GOD'S PLAN FOR PAIN

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The Need for Answers

When investigating the major obstacles to the Christian faith, author Lee Strobel commissioned George Barna to conduct a survey that asked respondents what one question they would pose to God if they were assured of receiving back an answer. The number one question put forth by those surveyed was, not surprisingly, "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?"[1]

The presence of evil – manifested through pain, suffering, moral wickedness, and other like things – represents a very challenging issue for anyone wishing to defend the existence of a theistic God. For the non-believer, evil and suffering present a formidable blockade to ever acknowledging the reality of a God that is both all-powerful and all-good. It is what William Lane Craig refers to as "atheism's killer argument"[2].

For the Christian, the problem of evil and pain has great potential to shake the faith of the most rugged saint, especially when suffering lands squarely on them or those to whom they are close. How can a God who proclaims to be all-powerful, all-good, and the epitome of love allow evil to seemingly have such a stranglehold on this planet and affect those who appear innocent or ones He lovingly calls His children? The issue for the believer becomes one of not if God exists, but what *kind* of God exists.

While it is doubtful that easy answers will ever be found that satisfy the emotional and human response to evil, Christian apologists must nonetheless be ready to offer replies to

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[1] Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Zondervan, 2000), 29.

[2] William Lane Craig and Walter-Sinnot-Armstrong, *God? A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2004), p 112.

those who use the reality of evil to deny God's existence. For these non-believers, confidently providing convincing evidence for the coexistence of the Christian God and evil in the world will break down a major barrier that prevents them from believing in the One who died for them. For Christians, proving that God does indeed have a plan for pain helps stabilize faith, defeats the nagging notions that imply God cannot be good if he allows such heartache to exist in the world[3], and provides hope that pain and suffering will one day see their end.

General Responses on the Questions of Pain and Suffering

Before one can dive into the topics of if and why God uses pain and suffering to mature His people, there are general questions on the subject of evil that cause confusion for just about everybody. Everyone needs answers to questions such as what evil really is; how its presence can be reconciled with the existence of an all-good and all-powerful God; if evil was created by God; and what types of evil exist in the world.

The Nature and Origin of Evil

The natural place to start is to define what evil actually is. Is evil some force in the universe that manifests itself through sickness, wicked people, and natural disasters? Or is it merely an illusion as some Eastern and cult religions teach?

People generally think of evil as something which ought not to be. However, God called his original creation "very good" in Genesis 1:31, so something must have gone awry to bring about these things that should not be.

The best way to describe evil is a privation or corruption in something that was originally good, but is now missing something[4]. Just as a meal can be completely ruined by the elimination or corruption of a key ingredient in a recipe, something that was once "very good"

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[3] Norman Geisler and Ron Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask* (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 59.

[4] Ronald Rhodes, *Tough Questions About Evil* in *Who Made God?*, ed. Ravi Zacharias, Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids, MI: Zonervan, 2003), 34.

like this world can be ruined by evil and appear quite differently than what was originally intended. From a corruption standpoint, evil does not stand alone, but can be thought of as mold on bread or rust on a car. It overtakes something that was once perfect in nature and cripples it. The Greek word for evil, *Ponēros*, implies a malignancy, which is in keeping with the thought of corruption. From a privation standpoint, evil can be viewed, for example, as the definition of darkness, which is 'lacking light'.

When one understands what evil really is – a corruption or privation of something that was originally perfect – it becomes easy to answer the question of whether God created evil. As Norman Geisler summarizes:

1. God created every substance.
2. Evil is not a substance (but a privation in a substance).
3. Therefore, God did not create evil.[5]

So God did not create evil, but evil exists, so how did these privations or corruptions witnessed by everyone in the world come about? The origin can be traced back to the gift of free will that God bestowed on His created beings.[6] God's creatures were given the free will to choose one course of action over another, and by its very nature, a choice implies at least two possibilities. So in this sense, God allowed the possibility of evil, but did not actually create evil itself[7]. It was His created beings that actualized evil through their sinful rebellion against their Creator.

The critic may raise the argument that God could have created beings that were incapable of making a bad choice. But this argument negates true free will. This would mean that humans could not freely choose to love someone, but would instead act in some pre-programmed manner that is not free at all. In his interview with Lee Strobel on the topic of why evil exists,

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[5] Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1999), 220.

[6] Geisler and Brooks, *Skeptics*, 62.

[7] Ibid.

Peter Kreeft states, "Real love – our love of God and our love of each other – must involve a choice. But with the granting of that choice comes the possibility that people would choose instead to hate."[8]

The gift of free will was God's only way of allowing mankind to make the ultimate choice: to accept or reject their Creator. A man may exercise free will in deciding what color he will paint his house, what vocation he will pour himself into, and whether he will be faithful to his wife. However, all these free will selections pale in comparison to the ultimate choice he makes in deciding on whether or not to bow before God. The capacity of free will necessitates the possibility of choosing one direction over another, which is exactly how God designed it. With free will comes the possibility of evil, but God Himself does not actualize it (or bring it into existence), His creation does when they freely choose to act in a rebellious nature such as when they willingly reject His offer of redemption.

Types of Evil

Once sin entered into the world, then evil was actualized and took on two general forms, moral evil and natural evil[9]. The vast majority of the time, when the topic of evil comes up, moral evil is usually the centerpiece of the conversation. Moral evil manifests itself in the way humans choose or choose not to do something. It is important to note that this form of evil is not just what a human being does, but it can also just as easily be what they choose not to do. For example, a man may choose to murder another man, which is evil. Another man may choose to not thwart the murderer's actions although it is safe and possible for him to do so, which is also evil through inaction.

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[8] Strobel, 37.

[9] Ronald H. Nash, *The Problem of Evil* in *To Everyone an Answer*, ed. Francis Beckwith, William Lane Craig, J.P. Moreland (Madison, WI: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 208.

If evil is a privation of something, then exactly what 'lack' causes moral evil? The Bible provides the complete list in Galatians 5:22: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; against such things there is no law." When moral evil is exhibited, it can always be traced back to the removal of one of the fruits of the Spirit.

The second form of evil, natural evil, is realized through natural disasters (e.g. hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, etc.) and human disease and sickness. Natural evil comes as a direct result from living in a fallen world and in a body that has been polluted by sin. Note that one form of evil may give rise to another. For example, a man's sexual immorality (moral evil) can lead to sexually transmitted diseases (natural evil) that can ultimately take his life. This example also showcases how personal responsibility enters into the mix. The alcoholic who is dying of cirrhosis of the liver should not pinpoint God as the cause of the evil they are experiencing, but should instead look into the mirror to find the true originator of their condition.

The question may arise as to how natural evils such as earthquakes came about if humans actualized evil through their rebellious free will choices. All of creation itself was subjected to corruption through mankind's sin as the book of Romans points out: "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now."[10]

While natural evils cause very real suffering for mankind, it is moral evil that bears the responsibility for the bulk of tragedy and suffering in the world, and the form of evil that most disturbs everyone. When a tragedy along the scale of 9/11 occurs, people tend to ask if God

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[10] Romans 8:20-22, New American Standard Bible.

was responsible for it. The truth is mankind has become so skilled at causing grief, tragedy, and destruction, that there is little (if any) reason for divine additions or intervention.

While many proofs could illustrate this point, few exemplify mankind's ability to carry out evil better than the story chronicled in Jan Gross' book entitled *Neighbors*[11]. Gross takes his reader back to 1941 when the Nazis rolled into the town of Jedwabne where Poles and Jews had been peacefully living side by side for many years. Once the Germans arrived, the Poles asked the simple question "Is it permitted to kill the Jews?" The quick release of existing government control resulted in a type of evil and violence few modern horror movies depict. Summarizing parts of Gross's book in a 2001 Newsweek article, George Will states, "A head was hacked off and kicked around. To escape the killers, women fled to a pond and drowned their babies, then themselves. But most were burned alive in a barn while the town was searched for the surviving sick and children. A witness: 'As for the little children, they roped a few together by their legs and carried them on their backs, then put them on pitchforks and threw them onto smoldering coals.'"[12] Struggling to make sense of such impromptu evil, Will ends his article by answering the question that was on everyone's mind: "So, again: Why in Jedwabne did neighbors murder their neighbors? Because it was permitted. Because they could."[13]

Reconciling the Existence of God and Evil

"Aha", cries the critic, "there is an example of the core question! Why would God, if He exists, allow such things to happen? There can be no rational reason or plan for such things!" This seemingly irreconcilable issue has erected a barricade to God for many with the end result for them being total disbelief. The problem exists because of the way God describes Himself. If God were not all-powerful, then mankind could understand why evil is so widespread. This finite

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[11] Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001).

[12] George F. Will, "In Jedwabne", *Newsweek*, 09 July, 2001.

[13] Ibid.

Godism argument is offered by Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People.*[14] Kushner believes God wants to stop evil, but cannot because it has simply gotten away from Him and He is not powerful enough to make things right. However God does state that He is all-powerful[15], fifty-six times in the Bible to be exact[16]. Further, God says that He is all-good[17]. If God did not make this claim, then evil and God's existence could also be easily reconciled. The skeptic David Hume summarizes the position against the co-existence of God and evil in this way: "Is He willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is impotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"[18]

God is certainly not impotent as no impotent being can create something as vast and complex as this universe out of nothing, which is what the cosmological and teleological arguments for God demonstrate. However, being all-powerful does not mean that God can literally do anything. For example He cannot deny Himself, make a round square, or more importantly for the sake of this argument, make someone freely choose to avoid evil[19]. Still the critic can complain that this just does not add up. William Sinnott-Armstrong protests, "Although I want my son to have free will, I would stop him from killing his sister. If I didn't, then I would be guilty of a serious crime. So why doesn't God stop people from killing each other? At least, why doesn't he stop *most* of them? There is way too much killing in the world to

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[14] Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1981).

[15] Revelation 1:8.

[16] Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 396.

[17] 1 Peter 1:16.

[18] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited with an introduction by Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980), part 10, 198, quoted by Craig, William Lane. *Hard Questions Real Answers.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 82, footnote 4.

[19] Craig, *Hard Questions*, 82-83.

think that an all-good God could stop it but chooses to sit idly by just in order to protect the free will of murders."[20]

However, as has already been discussed, free will actions on the part of God's creatures were the root cause of evil being actualized in the world, and God cannot logically excise evil as it would mean the destruction of human freedom[21]. Freedom is the only avenue open to mankind to realize a freely-chosen eternity spent with God.

It should be pointed out that God has, at times, coerced mankind to do His will such as when He redirected Jonah back onto his originally commanded mission. It is admittedly hard to understand why God acts in some cases and why He does not in others. For example, in the New Testament Joseph was warned by God to flee from Herod's plan to kill all the male children two years of age and younger, which had been prophesied in the Old Testament (indicating God knew it would happen).[22] Why would God not just strike Herod down prior to him issuing the order? Some may say that God does not intervene in human affairs like that. Yet in Acts, another Herod is divinely struck dead by the Lord during an address to the people of Tyre and Sidon[23]. Such questions raise the issue of God's goodness along with how and why He acts in certain cases to allow what appears to be senseless evil.

Norman Geisler points out that God has a good purpose for everything, even if mankind does not see it. His argument is stated in this manner:

1. An omni benevolent God has a good purpose for everything.
2. There is some evil for which we see no good purpose.
3. Therefore, there is a good purpose for all evil, even if we do not see it.[24]

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[20] Craig and Armstrong, *Debate*, 93.

[21] Geisler and Brooks, *Skeptics*, 64.

[22] Matthew 3:16-23.

[23] Acts 12:20-23.

[24] Geisler, *Apologetics*, 222.

This does not mean that God is causing evil to bring about some form of good. Rather He redeems good from evil.[25] For example, the freedom marches of Martin Luther King resulted in great brutality being inflicted on the protest marchers. But as America witnessed the ugliness of racism being completely exposed through the beatings of the marchers on television, it was King who ultimately won the day. The most-referenced verse in all of Scripture that describes how God brings good from all situations is Romans 8:28 that says, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

It has also been suggested that God allows lesser evils to occur to circumvent greater evils in the future. For example, war is never welcomed, but is sometimes necessary to stop the onslaught of a madman like Hitler. A softer illustration can be seen in the arena of human relationships. For example, when counseling young women who are in a bad dating relationship, Scottish preacher Alistair Begg has said that his advice is always, "Missy, you can cry now because you lost him, or you can cry a whole lot more later because you got him." While such advice may initially hurt and cause pain, it ultimately is for the best and is good. As Peter Kreft writes, there is a difference in being kind and being good: "First, we must be clear that goodness means more than 'kindness'. Kindness is the will to free the loved one from pain. Sometimes, to be good is *not* to be kind."[26]

God's plan for pain can very much be a 'good' thing. No one has done a better job of expressing this truth than Philip Yancey in his book *Where is God When it Hurts?*[27] Yancey provides exhaustive evidence of how the lack of pain can be an awful curse, and uses the example of individuals suffering from leprosy who have no pain sensations. As a result of the

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Peter Kreft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Madison, WI: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 139-140.

[27] Phillip Yancey, *Where is God When it Hurts?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977).

disease, they cause great harm to themselves because they cannot feel things like a hot stove or a deep cut. Yancey notes that pain and pain alone was the only thing that forced the patients to respond to danger, and concludes by saying that he now understands how wise and good God is by putting pain out of reach[28]. In this respect, God's plan for pain protects his created beings in ways that nothing else can.

This concept of wisdom and goodness leads to the moral nature of God. The argument for the existence of God in the face of evil is strengthened even more through what is called the argument from moral law. The basic structure of this argument is as follows:

1. Moral laws imply a Moral Law Giver.
2. There is an objective moral law.
3. Therefore, there is a Moral Law Giver.[29]

Using this line of reasoning, it can be argued that the very recognition of evil necessitates the existence of God. Just as no one can call a line crooked, unless they know what a straight line is[30], mankind cannot identify evil unless they have some standard to measure good and evil. Without such a plumb line, it is just a matter of opinion. The ultimate reference point for distinguishing good from evil can only be found in the person of God. If He does not exist, then there are no moral absolutes and no ultimate basis to judge between Hitler and Mother Theresa[31].

When will Evil be Defeated?

Still, arguments are made that if such a moral and pure God exists, then evil should be defeated by now, but since evil is not defeated, this so-called holy God does not exist. To those

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[28] Ibid, 20.

[29] Geisler, *Apologetics*, 278-279.

[30] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: Macmillian Publishing, 1943), 45.

[31] Rhodes, 35.

wishing that evil be immediately removed from the earth, the question can be asked, "Fine, but suppose he starts with you?"[32] The fact is that no one is innocent when compared to the absolute perfection and purity that exists in God. But there does need to be an intellectual response to the question of why evil is not conquered. The answer comes by including one simple word – "yet" – in the conclusion that is reached regarding God and the ultimate defeat of evil:

1. God is all good and desires to defeat evil.
2. God is all powerful and is able to defeat evil.
3. Evil is not *yet* defeated.
4. Therefore, it will one day be defeated.[33]

Such a conclusion naturally follows when one proves that an all-powerful God exists (the cosmological argument) and that an all-good God exists (the moral argument). Still, it is natural for all to yearn for the day when evil will finally be extinguished. It is interesting to note that the answer to the "when" question may never be fully revealed here on earth because it is something that is also asked in heaven. The book of Revelation reveals that those who have been killed for their faith in God ask the question too: "'How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also."[34] The verse pictures saints of God, face to face with the Lord, who have not been given the answer as to when evil will cease and justice be done. It is also interesting to note that the verse states God is not interfering with the future murders of His saints, but is instead allowing them to occur for His own divine purpose.

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[32] Geisler and Turek, *Faith to be an Atheist*, 389.

[33] Geisler, *Apologetics*, 221.

[34] Revelation 6:10-11.

Evil will one day see its end, but its defeat will occur in the perfect timing of the Lord of the universe. Until then, it is good for everyone who wishes for the elimination of suffering and evil to listen to Peter Kreft's remarks: "On my door there's a cartoon of two turtles. One says, 'Sometimes I'd like to ask why he allows poverty, famine, and injustice when he could do something about it.' The other turtle says 'I'm afraid God might ask me the same question.'"[35]

Exploring God's Plan for Pain

Intellectual answers to the problem of evil only go so far, especially for Christians who have experienced deep hurt in their lives and still wear the bruise marks that evil and suffering have left behind. A mother of four young children who has been recently diagnosed with cancer will likely need more insight than the somewhat dry conclusions that have been presented thus far. It is plain that emotional and deeper spiritual answers are needed to buttress the intellectual responses already presented so Christians can better understand if and how God uses suffering and pain to accomplish His purpose in their lives.

Most everyone admits that they do not welcome pain and suffering. For the Christian, however, pain and suffering are especially difficult to deal with for two reasons. First, although most Christians will not admit it, many view their faith and induction into the family of God as a 'divine insurance policy' that exempts them from the perils of this world. Actually, this view has some merit as Satan brings this very fact up to God when discussing the righteousness of Job, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Hast Thou not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land."[36]

No more information is given regarding the apparent hedge of protection that God placed around Job, but there is little question that most believers feel down deep God should

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[35] Strobel, 50.

[36] Job 1:10.

protect them in the very same way. Of course God does offer shelter from the enemy as 2 Thessalonians 3:3 says, “But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.” The facts of the invisible war aside, the truth is that few Christians remain unscathed in this life and that is where the difficulty of reconciling a loving Heavenly Father and the sometimes brutal events of this life lies. It is helpful to first investigate the sources of evil that one may encounter before turning to how God uses such pain and suffering in the lives of those He calls His own.

Sources of Evil and Suffering

When a believer faces a certain hardship, it could very well be that they are experiencing a God-ordained trial, but it also may be true that they are simply encountering issues that come from living in a fallen world. It can be argued that four sources of evil and suffering should be considered:

1. Satan.
2. The fallen world.
3. Punishment from God.
4. Suffering that results from following Christ.

Satan

When addressing this source of evil, one must be careful to avoid two extremes. There are those who attribute all pain and suffering to the enemy and there are those who believe that the god of this world[37] has no power whatsoever over the life of a believer. Regarding the first position, it will be shown that three other avenues of suffering are possible for the Christian, so this stance will be negated. As for the second assertion, Scripture provides evidence that Satan actively works against the saints of God. For example, in 1 Thessalonians, Paul describes how he

[37] 2 Corinthians 4:4.

wished to see the church in Thessalonica, but yet Satan thwarted his plans[38]. Peter also warns all believers to be on guard because their adversary stalks them as a lion looking for a meal[39].

The fact that Satan possesses great power is not up for debate. In the book of Job, Satan was the direct cause of raiding bandits that murdered Job's servants and stole his possessions, a supernormal fire that consumed another gathering of Job's servants and livestock, a windstorm that took the lives of Job's children, and a disease that swept Job over from head to foot. In the New Testament, Jesus heals a woman who suffered from a physical condition that was demon-caused where she could not straighten up[40]. From these evidences, it can be seen that the enemy has real power and should not be taken lightly.

Paul warns believers to not provide the enemy a foothold in their lives[41], which is a warning that all Christians should adhere to. Instead, each should stand firm, cloaked in the full armor of God knowing that the flaming missiles of the enemy are sure to come[42].

The Fallen World

The results of living in this fallen world can be devastating. Natural disasters such as earthquakes and tornados are often no respecter of persons, Christian or not. Moreover, bodily handicaps, sickness, and disease commonly strike believers or those they love just as they do others who do not know God. Jesus taught that regardless of whether people build their lives on the foundation of God or on their own, the storms of life will blow against them[43].

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[38] 1 Thessalonians 2:18.

[39] 1 Peter 5:8.

[40] Luke 13:11.

[41] Ephesians 4:27.

[42] Ephesians 6:10-18.

[43] Matthew 7:24-27.

Christ's teaching on this subject shows that while a theistic God certainly has the capability to defy the natural laws and evil that occurs, His people oftentimes experience the end result of His curse right along with the rest of the world. For example, when Elijah delivered God's message to King Ahab that a multi-year drought would be visited on the land by divine judgment, the brook he was using to live dried up with all the other rivers and streams, and the prophet was forced to move to a different hiding place[44]. There was no supernatural preservation of Elijah's brook; and although he was later miraculously preserved with food through a widow at Zarephath, he initially felt the effects of God's judgment right along with everyone else.

Christians can expect to feel the ramifications of moral or other natural evil as well. Mankind's evil nature is quite capable of afflicting God's people with harm as evidenced in the lives of the first two brothers who lived[45]. Christians should also understand their own personal responsibility when it comes to minimizing evil's intrusion into their lives. Just as no Christian should expect divine intervention from gravity should they willingly choose to step off a roof, there are other such guidelines they should follow in order to guard their health, safety, and other such things.

Punishment from God

This subject is a difficult one to tersely discuss as whole books have been written dissecting different opinions and conclusions. However, a few facts can confidently be made. First, God does discipline His children as the Scripture makes clear[46].

But the Bible also makes it plain that afflictions are not always the result of God divinely bearing down on humanity. For example, there are two examples[47] in Scripture where

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[44] 1 Kings 17:1-9.

[45] Genesis 4:1-12.

[46] Hebrews 12:5-6.

[47] Luke 13:1-5 and John 9:1-3.

Jesus is directly confronted with seemingly senseless tragedies and asked if they were judgments from God that were delivered because of sinful behavior. Both times, Jesus responds "No" and redirects the issue to humanity's need to turn to God.

Suffering that Results from Following Christ

The final area of suffering is somewhat unique to the Christian and concerns the new identity that the Christian takes on when they are born again. The major difference in this form of suffering is that it is *chosen* by the Christian and not imposed by any outside force[48]. The Christian willingly takes up the cross of Christ, and endures the ramifications that come with following Christ in obedience and being identified with Him. The vertical rebellion that mankind and Satan normally direct at God takes on a horizontal aspect that is aimed at those who represent the Lord here on earth. That such suffering comes is very evident for Jesus plainly said, "You will be hated by all on account of My name . . ."[49] and, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you."[50] Paul also reminded his readers, "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."[51]

Divine rescue from such suffering and persecution happens occasionally in the Bible, such as Daniel's liberation from the lion's den. However, there are plenty of recordings in and out of the Bible that show this is not always the case. Even Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego who were spared from Nebuchadnezzar's furnace in the book of Daniel indicated that God may choose not to protect their lives here on earth, thus indicating no guarantee of an easy life for

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[48] A.W. Tozer, *Chastisement and Cross Carrying Not the Same*, in *That Incredible Christian* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1964), 113-115.

[49] Matthew 10:22.

[50] John 15:18.

[51] 1 Timothy 3:12.

God's people who choose to stand for what is right[52]. A.W. Tozer puts it very well when he says, "The wind still blows toward hell and the man who is walking in the opposite direction will have the wind in his face. And we had better take this into account when we ponder on spiritual things. If the unsearchable riches of Christ are not worth suffering for, then we should know it now and cease to play at religion."[53]

The evidence shown regarding hardships that come from Satan, the fallen world, punishment from God, or being identified with Christ should silence the segment of the Church that argues Christians suffer only because they don't have enough faith to ward off the trials that they are experiencing. Such preposterous claims are not only easily defeated (for example, the heroes of the faith spoken of in Hebrews 11 were martyred because they lacked faith?), but it can be shown that the reverse may actually be true.

A Pivotal Point of Radical Truth

In an essay supporting the concept of Intelligent Design, William Dembski makes the argument that the more improbable a statement is, the more information it contains[54]. This being the case, A.W. Tozer delivers what could be the most improbable and therefore most informative statement ever regarding suffering and the Christian in the opening line of his essay entitled *The Ministry of the Night*:

> If God has singled you out to be a special object of His grace you may expect Him to honor you with stricter discipline and greater suffering than less favored ones are called upon to endure.[55]

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[52] Daniel 3:17-18.

[53] Tozer, *The Wind in Our Face*, *Incredible*, 118.

[54] William A. Dembski, *An Information-Theoretic Design Argument*, in *To Everyone an Answer*, ed. Francis Beckwith, William Lane Craig, J.P. Moreland (Madison, WI: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 86-87.

[55] Tozer, *The Ministry of the Night*, *Incredible* , 122.

This radical statement stands in stark contrast to what most Christians believe regarding suffering in their lives and reveals that God may intentionally use suffering in His plan for maturing His saints. Tozer's statement is so revolutionary compared with how most view pain and suffering that it simply must be given attention. What evidence can be found to support such an assertion?

A quick tour through just a few of the lives in the Old Testament finds backing for Tozer's claim as suffering and hardship seemed to be an ever present companion for many of those that God used mightily:

- Joseph – abandoned by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused for sexual misconduct and imprisoned, and forgotten in jail for two years after helping fellow prisoners.
- Moses – rejected by his own people, 'forgotten' for forty years, walked every mile with the disobedient Israelites in the desert, and oftentimes was challenged and overwhelmed by Israel's demands on him.
- Elijah – fled from a wicked king (and perhaps a more wicked queen) after delivering God's judgment, forced to endure life on the run in remote parts of the wilderness, and was so depressed and exhausted that he despaired of life before being comforted by God in a remote cave.
- David – the man after God's own heart composed countless psalms from a weary and tearful heart after being on the run from King Saul as well as experiencing many other painful trials.
- Daniel – taken into captivity by the Babylonians, persecuted by jealous political enemies, and thrown into what should have been certain death in the lion's den.

Turning to the New Testament we find the same sort of sufferings in the lives of John the Baptist and the apostles. The Bible aside, the history of the Church is rife with examples of those who endured a suffering path and were greatly used by God. From the likes of Martin Luther who struggled with depression to great hymn writers such as Horatio Spafford who wrote "It is Well with My Soul" after his business had been ruined by the great Chicago fire and all four of his daughters were drowned at sea after their ship collided with another vessel, it seems each greatly-used saint has their own personal bruise marks. But as Tozer points out, these brandings may be part of God's plan in molding His special child so that they deepen in their

walk with Him and bear much fruit for His glory. C.S. Lewis puts God's process in wide-eyed perspective:

> The more we believe that God hurts only to heal, the less we can believe that there is any use in begging for tenderness. A cruel man might be bribed – might grow tired of his vile sport – might have a temporary fit of mercy, as alcoholics have fits of sobriety. But suppose what you are up against is a surgeon whose intentions are wholly good. The kinder and more conscientious he is, the more inexorably he will go on cutting. If he yielded to your entreaties, if he stopped before the operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless. But is it credible that such extremities of torture should be necessary for us? Well, take your choice. The tortures occur. If they are unnecessary, then there is no God or a bad one. If there is a good God, then these tortures are necessary. For no even moderately good Being could possibly inflict or permit them if they weren't.[56]

The last question to consider in this vein is what Christian has not asked God to make them more like Jesus? For some believers this is a daily prayer. But has the Christian thought through what they are asking God to do? Consider this simple contrast of a song that every believer has likely sung at some point in their life along with a description of Christ from the Old Testament:

Make me like You, Lord, make me like You.
You are a servant, make me one too.
Lord, I am willing, do what You must do,
To make me like You Lord, make me like You.[57]

> He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities, the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed . . . But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. He was oppressed and He was afflicted . . . By oppression and judgment He was taken away . . . But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief . . .[58]

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[56] C.S Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York, New York: The Seabury Press, Inc., 1961), 49-50.

[57] Jimmy Owens, Carol Owens, *Make Me Like You* (Bud John Songs, Inc. 1978).

[58] Isaiah 53:3-10.

If a Christian is experiencing suffering or pain in their life, could it be that God has heard their prayer and has put them on the same road Jesus walked down? While Romans 8:28 is oftentimes quoted when the subject of suffering comes up, few continue reading onto verse 29 which says "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among the many brethren;". As difficult as it is to accept when trials are at their worst, perhaps God has His children right where He wants them and is molding them into the image of His Son so that they will be used as a chosen instrument of His. As Tozer has said, "It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply."[59]

The Christian may at first recoil at this type of statement and instead agree with Philip Yancey who called this process of God "the gift that nobody wants"[60]. But as one meditates on this possibility, two thoughts emerge. First, one cannot have anything but a grand admiration for Jesus. A simple and quick death would have technically produced the lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world. Instead, Christ went down a suffering path that few, if any, have endured. It is interesting to note that the animal sacrifices performed before Christ did not involve torture or suffering; the animals were simply killed. Jesus, however, suffered greatly and then died an atoning sacrifice for all. As Dorothy Sayers put it, "For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is – limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death – He had the honesty and courage to take His own medicine."[61]

Second, the Bible speaks a number of times that Christians should indeed welcome this 'gift' from God because of the end result that appears after His hammer and chisel have

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[59] A.W. Tozer, *Thank God for the Furnace*, in *Root of the Righteous* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1955), 157.

[60] Yancey, p 11.

[61] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 14, quoted by Yancey, 233.

finished their work. The book of James says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."[62] James states that the end result of trials is perfection and completeness, something to which every Christian aspires.

Paul provides a more detailed outline in Romans of the same process referred to by James when he says, "And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."[63]

When All Hope Seems Lost

Even those with strong faith will encounter times when grief overwhelms and trust wavers. There are no simple explanations as to why for some the morning comes and for others, it becomes obvious that the night will be a permanent companion here on earth. What can be said of these cases? First, one should never underestimate the power of the Creator who fashioned the universe out of nothing. It does not get any more final than four days in the grave, and yet Jesus spoke and Lazarus came back from the dead[64].

Second, while it is true that Christians lose their lives in tragic accidents or in a struggle against a terminal disease, death does not claim victory over the one who has trusted

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[62] James 1:2-4.

[63] Romans 5:3-5.

[64] John 11:39-44.

Christ with their eternal soul. Commenting on this, J.I. Packer has said, "Health and life, I would say, in the full and final sense of those words, are not what we die *out of*, but what we die *into*."[65]

Final Conclusions

The poll results from George Barna showing that the number one question people have for God is "Why evil?" should surprise no one. Reconciling the existence of evil with an omnipotent and morally perfect God has been a struggle for nearly everyone who has lived. From an intellectual standpoint, the response to this seemingly contradictory situation can be summarized in two ways. First, just because evil exists now, it does not mean that God will not one day defeat evil, since an omnipotent and all-good God can ultimately do nothing else. Second, the moral argument proves that the only way people can recognize evil, pain, and injustice is to know what goodness, wholeness, and justice is, and this means that some ultimate and absolute standard must exist by which these things are known, namely God.

Answering the problem of pain and God from an emotional standpoint requires more effort as the intellectual responses appear dry, especially for those in the Church. However, God throughout history has had a plan for pain and has used it to warn, protect, and perfect those that call upon His name. An honest examination of the Bible reveals that it is replete with examples of this process.

In fact, this truth provides additional evidence that the Bible should be trusted. If every hero of the Word was divinely taken up in a fiery chariot by the river Jordan, then it would be immeasurably difficult to reconcile the Bible to the painful existence that many in this life face. However, the Bible instead showcases many honest instances of hardship and tribulation in the lives of those that walked and talked with God that exactly matches today's life.

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[65] David Watson, *Fear No Evil*, with an introduction by J.I. Packer (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1984), 7, quoted by Yancey, 95, footnote 9. Emphasis in original.

This truth brings great hope to those who struggle with the concept of suffering and evil on earth because if God is telling the truth about pain, then He is telling the truth regarding salvation and the promise of the eventual defeat of evil. Instead of sliding into eternity with their fingers crossed, Christians can confidently look beyond the struggles of this world and fix their eyes on a day when injustice and hurt will be eliminated, all children go to sleep well-fed, and every oncologist is out of a job.

In one of his sermons on how to handle tough times, Charles Swindoll asks his listeners the question of what they consider the best feeling human emotion to be. After ruling out things like accomplishment, happiness, or joy, he makes the assertion that the best feeling human emotion is *relief*. For example, a person may nervously wait for medical test results on a condition that could be life-threatening, but when the all-clear message is relayed, the emotion of relief that washes over the person simply cannot be beat.

It is interesting and perhaps a little sad to note that the best feeling human emotion can only be experienced once the threat of tragedy, harm, or pain has passed. But because an all-powerful and all-good God exists – a God that has a plan for pain – relief will one day cease to be an experienced emotion because, ". . . He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain;"[66] What a great victory that will be.

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[66] Revelation 21:4.

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