortcuts or used inferior materials. The architect probably did not fully understand the strains and stresses involved and so failed to design adequately for them. Disasters like this must be expected in our imperfect, sinful world because all of us are imperfect, sinful people. We all blunder, sometimes deliberately, sometimes out of ignorance. But almost always other people are affected.

Most illnesses fit in this category. People used to live nearly 1000 years. Read Genesis chapter 5. Faulty living habits have brought degeneration to the entire human race, shortening life for everyone and making us all susceptible to high blood pressure, cancer, heart attacks and other dread diseases.

God made the world perfect. Surely we cannot blame Him for suffering that results from mankind's repeated actions that spoil His world. Who's to blame for his lung cancer?

## **Satan's Enmity**

Fifth is the suffering that results from Satan's enmity against God. The Bible reveals that just before the creation of our world, the highest angel in heaven criticized God's government and claimed he could run the universe better. He won over to his cause a third of the angels: they rebelled against God and were put out of heaven. The leader of the rebels is called the serpent, Satan or the devil. See Revelation 12:7-12. Jesus spoke of him as an individual whom He had personally seen fall from heaven. Luke 10:18.

Is Satan's plan really better than God's? God could have chosen to suppress Satan or to argue against him. Instead, He gave Satan opportunity to work out his plans and demonstrate their superiority if they were superior.

The book of Job tells of the suffering Job endured when God gave Satan a free hand to do what he wanted with that faithful God fearing man. The gospels record the heartbreaking anguish that Satan inflicted on Jesus. Unfortunately, men blame God for this kind of suffering, instead of Satan. But should we?

## **Punishment For Sin**

Sixth, is the suffering that comes as punishment for sin. Some four or five thousand years ago God destroyed the inhabitants of our world by the Flood because God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the Earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Genesis 6:5.

Several centuries later He decreed destruction of the tribes of Palestine because the cup of their iniquity was finally full. See Genesis 15:16.

Note that this kind of suffering comes only when humans have finally chosen to reject God. God delays the punishment as long as possible. He told Abraham not to take possession of Palestine because He was giving the tribes people another 400 years of grace. See Genesis 15.

He told Noah to build the ark, then stated that the inhabitants would have another 120 years in which to repent of their sins and escape the threatened punishment. See Genesis 6:3.

In both these cases the people refused to accept forgiveness or change their way of living. Before the Flood the earth was "filled with violence" Genesis 6:13. No one was safe. History records that the tribes of Palestine became so brutal that they even murdered their children in the name of religion.

We can see similar conditions in our society today. A rapist-murderer strikes terror to a community-till he is caught and punished. A ruler goes berserk and destroys hundreds of thousands of his own countrymen. Anti-Semitism breeds the Holocaust. When God moves to stop such practices, should we not thank Him and be grateful that justice has such a strong and determined Defender?

## **The Final Destruction of Sinners**

Seventh is the suffering humans will endure when fire comes "down from God out of heaven" and destroys sin and sinners forever. See Revelation 20:9.

This suffering will be the final result of a person's decision to separate himself from God, Life comes from God, the Life-giver. Human beings can live only so long as they maintain a living connection with God. All who separate from God separate from life.

This is what Jesus meant when he told Adam and Eve that if they ate the forbidden fruit they would die. This is what Paul meant when he said, "The wages of sin is death." Romans 6:23.

This is not the death we all die and our loved ones bury us. This is the death that is the end.

Read Revelation 20. All who have ever lived are gathered in this memorable scene. Those who in their lifetimes repented of their sins and accepted Christ's death in their behalf are close to Christ now, within the walls of the New Jerusalem. All the others all who refused to repent and who rejected Christ's sacrifice, are outside. But they can see into the city! They can observe the reward of the saints and understand something of what they cut themselves off from when they cut themselves off from Christ. Much of their suffering, we believe, will come from realizing what they could have had if they had made the right decisions when they had opportunity to do so. Now, unfortunately, they are wholly unfit to live in Christ's kingdom.

Their death at this time is the inevitable result of their decision to separate themselves from the Source of life. It is an act of mercy that God brings death to them quickly, cutting their suffering as short as possible.

## **An End to All Suffering**

It is clear, then, that suffering comes from Satan or from ourselves or from the sins and mistakes of other people or because our loving Father knows we need discipline.

Why doesn't God end suffering? He will soon. The unprecedented extent of the frightful disasters we have seen in recent years is evidence that Bible prophecies are being fulfilled. "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! For the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knows that he hath but a short time." Revelation 12:12.

We can expect disasters to be more frequent and more severe. But not forever will they continue. Jesus will set up His kingdom on earth soon. Then sorrow and suffering will be no more.

Let us thank Him for His goodness to us and get ready to live in the kingdom He is preparing, where there will be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain." Revelation 21:4.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus! Usher in that glorious day!

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