

What Does the Bible Say About Suffering?



By Paul Kroll, Joseph Tkach,
and J. Michael Feazell



GRACE COMMUNION
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Living and Sharing the Gospel

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Why Does God Allow Evil?

Each week is a week of tragedy. There are wars, there is ethnic violence, there is state-sponsored persecution or a natural disaster. There is hatred and jealousy, murders and war — pain and sorrow — every week.

But some weeks it strikes closer to home. A war seems more real to us when people in our own nation are involved, when we see pictures of people who are killed or homeless. An earthquake in one nation, a tsunami in another, a hurricane in a third.

Whether it is New Guinea or New Orleans, Senegal or Seattle, it all seems so senseless, so stupid, so ineffective. Even people with no moral foundation at all can see that this sort of thing is wrong. It is wrong for innocent people to suffer and die. It is evil.

How do we as Christians respond to the problem of evil?

With sorrow. With sadness. With revulsion. With perplexity. With questions that have no answers.

Why does God allow such things? Why does he allow innocent people to endure such pain and suffering? Couldn't things have worked out in a less tragic way?

Philosophers and theologians can talk for hours about why God might allow evil, but all their ideas do not make the pain go away. Intellectual answers do not help our gut feelings. Their explanations cannot make the world seem tidy and sensible — because the world is not tidy and sensible. Christian faith is not designed to make everything tidy and sensible. This can be seen in Christian history. Plenty of believers were martyred, and it takes more faith to be torn asunder than to live in relative comfort.

Well then, what do we say about the evils we see today?

First, that these sorts of things are indeed evil. Not just falling short. Not

just a failure to do as good as we should. No, these things are evil, actively causing pain and suffering and death, and then more pain and suffering. This world has evil in it.

Right and wrong is not simply a matter of opinion — there is an objective and unchanging standard of right and wrong, defined not by humans but by God — and the evils that we see reported in the news are not just ideas where one person's idea is just as good as another person's idea, or one ethnic group's idea against another's. No, evil is defined by God. There has to be a God if there is going to be any definition of evil. And for reasons known best to God alone, God allows evil in this world.

Jesus and evil

Jesus commented on the problem of evil. He referred to a news report of his own day. There was a tower-building project at Siloam, and the whole thing collapsed and killed 18 people. Was this some kind of divine punishment for their secret sins? No, said Jesus. These people were not any more sinful than anybody else.

Jesus did not say why the tower fell. He did not give clever reasons why God would allow such pain and suffering for these families. No doubt he had compassion on the victims, and he probably would have said something different if he had been talking to their families. But he brought the situation home to his audience. He made it personal for *them*: Unless you repent, you will also perish. The tragedy on other people became a lesson for us to repent.

If we have attitudes of jealousy, anger or resentment, we have already committed murder in our hearts. We do well to examine ourselves and our own attitudes, and we will see evil within ourselves. We need to be shocked and appalled by the wrong attitudes within ourselves. When the results of sin are made so clear, what we need to do is repent.

We can grieve for the victims. But Jesus is saying that we need to look at ourselves, too. Unless you repent, you will likewise perish. We can ask why God allowed people to die — but we also need to ask why God allows us to live. Each of us has had wrong thoughts, evil thoughts. Each of us has done something wrong — something evil. Why does God allow evil within us? None of us deserves to escape punishment, and yet God allows us to escape.

If we ask why there is evil, we should also ask why there is mercy. Why should God forgive us when we do not deserve to be forgiven?

Fighting against evil

Let us abhor evil, and hate evil. Let us also rejoice in God's grace, and seek his grace. Let us repent. Let us fight against evil, starting with ourselves.

Jesus fought against evil, but he did not fight the way humans tend to fight. He fed the hungry, he healed the sick. He cast out demons, and he taught against religious oppression. But Jesus did not try to stop all evils through force. He did not suggest that we need better police or better family values. He did not suggest weapons-control laws or better engineering. Those things might help, but Jesus addressed a more fundamental need: repentance. We cannot conquer evil unless we are doing something about it within ourselves.

And ultimately, Jesus conquered evil — but he did it through suffering and death, not through brute force. And he also calls upon his followers to be willing to suffer and die. He assures us that we are conquerors if we follow him even through suffering and death. Our experiences with evil help shape us, help us grow in compassion, help us grow in love, and they even help us grow in faith — precisely because they test our faith. We are forced to trust in God because in such times, we can see the truth more clearly — there is really nothing else to trust in.

Someday, Jesus will use force to put down all remnants of evil. Right

now, he does not. Right now, we as Christians live as aliens in a tainted and sinful world. We know by faith that a better world is coming. We know by faith that a better way of life is possible — but we also see in Jesus the perplexing message that this better way is achieved only through a time of evil and pain. We cannot understand it, but we trust God to work it out because we see that he was willing to bear the pain himself. He was willing to suffer from evil, too.

But there was joy set before Jesus, and there is joy set before us, too. If we suffer with him, we will also reign with him. If we are with him in his humility, we will also be with him in his glory.

We do not yet see all things put under the reign of Christ. Now, we see suffering and death. But through the resurrection of Christ, we can see that death itself has been conquered. All things will be brought under the authority of Jesus Christ, the Lord of compassion and mercy. Even as we grieve for the evils of today's world, we can rejoice in our hope in Jesus Christ. We still grieve — we should grieve at evil — but we grieve with hope and faith in Jesus Christ.

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Why God Allows People to Do Evil

The Bible shows that God allows humans to have freedom of choice. He didn't stop Adam and Eve from eating the forbidden fruit or Cain from murdering his brother (Genesis 3:6; 4:8). God didn't prevent his own nation, ancient Israel, from sinning. The people were told to choose the way of love and life (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). But God didn't prevent them from choosing the way of evil, which they did.

Paul also wrote about humanity's choice to do good or evil. Once again, it's plain that God wasn't in the business of forcing people to do good things. He simply gave people over to "the sinful desires of their hearts" (Romans 1:24). They engaged in greed, depravity, slander, murder, and ruthlessness (verses 26-31). This hurt innocent people terribly. God was infuriated by what they did and pronounced their penalty (verse 32). But he didn't stop them from being abusive to others. Why not? Why didn't he — why doesn't he?

If humans are to be free to make meaningful choices, the world must operate according to rules that make human freedom possible.

Preventing all evil

Suppose God changed the rules of life and prevented people from doing hurtful things to others. Would he halt all evil, or would he halt just some of it? How bad would the evil have to be for God to stop it? Genocide? Murder? Torture? Wife beating? Child abuse? A slap in the face? A nasty word? Would God stop people from writing bad checks, cheating on school tests, stealing office supplies? How far would God have to intrude in human life to stop human evil? If God were to prevent evil, he would have to intervene in everyone's life virtually nonstop, wouldn't he? That is, if he were to be consistent about it.

God would then be removing our freedom. We would be automatons, with God regulating every behavior of each person. We couldn't make any moral choices because God would be making them for us.

To be responsible moral beings, as God wants us to be, we must have the freedom to choose what's right for its own sake. We cannot have our decisions and choices made for us or have them forced upon us. We also have to be free to make wrong choices, and for consequences to result.

Allowing evil

This world, so full of evil, operates according to these ground rules. God is not powerless to stop evil, as some think. The Bible tells a different story. Although God is outraged about people's inhumanity to people, to preserve human freedom, he chooses not to stop every incidence of evil or wrongdoing. We may not like this moral order of things. We can hate it, in fact, because God does. Yet, that is how God, for his purpose (which is for our ultimate good), has chosen to run the world. Would any one of us want to live in a world without choice?

But God is not causing anyone to suffer. People are the culprits, human society is. That makes anything, from a Holocaust to the shooting of a loved one, a product of the human mind. It's not something God does or wishes. (We'll comment on evils in nature in a later chapter.)

The Bible, God's word to man, attests over and over that unjust suffering exists. It will be ended only when God's way is in its most complete manifestation on this earth. Then Christ will rule the world in righteousness (Isaiah 11:19). God will operate in human minds through the Holy Spirit (Jeremiah 31:31-34). With this hope in mind we may find it easier to deal with an unfair world of suffering.

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## Why God Allows Suffering

*Tragedies strike saint and sinner alike. Is God fair? Does it matter to him?*

If we believe in God, we have to wonder why he doesn't eliminate mindless suffering from our planet. Yes, why doesn't he make this bad world right? Why doesn't he stop the hurting?

If God really cares, author Philip Yancey asked in *Disappointment With God*, "Why won't he reach down and fix the things that go wrong — at least some of them?"

Rabbi Harold Kushner asked the same question in his best-seller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. He told of a personal tragedy that caused him to rethink everything he had believed and been taught about God. His son, Aaron, died at age 14 of progeria, the "rapid aging" disease. Aaron was short, bald and appeared to be an old man even as a young child.

Why did the Kushners have to suffer this tragedy? They were decent people and didn't deserve this. Rabbi Kushner wrestled with this question. He asked in his book: "If God existed, if He was minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could He do this to me?"

Why do innocent people, average people, nice people suffer? Why should anyone suffer? It has been a question asked again and again down through the ages. It may be the important issue of our lives. "There is only one question which really matters," wrote Rabbi Kushner, "why do bad things happen to good people?"

How, then, do we make sense of our world, our sufferings? Philip Yancey explored these issues in *Disappointment With God*. He had to admit: "I knew I would have to confront questions that have no easy answers — that may, in fact, have no answers."

The questions about suffering affect all of us in some way. Even if we or our family escape tragic accident or illness, we will have other burdens to bear. Perhaps it's loneliness, rejection, grinding poverty, a broken relationship, a troubled childhood, fear or guilt. And none of us escapes the ultimate tragedy: death. Why is the world — your life — buffeted by suffering?

### **God above, tragedy below**

One article like this cannot answer everything about human suffering. It can, however, give something helpful in the way of directing our thoughts. One of these keys is to distinguish between what God is and what life brings.

God is fair, but life sometimes isn't. God is good, but people often do bad things. God is perfect, but we make mistakes that sometimes cost us dearly. As long as people do bad or evil things, other people will be hurt. If a robber shot you, you and your family would suffer.

As long as humans make mistakes, there will be suffering. If we could just take back that one decision or action that caused so much suffering. Oh, if we could eliminate one tiny mistake. But we can't. As long as nature is what it is, it will manifest itself as both Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. We will be blessed both with rain for our crops and cursed with typhoons that flood, destroy and kill. As long as we are physical and subject to breaking down and wearing out, sickness and death will come upon us.

Decent people will often suffer, and those who do terrible evils will often prosper. Jesus Christ pointed this out when he said that the rain falls on both the "righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45).

Consider what the world would look like if it could be fair as we want it to be fair. No accidents could happen, no criminal act could occur, no natural disaster could affect us. That kind of world would have no logic. The natural laws that govern cause and effect would have to be different in every

circumstance.

Would God stop carelessness and irresponsibility? Would he stop everyone from being hurt, from coming down with illnesses and diseases? What about death? Would God abolish death? He'd have to, if sorrow and suffering were to be eliminated.

During our entire lives we would be like babies, always under the interventionist eyes of our spiritual parent, God. No longer would we be free to choose, allowed to consider possible courses of action and to carry through on our choices.

We might agree that a world without suffering seems something of a fantasy. However, the question of God's fairness doesn't go away easily when we see so much suffering in the world.

### **God's perspective**

Paul dealt with this issue in the book of Romans, chapter 9. He did so in the context of an important question: Why were only a few being called to salvation in the early New Testament church? Was God unjust in denying salvation for everyone at that time? Why did the vast majority remain "without hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12)?

Paul explained God's view of things by citing the example of the Pharaoh of the Exodus. In rescuing Israel from slavery in Egypt, God devastated the Egyptian nation in the process. But wasn't that unfair? Paul asked: "What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy'" (Romans 9:14-15).

The Israelites would certainly have said God was being fair! At last they were being freed from slavery. Life was certainly coming up roses for them. But if we had been Pharaoh or the Egyptians, our attitude would have been quite different. For starters, our secure world had just gone crazy on us. Our crops were destroyed. Our boys were massacred and drowned in battle. Our

herds were slaughtered. Our country was wrecked. Our firstborn sons had been killed.

Had we been Egyptians at the time, only one conclusion would have been possible: God (or any number of the gods) was grossly unfair to us. Here was God mercifully intervening in human affairs to make life better for an entire nation — the Israelites. But there was still something unfair in the grand scheme of things. Another nation — Egypt — had been humiliated and destroyed.

Paul had only one answer to such apparent contradictions of life. We must trust God to work out his purpose, as he sees fit. And, to be sure, God does have a plan of salvation for all humanity.

### **No answer to “why?”**

Paul had responded to the question of God’s fairness. But he didn’t answer the question directly. His response to his readers was to inquire — Why are you even asking? Paul’s response was a stinging rebuke: “Who are, you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” (Romans 9:20).

But don’t we have the right to ask God: “Why did you make me so I would get cancer or suffer a stroke? Why wasn’t I a clay pot with a different design?” Paul refused to directly answer “Why?” He defended God’s wisdom and justice. Paul wrote: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!” (Romans 11:33).

Paul insisted that no matter what our suffering, we must accept that God is wise, merciful and just. Paul was saying that God allows human suffering because he is God. God is so great, his thoughts so far above ours, that inferior human logic does not apply to his actions.

There isn’t always a clear *why* to suffering. It’s really the wrong question

to ask. A specific *why* looks back to something that we can't change. We must look forward by asking: What purpose is there to life, unfair as it may sometimes seem? What future does God have beyond this life of suffering?

We should understand God correctly. He is not an advocate of suffering for its own sake.

## **God hates suffering**

One example. More than 2,500 years ago, the prophet Jeremiah surveyed the carnage of the city of Jerusalem, sacked by the Babylonians. Inside the besieged city, starving mothers had eaten their dead children. Jeremiah looked past the suffering of a sinful and dying generation to a future with hope. "Men are not cast off by the Lord forever," he said (Lamentations 3:31). "Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men" (verses 32-33).

But it was in Jesus Christ that God showed his attitude toward human suffering. He once and for all demonstrated he does care by sending his own Son to this earth. Jesus lived, agonized and died by the rules of life, the same ones we live and suffer by. It was actually God in the flesh who came to suffer with us. It was the greatest example of God's love possible. Jesus Christ himself said it: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Less than 24 hours after saying this, Jesus, as God incarnate, gave his life for all the world. He had suffered and died for human beings, to take away their sins and open up salvation for those who would believe. John witnessed this death of God in the flesh. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ exemplified love. John expressed it eloquently: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

In the crucifixion, God put to rest for all time any idea that he doesn't care about us during our suffering. In the future resurrection of the righteous, God will give them immortal bodies and make their lives suffering-free. The tortured, the cancer victims, the unloved, the paraplegics, the lost and lonely — everyone who has suffered and is suffering — will suffer no more.

God will swallow up suffering and death in the victory of eternal life. He will be the God who cares, who is seen, who is fair. Then, God will be known to all humanity. He will act as healer and life-giver, one who does not take pleasure in human suffering.

In that new world, described in the final chapters of the Bible's last book, Revelation, God will dwell with his people. Revelation chapter 21 tells us: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (verse 4).

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## **Book Review: Three Questions Few Dare Ask Aloud**

The book *Disappointment With God*, in the words of its author, Philip Yancey, deals with the gap between what many people “expect from their Christian faith and what they actually experience.”

Christianity, says Yancey, is all too often put forth as the good news of individual triumph and success in this world. Many Christians come to expect regular and dramatic physical evidence of God working in their lives. Then, personal problems and tragedy strike people. But God doesn't seem to answer their prayers or end their pain. That's when many feel disappointment with God. They feel betrayal — and even guilt.

Yancey writes about our deepest desire to understand God when he seems silent. He asks why God fails to prevent our suffering, end it or reach down into our lives and make things right. He also examines three basic questions we would like to ask God about our suffering, but few dare ask aloud: Is God unfair? Is God silent? Is God hidden? These questions have less to do with faith than with our feeling that God has left us, that somehow he doesn't care.

But there is an irony in the idea that God seems to hide himself from human suffering. Throughout history, in his dealings with human beings, God has been the betrayed one. God has been repeatedly put off by humans, as a jilted lover or rejected parent. He has been forced to distance himself because people have kept the potential relationship between Creator and human beings from being formed.

Yancey thus concludes: “All feelings of disappointment with God trace back to a breakdown in that relationship.” To make this point clear, he devotes a number of pages to the life of Jesus. God had come in human flesh to live among human beings — and he dramatically affected their lives — yet was rejected by them.

In spite of it all, God in Jesus grasped what it is like to suffer as a human.

Yancey writes: “The New Testament records what happened when God learned what it feels like to be a human being.” He asks: “Would it be too much to say that, because of Jesus, God understands our feelings of disappointment with him?”

In the second part of his book, Yancey takes up the meaning of the book of Job, which any exploration of suffering and God’s presence must. He concludes that Job is more than “the Bible’s most complete treatment of the problem of suffering.” He discovered that “seen as a whole, Job is primarily about faith in its starkest form.”

When trials come, says Yancey, we should not ask “Why?” about suffering, but “To what end?” His conclusion about the Christian and suffering is that “God deserves trust, even when it looks like the world is caving in.”

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## Finding Meaning in Tragedy

Scripture tells us that God can be trusted to take good care of those who put their faith in him. But the Bible makes no bones about the fact that it takes *faith*, because the actual path of human life, even for the faithful, as we know so well, is regularly filled with trouble, trial and pain.

Often, when we look back on a dark period of suffering in our lives, we begin to discover that the awful journey we had to make led us to a place of peace and maturity — a sense of intimacy with God and security in him we could never otherwise have known. And some journeys of faith are the kind in which that discovery lies only on the other side of death.

Experience has taught us that life sometimes becomes a raging, stormy ocean of pain, grief and depression, dragging us into its dark and merciless depths. In the swirling confusion, we cling with sore, tired arms to a ragged plank of faith, a faith that whispers in our drowning ears that somehow God is there, somehow he knows and somehow he won't leave us. It is all that gets us through, this flickering little flame of trust in an invisible God who promises deliverance and security and hope.

When the storm finally ends and a bright sun warms the calm sea, we begin to see, maybe for the first time, the ways in which the gentle hand of a loving Father was holding us the whole time. But it is not easy. No one ever said it would be. That is, no one who knew what they were talking about.

### **Trusting God's love**

God loves us, the Bible says. But when the doctor informs us our five-year-old has cancer, or we find out our abusive spouse has also been molesting the children, or we wake up in a hospital to learn we lost our legs in a car wreck, or our mother is killed in a tornado, or someone we love is burned and crushed to death trying to rescue others, all this talk of "God's

love” can seem terribly hollow, if not downright offensive.

Who is this God who lets trauma and disaster devastate the hearts and hopes of people who love him and trust in him? Who is this invisible, silent God who claims to never leave nor forsake us? Where is he when we really need him?

“What terrible sins have you committed?” we have heard some Christians ask of hurting people, “that such punishment has come upon you?” Some Christians can’t imagine that God would allow bad things to happen to “real” Christians. But — aren’t we all sinners, even “real” Christians? So why are some of us “punished” with disaster while others, guilty of the same sins or worse, seem to “go scot-free”? Thank God the people who think every human tragedy is “God’s judgment on sinners” are not God, and do not speak for God.

Still, it does raise a troubling question. We do know we are sinners, and we do know we don’t deserve anything from God, and sometimes that makes us wonder whether the reason God hasn’t delivered us is that he doesn’t really care about us. After all, why should he? We know we are sorry excuses for godly people. We know it and God knows it. So why should God bother himself with our problems?

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul explained it like this: “For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6-8, New American Standard Bible).

*God loves us sinners* — so much that Christ died for us to bail us out of our sins. And he was raised from the dead for us, too — to establish us in a new life in him. So the sin argument holds no water. In fact, it raises the ante,

because if God went to all that trouble to save us from sin and spiritual death, why does he so seldom lift a finger to save us from the here-and-now tragedies and traumas that constantly rip us apart?

### **Suffering in hope**

As Christians, we believe that God does rescue us. But we believe he rescues us from what we actually need rescuing from, not from what we *think* we need rescuing from. Still, when our child is dying, we rightly want rescue from *that*, not some invisible, spiritual thing. And if that rescue does not come, how are we supposed to continue trusting in God's power and love?

The Bible tells us that our lives — our families, our health, our fortunes — are indeed important to God. It tells us that God is very concerned about our here and now circumstances, but he is also concerned about far more than our present circumstances — he is concerned about *us* — forever. We are assured that he made us, and that he made us because he wanted to, and that he loves us because we are his.

When it comes to life and death matters, the gospel assures us that Jesus Christ is the Resurrection and the Life; he takes care of restoring our lives. The gospel also assures us that God is making us into the image of Christ (Colossians 3:10) — a whole, strong, together person, a person who is everything we were made to be and ought to be and wish we could be, but never, in this life, actually seem to be. That may be invisible, but it really does happen as God works within us — from the inside out (Colossians 3:1-4). And suffering plays an important role in that process.

The gospel assures us of an unassailable inheritance of salvation that awaits us in heaven (1 Peter 1:3-4), and it assures us that God protects us through faith, not necessarily from the trials and traumas of this life, but from whatever might attempt to wrest from us that salvation (verse 5). It is in the hope — and assurance — of that eternal salvation that we can take joy in this

life, despite the evils that might befall us in the meantime (verse 6).

Peter calls our faith, that is, our trust in God's faithfulness to keep his word to us, a faith that is forged in difficult, or "fiery" trials, "more precious than gold" (verse 7). Peter admits that we are asked to believe in a Savior we cannot see (verse 8), but assures us that our trust in and love for our invisible Savior gives us a present joy that is beyond description. And he assures us that it will climax in glory and honor and salvation (verses 7-9).

## **Suffering God**

Who is this God who lets his people suffer even though they cry out to him for deliverance? He is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God — the one with the nail holes and the spear wound. You'll recognize him by the bloody gashes and lacerations and the crown of thorns. He's the one they ridiculed and lied about. The one they spit on, beat up and murdered.

He is also the one who stays right by our side in all our pain and anguish. He suffers along with us through our every grief and heartache. He doesn't leave us — not even in our darkest nightmare (Deuteronomy 31; Hebrews 13:5). But his presence is invisible. Instead of bailing us out of our here-and-now catastrophes, he walks through them with us (Matthew 28:20). He cries with us; he aches with us (Hebrews 2:18).

Our hope, as Christians, is in the resurrection. It is this hope — a hope fueled by trust — that makes life worth living and gives us what it takes to keep going when everything in us wants to give up. That is why we can, even in the midst of our pain, trust in our invisible Savior and reach out to help, support and encourage one another (Ephesians 4:31-5:1). The inspiring stories of heroism and courage we hear in the aftermath of many tragedies are a testament to the invisible inner strength, love and fortitude of humanity that is rooted in the humanity of our risen Lord in whom we all live and move and have our being.

Because Christ suffered for us, our tragedies are not meaningless, but are part of the fodder, the raw material, of our spiritual wholeness (Hebrews 2:14-15). We emerge from them stronger and wiser and lovelier, and as we keep our trust in our God who promises to be our salvation, we are, in his love, forged into unity with Christ and with one another.

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. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:6-9)

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Where Was God?

If God loves people, why does he wipe them out? We can't help but ask that after a disaster such as the devastating earthquake and tsunami that hit northern Japan. What kind of God would kill so many thousands of people and ruin the lives of millions of others in a single stroke?

Where is God when thousands, tens of thousands, or sometimes hundreds of thousands are being crushed, maimed and trapped in a massive earthquake or drowned when huge waves swallow coastal towns and cities? If God is all-powerful, surely he could stop such things. So why doesn't he?

Who's to blame?

"God didn't do it; he just allowed it," some say. Maybe they think that's a good defense. I don't, and I doubt you do. Allowing something that you could stop is not much better than doing it yourself.

When something bad happens, we want someone to blame. When the bad thing is a natural disaster, there's no one left to blame but God. Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, tidal waves, lightning strikes. The insurance companies call them "acts of God." Nobody is to blame — nobody except God, that is.

The Japanese earthquake and tsunami, the wildfires and floods in Australia, the earthquake in Haiti, and the horrific Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 that killed more than 200,000 are just recent examples in a long line of history's mind-numbing natural disasters. Looking back, at least one million died in the North Korean floods and famine of 1995-98. More than 900,000 died in the Ethiopian famine of 1984. Two hundred forty-two thousand died in the Tangshan, China, earthquake of 1976. The Ethiopian famine of 1974 claimed 200,000.

The Bangladesh sea flood of 1970 took 200,000-500,000. China's famine

of 1960 took 20 million. One million died in the flu pandemic of 1957, and up to 100 million died in the flu pandemic of 1918. Earthquakes in Nansan, China, in 1927 and in Gansu, China, in 1933 killed 200,000 each. Up to one million died in Huayan Kou, China, in the Yangtse Kiang flooding of 1887.

The French smallpox epidemic in 1870-71 killed 500,000. One million died from the Irish famine of 1845. The Iran earthquake of 1780 killed 200,000. Ten million died in the Bengal, India, famine of 1769. The Shensi, China, earthquake of 1556 claimed 800,000. And the black plague of Europe and Asia in 1346-42 took 25 million lives.

People ask, why does a loving God let such astounding mayhem happen?

I have another question. Why does God let *anyone* die?

Not long ago, I attended the funeral of a woman who was celebrated for her many personal ministries of love. She died of cancer, and her suffering was nothing short of horrible. A friend's teenage daughter died in a fiery car crash on slick winter roads. She was on break from a Christian college, and her suffering and the grief of her parents, relatives and friends was every bit as real as the suffering and grief of any individual who died in a tornado, a tsunami or an earthquake.

Why did God let Grandma die? "She was old," someone might say. "It's the natural way of things. We grow old and die."

Yes, it is the natural way of things. Bodies wear out. Plaque builds up in arteries, and if enough builds up, it cuts off the blood flow and causes strokes or heart attacks. Sometimes cells get mixed up and go crazy, becoming cancer cells and disrupting the tissues and organs around them. Over time bones lose their density and an accidental fall can break a hip. Joints lose their elasticity. Eyes lose their sharpness.

The ground erodes too, and the earth's crust shifts. Water evaporates. Rain falls. Rivers rise. Winds blow. Even healthy people and young people

can get hit by falling rocks or flying debris. People get caught in flash floods, mudslides and collapsed mineshafts.

People fall off roofs, out of windows and off scaffoldings. Sometimes it happens when they are doing humanitarian work, trying to help or save someone else. And God, far, far more often than not, sits by and watches it happen without lifting a finger to stop it.

When someone we love grows old and dies of “natural causes” we accept it as the way God has designed the creation — there’s a time to be born and a time to die.

But when someone we love dies before growing old, we ask, “Why would God allow this to happen?”

Not an automaton creation

No doubt, God could have made the universe in such a way that nothing ever went wrong. But he didn’t. He created a world that is free to be itself — and to express its identity in continually fresh and creative ways. For some reason, he thinks that is good.

Maybe that’s because it takes such a world, a wild and free world, to be the breeding ground for things God values in human beings — things like courage, devotion, loyalty, self-sacrifice, kindness, generosity, hope, trust. By anybody’s reckoning these are a few of the noblest features of humanity. Would such qualities exist in a world without risk, danger, calamity — and death?

And where would love be in such a world? Love isn’t just a matter of getting along. Love is made real in the crucible of suffering, of self-sacrifice, of loyalty and devotion against the odds.

“Oh really,” someone might say. “If God thinks that is so great, why doesn’t he just come down here and go through what we go through in his so-called good creation?” Well, that’s just what he did. And just like death

happens to every one of us, he died. But Christians believe that his death changed death itself. He made death a pathway to resurrection, to new life, to a new creation in which “there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain.”

As much as we hate to admit it and hate to talk about it and throw stones at those who do, we all die. We all die of something. Whether we die of “natural causes” or of “natural disasters” makes little difference in the end. Either way, we die, and nothing will stop it, regardless of how kind we are or how mean we are or how smart, careful or wise we are. But the good news is, regardless of how or when we die, Jesus resurrects the dead.

God could stop all natural movement of earth, air and water. He could stop humans from making mistakes, making unwise decisions, being selfish, or stubborn or rude. God could have made a creation in which everything worked automatically. But he didn't. God created a world in which something far more valuable than long physical life could exist. He made a world in which love can exist and grow. In love, humans pull together and respond to suffering and calamity. In love, humans forgive one another, help one another, encourage one another and stand by one another.

God suffers with us

God is not a stranger to human suffering. Christians believe that God became a man, suffered as a human and died as a human, and because of that, humanity itself has been taken up into God's own being. In Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, humanity's cause is now God's cause. When we suffer, God suffers with us.

God loved the world so much that he gave his Son that whoever believes in him would have new life. God sent his Son to *save* the world, not to condemn it (see John 3:16-17).

Death is part of life, and every person who lives will also die. Even you

and even me. But death is not the end of the story of our lives.

God did not make human beings merely for this life of suffering and grief — he made us for his new creation of fulfillment and joy. The lives cut short now, deprived now, stifled now, cheated now, will find their fulfillment in the life of the new creation. This is the Christian hope, and Christians hold this hope in faith — faith that God who freely took up our human cause as his own, even to the point of dying like a criminal as one of us, is true to his word. Every person who dies will also live.

In this hope and in this love, we extend compassion and help to others. As we do, we experience the deepest riches of true life, riches that are unseen but more real than physical security or safety. Love truly does “make the world go ‘round.’”

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The Trial of Job

Have you experienced pain and suffering? Then you have shared Job's anguish and perhaps his wonderment. Like Job, you also may find God near to you.



Job and his family. Illustrations by James Tissot

The book of Job in the Bible is the story of a devout man who lived thousands of years ago. But tragedy hovers over this righteous man. When the book opens, we notice Job is about to lose everything — children, property and wealth, good name and even his health.

Why will Job suffer such tragedies? Because God is about to challenge the devil with Job's obedience and faith.

The big dare

The prologue or introduction to the book of Job tells us, the readers, the background of God's challenge and Job's suffering. Scene I invites us behind the curtain to the universe-ruling throne of God. Angelic beings are delivering reports on their activities. Satan is among them. The Evil One has been roaming the earth, surveying his domain (Job 1:6-7; 1 John 5:19; Revelation 12:9).

Job's troubles begin because God presents him to Satan as shining example of virtue. "Have you considered my servant Job?" God asks Satan. "There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who

fears God and shuns evil” (Job 1:8).

Yet God will soon allow Satan to afflict Job. Obviously, God is not punishing Job for sin. God himself says Job is “blameless and upright.” Job suffers because he is the best of men, not because he is the worst.

Satan rejects God’s view of Job’s pious character. He implies that Job has an ulterior motive, a cynical reason for obeying and trusting God (verses 9-22). “Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan asks. Satan insinuates that Job is simply out for what he can get from God. Job is only a fair-weather friend, Satan insists. “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?” Satan argues. “You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land.”

Satan’s challenge

Satan sneers at God’s pride and joy — the man Job, who is unlike any other. He doesn’t love you, Satan implies. Take away Job’s many blessings and you’ll find that he’s no friend of yours. Satan tries to make a bet with God. “Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has,” Satan dares God, “and he will surely curse you to your face.”

Really? Does Job love God only for selfish reasons? Do we? Well — let’s see, is God’s reply. He tells Satan, “Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.”



Job hears bad news

With God’s permission, Satan grabs a handful of dirty tricks from his bag

of suffering. He flings them at Job, and the world caves in on this innocent man. Job's herds and property are either carried off by raiders or destroyed by natural disasters.

But Satan is proven wrong. After these terrible tragedies strike Job, he tears his robe and shaves his head. He falls to the ground in worship, saying, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." The author of the book of Job is careful to point out, "In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing."

The second dare

Time elapses. One day, another angelic briefing takes place in heaven. God reaffirms to Satan his contention that Job truly loves God and his ways (Job 2:1-7). Satan again scoffs at Job's faith in God. "A man will give all he has for his *own* life," jibes Satan. "But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face."

God again expresses confidence in Job. "Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life."

The devil immediately strikes poor Job with putrid sores over his entire body. The fall of the house of Job is complete. It appears he has become — without his knowledge or permission — the guinea pig in one of history's greatest tests.

Job is now on trial. He must answer a vital question. How will he, who had faithfully trusted God for help and protection, react to suffering that seems senseless and unjust? Will righteous Job reject God, or maintain his faith?

So far, Satan has lost every round. He has been proven wrong about Job's faithful relationship with God. But can Job endure? Will he continue to trust in God as the seemingly endless suffering rolls on, with only pain and death in sight? Will Job persevere though God seems to have forsaken him? That is

the issue at stake.

Job can be seen as a metaphor of the suffering Christian. How Job reacts to God's test says something about how we should react to trials. The book asks us to consider *our* faith. Would we continue to trust God, to love God with all our heart, soul and mind (Matthew 22:37-38) — even while suffering for reasons we don't understand?

On the ash heap



Job lying on the ash heap



Job and his three friends

Scene 2 of this great drama takes place on an ash heap in the land of Uz, here on earth (Job 2:8). Job is suffering pain and anxiety. He is emotionally alone, tormented, confused, angry. His three friends who came to comfort him are instead emotionally and verbally persecuting him.

The human actors in the drama have no idea God is deeply involved in Job's life at this precise moment. They have no understanding of what God is trying to accomplish nor why Job is suffering so terribly. Nor do they grasp that a cosmic issue is at stake.

Job himself does not understand why this evil is happening to someone

who has faith in God. Why has a good God allowed such terrible things to happen to a decent, God-fearing human being? Job, in short, is asking, “Why me, Lord?”

On the ash heap, the issues are very human, confused and not completely understood. The principal human characters are all plagued by incomplete and distorted knowledge. They make partial or even incorrect judgments about God’s activities. Or they misapply general observations to Job’s specific situation.

The prologue has given us a sneak preview of the heavenly perspective on Job. We know God is much pleased with and concerned about him. No matter that God has temporarily suspended Job’s protected condition. There is a reason.

Job is not a victim of time and chance but a part of God’s orchestrated purpose. Job has no inkling he is the star actor in a God-directed morality play on earth. As far as Job knows, God has disappeared from his life.

Job’s primal scream

Job desperately tries to solve the mystery behind his suffering. He struggles on his own, looking for clues. None appear. Job prays expectantly. God will surely speedily intervene in his life — heal him of his disease, explain to him what in the world is going on. But nothing happens. The horribly painful disease saps Job’s strength. He grows weaker and weaker. He becomes more confused.

Job’s language sometimes borders on the irrational and incoherent. At times he appears almost delirious. Opposing attitudes clash in his speeches. Job appeals to God to act before it is too late. At times he even challenges God. Please help me, he cries. Come to me quickly. “I will soon lie down in the dust,” Job cries out, “you will search for me, but I will be no more” (Job 7:21).

Through his agony Job becomes increasingly confused, perplexed, discouraged, without hope. In his worst nightmare, Job sees death careening around the corner of his life, ready to run him down. Job knows he is finished — through. He sees himself doomed to die a broken, lonely, hated and despised person. Job's hopelessness is painted with poignant strokes throughout the book. In one place he moans, "My spirit is broken, my days are cut short, the grave awaits me" (Job 17:1).

Even though Job has done nothing wrong and pleads desperately for help, God still chooses to stay hidden. "I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer," Job wails (Job 30:20). Job's tragic circumstances challenge and contradict everything he has always believed about God as a rewarder of the good. Life has gone crazy for Job, and he has been locked up in the padded cell of his own mind.

Wrestling with God

Job can only assume God is persecuting him, hiding from him. He lashes out at God in pain and anguish. "If I have sinned, what have I done to you, O watcher of men? Why have you made me your target?" Job complains (Job 7:20).

We should not mistake Job's terrible discouragement, his lashing out at God, for disbelief. God's existence is not in question. Job knows that somewhere in the universe God must be alive. "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him," Job cries out in despairing belief (Job 13:15). Still trusting in God as his Advocate, Job insists, "I know that my Redeemer lives" (Job 19:25).

Meanwhile, Job's friends are shocked at his outbursts against God. Surely, the comforters think, the fire of God is about to burn up this man. They are afraid to admit that no cause-and-effect reason exists for Job's painful trial. That would imply they live in a senseless world. How could God

be just and strike Job unjustly?

Blame the victim

Their answer? Job obviously must have sinned grievously against God. Yes, that's it — Job's sins are the cause of his suffering. God is off the hook. The friends put forth the old "if you are suffering you must be sinning" answer to suffering. It is blame-the-victim time. Although at first they came to console Job, they end up attacking him relentlessly as a hideous sinner.

Eliphaz pontificates: "Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?" (Job 22:5). He and the other two friends completely misread Job's spiritual condition and God's purpose. They, too, try to find the perpetrator of the crime — the cause of Job's terrible suffering. But they accuse the wrong person — innocent Job.

Part of what the friends say about the relationship of sin and cursing, virtue and reward is true. Sin does have consequences — we do reap what we sow (Psalm 1; Galatians 6:7). But Job's friends misapply their remarks in Job's case. They take a general principle and nail it to a specific person — Job — and the specific trial he is undergoing. They will soon be shocked to discover how wrong they are (Job 42:7-8).

On the ash heap, all the drama's actors, Job especially, have been asking questions of God and imputing motives to him. Job has already prosecuted God. The friends have been, let us say, mistaken witnesses against Job.

From the storm

Throughout the dialogues between Job and his friends, Job especially, had claimed vast knowledge of the way things work — or should work — in this world. Job said of a hoped-for encounter with God, "I have prepared my case, I know I will be vindicated" (Job 13:18).

In scene 3, God storms into Job's presence. Now, it's my turn, he says. I will cross-examine you. Out of the raging storm, God begins to challenge

Job's claim to understanding: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2).

From the whirlwind, God demands of Job, "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?" (Job 40:2). God tells Job he doesn't know what he's talking about when he questions God's fairness. He isn't going to answer any of Job's "Why?" questions. God has come to cross-examine. "I will question you, and you shall answer me," he tells Job twice (Job 38:3; 40:7).

How does God answer Job? He sidesteps every question Job had. Instead, God gives Job a wilderness appreciation tour, recounting the majesties of nature from hail to horses (Job 38:22; 39:19). Is this relevant? Indeed, it is.

God's point to Job, Philip Yancey wrote in *Disappointment With God*, is this: "Until you know a little more about running the physical universe, Job, don't tell me how to run the moral universe."

Aaagh! How stupid I was, thinks Job. He smacks his brow and puts his hand to his mouth. Job finally understands the error of his hasty conclusion (Job 40:4). He grasps that his position is built on ignorance. He realizes God is quite capable of running the universe correctly.

A bigger God

Job now knows that whatever has happened to him — in some way he can't fully understand — will work out for his benefit, for everyone's benefit (see Romans 8:28). Job can say to God, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2).

Job is now convinced of God's infinite wisdom in dealing with him as he sees fit. Job now knows there is a purpose for his suffering — God's purpose. That is quite enough for him. The mighty voice of God thundering out of the whirlwind puts everything into perspective for Job. It says: God is alive; God is here; God cares; God is capable.

Job has been given an answer, not the one he expected, but one much more important. No matter that he had not been given a chance to present his own case. When God appears, Job's questions melt away precisely because God has now revealed himself.

Surprisingly, God does not condemn Job for railing against him and accusing him. God only corrects Job's misconception about his ability to rule the creation. God does reprimand Job because Job condemned him for injustice. Out of the storm, God batters Job with these questions: "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself" (Job 40:8). But God does not accuse Job of sin. God neither calls him self-righteous nor a blasphemer.

God won't condemn

Does this mean that we might also dare express our frustration, our anger — even call God to account in our ignorance and confusion — without being condemned by God? Shocking though it may be — yes, we can. In Yancey's words: "One bold message in the Book of Job is that you can say anything to God. Throw at him your grief, your anger, your doubt, your bitterness, your betrayal, your disappointment — he can absorb them all." God is much bigger than we are.

Job also recognizes how big and how great God is. After hearing God's argument, Job says, "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). But repent of what? Of some specific sin? Not quite. Job explains, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (verse 3).

It wasn't that Job had to overcome a specific sin, but rather that he had to grow in understanding. Job had been too hasty in concluding God was unjust or inept.

Job now had a deeper, clearer perception of his Creator. But this new

awareness was only a by-product of the real purpose of Job's suffering — the testing of his faith and love. In this case, God needed to know something about Job, and Job needed to know something about himself and about God.

The why of suffering

The book of Job, then, teaches us that suffering may occur for reasons that we don't understand unless or until God reveals them to us (see John 9:1-7, for example). Trials may come because God needs to know something about a faithful servant (Genesis 22:1-12). Job's suffering had such an intent — to prove whether he would love God in spite of everything.

This message of Job has deep implications for the Christian's relationship with God. Trials and suffering provide spiritual enrichment and build a relationship between us and God (2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Hebrews 12:4-12; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 4:12-19).

Job also tells us no ironclad relationship exists between suffering and sin. Just because Christians suffer trials or tragedies does not mean God is punishing them for some sin.

The book of Job is about much more than suffering or God's justice. Job affirmed that God was still God — no matter what — and always worthy of our love, reverence and worship. That was the test on Job, and he passed it. He vindicated both himself and God by remaining faithful. Job proved it is possible for humans to love God unconditionally.

Suffering had been an expansive, faith-demonstrating opportunity for Job. God had grown much bigger; Job had become smaller.

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# The Blame Game and Other Games

Have you ever suffered and then blamed yourself for your misfortune? Perhaps you questioned your faith? You worried that God might be punishing you for some sin or trying to teach you a lesson. If that's what you thought, you may be suffering needless guilt.

Sometimes people do suffer for their own moral lapses or sins (Lamentations 3:39). But if suffering comes on us only because of specific sins — or to teach lessons — then God is sending us mixed and garbled signals. Suffering is painfully random in the world. Consider the innocent infants who suffer from terrible diseases. For what sin were the little ones responsible?

Why do some people who do bad things not suffer much, or seemingly not at all? Why do faithful Christians suffer? What about the unsuspecting victims of accidents or natural disasters? The suffering-for-sin idea can't be a complete explanation for suffering. Yet it is a normal human reaction to blame victims — even ourselves — for suffering.

Jesus said that the 18 people killed by a collapsing tower did not die because they were worse sinners than others (Luke 13:1-5). Jesus turned the issue to more important considerations. He declared that all people would die — he meant spiritually — if they didn't repent.

Jesus implied that we can reflect upon suffering, our own and others', and see it as a general warning about the fragile nature of life. But Jesus resisted the notion that a specific instance of suffering pointed to a specific sin or lesson. He redirected thinking from the past — the why of it all — to the future, and to God's purpose for us.

## **Can we know?**

On the other hand, sometimes we try to give some positive and specific

meaning to our suffering. We might say, “God is trying to teach me such and such.” Can we know — really know — such a thing is true?

Some suffering people sincerely believe they suffer because they are stronger than other people, and therefore are able to endure the agony. This hope also has pitfalls. Rabbi Harold Kushner described how Harriet Schiff in her book *The Bereaved Parent* spoke of her pain at the loss of a young son, Robbie. A counselor told her that God had let this happen because he knew she was strong enough to handle it. Ms. Schiff’s response should give us pause to think. If only I was a weaker person, she thought, Robbie would still be alive. She would rather be considered weak than for her son to die.

The “why” of suffering is too complex a question to be explained away by simplistic answers. Human suffering, especially for Christians, can be a deep and profound mystery that cuts to the heart of a person’s relationship with God.

Consider, for example, how God worked in the lives of the giants of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11. The chapter contains stories of people rescued by God from terrible suffering. They “conquered kingdoms” and “gained what was promised” (verse 33). These faithful “shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword” (verses 33-34). Godly women “received back their dead, raised to life again” (verse 35). God gave protection and brought blessings to this group of faithful.

But for some of these giants of faith, God gave no rescue or help from their immediate pain. The account in Hebrews continues: “Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated” (verses 36-37).

Both groups consisted of people of faith. It was the same God working in



both groups but allowing different circumstances — some quite tragic — to occur in their lives. This encourages us not to automatically blame ourselves if we suffer. And it also cautions us to be careful about assigning specific meanings to the tragedies and anguish of ourselves or others.

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## **Jesus — The Suffering God**

Is God fair? This question was answered once and for all 2,000 years ago by Jesus. God came in human flesh and suffered the worst unfairness of history. Jesus didn't enjoy peace, had no wealth or possessions, lived a rather short life full of sorrows, and was ignominiously murdered.

Some think God gives an automatic promise to make life fair for a good person. If so, it was a promise badly broken in the life of Jesus, the only sinless person in history.

Jesus, God in the flesh, was also the Suffering Servant. His coming had been prophesied hundreds of years earlier. The prophet Isaiah said the future Savior would be “a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” (Isaiah 53:3). He was to be the willing lamb led to the slaughter by his God. Isaiah wrote of Jesus: “it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer” (verse 10). To what purpose? To pay for human sin and make salvation possible (verse 12).

Though fully God, Jesus also took on the same humanity as we have, in order to accomplish his saving grace (Hebrews 2:17). He also experienced the suffering and pain that humans do. Jesus confronted disappointment, felt pain, became hungry and tired, faced temptation and apprehension. Shortly before his betrayal, on his last night, Jesus told his disciples, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Mark 14:34).

Jesus endured torture and finally hideous torment on the cross. People taunted and derided Jesus — “Save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:39-40). “He saved others...but he can't save himself,” some mocked a suffering, dying Jesus (verse 42).

### **God was not hiding**

From that time forward, no one could accuse God of not suffering as

humans do, of not understanding. Jesus had suffered through the entire human experience. Think of it: God in the flesh shared our human pain. The suffering and death of Jesus once and for all put to rest the idea that life must be fair, or that God is unfair. No one could accuse God of hiding himself or not caring.

In the Old Testament, some of God's favorites suffered. In the New Testament, it was God himself, manifested in the flesh as Jesus, who suffered supreme injustices. He was spit on, beat up, nailed to a piece of wood, humiliated and lifted up for all to see, and then speared.

Jesus' suffering and death exposed a world of gross and obscene unfairness. But the cross also made plain that God endured unfairness. Jesus was not exempt. God in Jesus came to share in the sufferings of the world and to free wretched humanity from the slavery of sin. In the process, he took on the worst the world could mete out — unjustly and unfairly.

When suffering becomes our lot, the question of God's fairness will naturally come to mind. Is it fair that we must suffer? God has given us an answer to this question. He gave it through the life and death of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ. May it give us faith and love in God in our darkest moments.

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## **Disaster in New Orleans!**

In America's worst natural disaster, nearly a million people were displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Tens of thousands were stranded without power, without food, without drinkable water, without sanitation, without medical services, without police.

One tragedy piled on top of another to make them all worse. If only the city had been built in a better place. If only the people had built better levees. If only they had evacuated before the hurricane hit. If only the government had acted quicker to bring food and water, and to transport the refugees. If only...

### **Where was God?**

All sorts of human decisions contributed to the tragedy, but it was nevertheless a natural disaster — nature gone awry — an “act of God.” Where was God when the hurricane hit land? Where was he when the levee broke? Where was he when people were trapped inside their attics when the water rose too high?

God was there, on the ground, in his people, suffering along with them. When one part of the body suffers, Paul said, every part suffers with it (1 Corinthians 12:26) — and that includes the head of the body, Jesus Christ. He suffers with us — he has proven his willingness to do it before, and he does it time and time again. God loves his people — he loves even the people who do not believe in him — he loves them enough to send his Son to die for them. When we grieve, he grieves, too. When we suffer, he suffers, too.

God is big enough and powerful enough to do something about it. Sometimes he intervenes, and we hear stories of miraculous intervention — but often we do not. Maybe the hurricane could have hit harder and stronger than it did, but still, it killed many people. God could have stopped it entirely,

so that it didn't kill any people at all, didn't cause any property damage at all, and yet he did not.

Whether the disasters are small or large, why does God let them happen? Frankly, we do not know the complete answer. The Bible does tell us that when sin entered the world, God said that nature itself would work against the people. "Cursed is the ground because of you.... It will produce thorns and thistles...until you return to the ground" (Genesis 3:17-19). When the first people sinned, nature itself went awry — and nature will win over every person, and every person will return to the dust from which they came (v. 19). Old age will strike — unless something else does first — and nature will have its say.

Paul says that creation itself "was subjected to frustration" (Romans 8:20), and it waits for the day when it "will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom" (v. 21). Frankly, we do not know how physics would function without "decay" of some sort, and we do not know how God will fix the problem. But we do know that there is something wrong with nature, caused by sin, and God had chosen to allow that — even with the difficulties it causes, even though those "difficulties" are sometimes huge disasters that kill thousands of innocent people. Sin often affects innocent people, and sin has somehow affected nature itself.

We may pray for the day when "the times comes for God to restore everything" (Acts 3:21), but we still have to live in the world gone awry.

### **Looking to Jesus**

Jesus saved his disciples from a natural disaster — the storm on the sea of Galilee. He saved Paul and his companions on a storm-caused shipwreck near Malta. But nature still had its way, for they all eventually died. Many were killed by evil people, others by disease (another example of nature gone awry), some by old age. God allows nature to take its toll. Not forever, not

permanently, but God still lets it happen. Someday, I suppose, we will see how magnificent the plan is, but for now it seems quite messy.

Jesus talked about a natural disaster in one man's life. Who sinned, the disciples asked: this man, or his parents? Neither one, said Jesus (John 9:1-3). Not all problems can be pinpointed to a particular sin. It's just that nature doesn't always work the way it is supposed to, and for this particular man, the result was a disaster in his own life. Jesus fixed that particular problem, but most of the time, he allows his people to suffer the consequences of a world messed up by sin, where even the forces of nature work against us.

Jesus talked about another disaster in Jerusalem: the tower of Siloam fell and killed 18 people. It was not a natural disaster, but a disaster nonetheless, a tragedy that killed innocent people. Jesus did not spend time blaming the engineers or the builders. Instead, he turned to the audience and said, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:4-5). Take that disaster, and instead of blaming somebody, examine yourself. Get your priorities in order, and the chief priority is your relationship with God.

Bad things happen to good people as well as to the bad. The disaster that hit someone else could have just as easily hit us. God could *allow* it to hit us just as well as he could allow it to hit them — that's the lesson we need to consider from these tragedies. We need to turn to God, to trust him even when the "acts of God" strike close to home.

During his tremendous trial, Job said, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (Job 13:15). We need a similar kind of trust — knowing that the God who did not spare his own Son will never cut us off, though we walk into the valley of the shadow of death, though we enter death itself. The God who spared not his own Son also rescued his Son after he went through that valley, and he promises to rescue us, too. He will give us life again, but to do it, we live in a world that takes life away.

If Jesus were talking to the families of the 18 people killed by the tower collapse, he no doubt would have been as compassionate as he was with the man born blind. When we are dealing with the victims of a disaster, we need compassion, too — compassion that motivates us to help. Many have given generously, and no doubt will continue to help as more disasters strike this planet.

But we also need to examine ourselves. When tragedy strikes someone else, we do not need to ask where God is — we need to ask where *we* are, and whether we can do something about it. The only thing worse than nature gone awry is a heart gone cold.

Can we trust God even when nature strikes us dead? Yes, we should, for one way or another, nature will strike every one of us dead. We have nowhere else to turn, for God has the only solution to the problem. But we need to trust him.

When disaster strikes, God is there, suffering in his people, and working in his people. Therefore, when disaster strikes, God's people can be found standing with him, not casting blame, but helping out, making a positive difference, loving as Jesus loves.

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# God Bless America

The events of Sept. 11, 2001, affected the American psyche. There was a sudden upsurge in patriotism, and a willingness to allow God in the public sphere. When people feel helpless, it is natural for them to seek supernatural help.

Few of us will quickly forget the images of planes striking buildings, of the huge fireball, of the dramatic collapse of buildings and the enormous rubble pile that killed thousands of people from scores of nations. Those horrors have left an indelible impression on the American and the Free World psyche.

Though the most visible and greatest tragedy was in New York, we do not forget the crimes that killed hundreds in Pennsylvania and at the Pentagon. We do not have a convenient symbol or label for these multiple acts of terrorism; we are left with the ungainly expression “the events of Sept. 11.” We are left with a dispersed enemy — criminals scattered in any number of remote nations.

And people are left with mixed feelings about some Free World values, such as respect for individual rights. They’ve been taught to treat everyone equally, and yet now they find themselves fearing some people more than others. They want certain people to be given a more thorough security check than others. Their values are being tested.

## **Church and state**

Another area of mixed feelings is the separation of church and state. Many Christians mix their religion with their patriotism, and I suppose that this is to some extent unavoidable. Nations have done that for millennia. Armies going to war always have religious leaders to assure the troops that their god(s) are on their side.



But it seems to me that Jesus and Paul don't give any support to a blend of faith and politics. The goals of the gospel are quite different from the goals of a nation. One stresses justice, the other stresses grace and mercy. One stresses material prosperity, the other focuses on spiritual reality.

Governments try to make this world better, and indeed it is their God-given responsibility to do that. But when they succeed, people often begin to trust in the government instead of in God. In times of prosperity, people tend to focus on material blessings instead of their spiritual needs. And sometimes churches get distracted by dreams of national greatness (Nazi Germany is one example, but we must not forget that religion was also used to justify slavery, colonial expansion and American massacres of Indian tribes).

Christianity tells us that this world is fallen and sinful, and it won't be fixed by better laws, better armies or religious wars. We are not going to usher in the fullness of the kingdom of God through human effort. We need the return of Christ, and until then, the Bible tells us, we live as aliens and strangers on earth (Hebrews 11:13). We are looking for a nation with foundations laid by God himself (verse 10). Our primary allegiance, our primary citizenship, is in heaven (Philippians 3:20).

Nevertheless, we are also citizens of earthly nations, and we have responsibilities in and for these nations. At a minimum, it means that we pray for our nation's leaders so that we might have peace and freedom to worship (1 Timothy 2:1-2). We pray that God would give these leaders wisdom in the way they seek justice for criminal acts. This is by no means easy — that is why we pray for supernatural guidance.

But we need to distinguish between religion and government. The bullets flying in various wars are not Christian or Kingdom of Christ bullets — they are bullets and bombs of individual nations, and there will always be a difference between the kingdom of God and national governments. Nations

have the God-given responsibility to punish evil-doers (Romans 13:4), but they remain nations as they do it; they do not become the kingdom of God. When Paul wrote, Rome spoke and acted for Rome, not for God, even though God often used what Rome did in its own interests for his purposes.

Of course, terrorists often mix religion with military action. They may portray their conflict as a holy war between their faith and others, and that is another reason why we need to keep our faith and our patriotism clearly distinct. America is not representing a religion — it is fighting for national interests. As Americans, we support those legitimate national interests. As Christians, we trust in God for mercy, safety and courage.

As Christians, we want God to bless Muslims, too. Those people also need the gospel. But bombs and bullets are not the best way to preach Christ. They might be the best way for America to seek justice, to try to bring order to a chaotic world, but they are not a means of spreading the gospel. We have mixed feelings. We pray for justice, and we pray for grace.

There are no simple answers to the problems we face. In this fallen world, we will always have problems that can't be solved. There will be troubles if we act, and troubles if we don't. One problem will lead to another, and another, and yet another, until Christ returns.

But let me leave you with some good news: Our hope is in Christ, and in him we are secure. "We are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (Hebrews 12:28). Our future cannot be threatened by bombs, bullets or chemical weapons. Even if we die, we win.

Christ has shown us how to conquer adversity: through faith in God. When we trust in him, we win. "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul" (Matthew 10:28).

Even if in some way-out scenario, religious fanatics take over our nation, the gospel "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes"

(Romans 1:16). Even if they declare Christianity illegal, we win. That is because we do not measure success by political power, but by faith.

The gospel gives us the most secure platform possible. Not even death can separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:38-39). The really good news is that God wants everyone to hear the gospel and to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4) — and it is for that reason that we pray for our national leaders (verses 1-2). We pray for peace, not merely for our own benefit, but especially for conditions that help spread the gospel.

Friends, pray for your nation — not because it is a better nation than others, but because it needs the gospel. All nations are sinful, and the citizens of all nations need repentance, humility and forgiveness. Pray that in one way or another, people might see the gospel as what they really need.

As Christians, we are free in Christ to support our nation in all its legitimate endeavors. As Americans, we are free in the Constitution to worship and believe as we see fit. That is, I think, the greatest blessing God has given America, and as loyal Americans, I believe it is our worthy duty to support that freedom.

### **How Does God Bless America?**

Many have sung “God Bless America.” But have they stopped to consider *how* God blesses America? What are the truly good things that God has given America? Does God bless America by giving us more money and goods, so that we can trust in money and goods? Does he bless us with luxuries that distract us from thinking about the purpose of life?

In the old covenant, God promised to give Israel national blessings for obedience, and national curses for disobedience. Israel broke her covenant with God, and the land was taken over by outsiders. But in the new covenant, God takes away our sins and gives us his righteousness through faith in Immanuel, God with us — Jesus Christ, the perfect human. Our inheritance is

not land and it is not a great nation — it is eternal life.

Perhaps what Americans need is the courage, integrity and unity to defend its Constitution, which guarantees our freedom to worship and believe as we see fit. And perhaps what we need is faith — faith that God loves us even when we hurt, even when death is at the door. And maybe what America needs is the gospel — good news that in the midst of human sin and pain, God holds out the gift of pardon and new life in Jesus Christ.

Indeed, God bless America!

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## Safe in God's Hands

Where was God when the tsunami struck in the Indian Ocean on Dec. 26, 2004? Is God useless in a crisis? What is the fate of those who perished? As we face such questions, it helps to rehearse the basic principles of our Christian faith.

Some of the religious leaders at the time of Christ saw most instances of mass human destruction and untimely death as God's judgment against sinners. Christ condemned such uncharitable explanations, saying that those who so judge should repent of their hurtful attitudes. He said that victims of tragedy are not worse sinners than others.

Even today, some writers and speakers judge victims in the same way as those religious leaders did — but Christ's instruction remains, that we should turn to God and stop judging others (see Luke 13:4).

That life is unfair is part of the human condition. Ecclesiastes 9:11-12 tells us that "time and chance" happens to us all, "like fish taken in a cruel net." God does not plan out in advance all the details of our lives and then make them happen. Time and chance are part of the very fabric of the universe, the way God freely chose to make things.

What God did plan in advance and bring to pass was to send Christ for the redemption of the world (Revelation 13:8b). In Christ, we have been freed from sin, and that freedom enables us to trust God for our lives and for the lives of others. It also enables us to trust God to give us what we need to endure suffering. In Christ's love, we have hope that goes beyond death, and we have courage to reach out to help others in times of need.

The Christian message is that through Christ's wounds and sacrifice God understands our suffering and pain. Matthew 25:35-40 reminds us that Jesus identifies with victims. In helping someone in desperate need it is as if we are

helping Jesus himself. Mother Theresa of Calcutta interpreted it this way: “When we touch the sick and the needy, we touch the suffering body of Christ” (*Mother Theresa: In My Own Words. 1910-1997*, page 26, compiled by Jose Luis Gonzales-Balado, published in 1996 by Gramercy Books, New York).

In Christ, our response to calamity and evil is a reflection of God’s infinite compassion. As we pray for the survivors, we participate in Christ’s love and compassion for those who suffer. Prayer gives voice to love. In Christ’s love, we pray for all those who grieve, whose homes and livelihoods have been destroyed, whose health is in danger because of possible disease, who need to rebuild their shattered existence.

We pray that they may find comfort and courage in God. And, as we are able, we give to help them in their desperate need. Acts 10:4 shows us that our prayers and our almsgiving — giving of our substance to those in need — are a memorial before God. God tells us that he does not take pleasure in the physical death of anyone (Ezekiel 18:32). In fact, God hates death and will destroy it.

So what happened to all those who perished in the tsunami, and to the nearly 3,000 who were killed in New York on 9/11? Or to the estimated 3.1 million who died of AIDS in 2004? What about the 937,000 Tutsi and Hutu moderates who were slaughtered during the Rwandan genocide attempts of the 1990s? And the reported 240,000 deaths in Chechnya since 1994? Or to the teenage pregnant girl who bled to death in some backstreet abortion? Are all these people lost to God? We know that the Christians who perished are with the Lord, but what about those who, as far as we know, never had the chance to receive or reject Jesus Christ? Are they gone forever?

God reveals himself in the Bible as loving the world, and as sending his Son into the world not to condemn it but to save it (John 3:16-17). If God is

anything, he is mercy. “Mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13). The answer to the question lies in the mercy of God.

In Psalm 88, David wonders whether death signifies the abandonment of God, and then in Psalm 139 he refutes that idea and proclaims that the Spirit of God finds us even in the grave. Similarly, in Ecclesiastes 3, the writer, called the Preacher, queries what happens to a person’s spirit or soul. Then, in chapter 12:7, he asserts that the “spirit will return to God who gave it.” Dead or alive, human beings are in the hands of the merciful God. The Bible tells us that God is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

God is faithful to his covenant love. In his faithfulness God sent his Son to die for us while we were still sinners. In his faithfulness, God loved us even before we loved him. In his faithfulness, God reconciles to himself the world he created (Colossians 1:19-20).

Because of God’s faithfulness, we can put all our trust in him. We can trust him to be who he says he is. He is the God who loves the world, who redeems the world, and who in Christ has shared in human suffering. He is the God who promises that beyond death, in the new creation he has prepared for us, we will see our Lord Christ as he is. In Christ, we can rest in God’s word of faithfulness concerning his mercy and grace for all his creation, for all people, even for those who may die without yet having met Christ.

The tsunami was not Judgment Day. Only God can decide how Judgment Day plays out, and the Bible tells us that God has decided that the final result of Judgment Day is that there will be “no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4).

The Song of Solomon says, “Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it” (8:7). Neither can tsunamis, earthquakes, diseases, violence or war. God’s love is the hope of humanity. And nothing separates

anyone from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Nothing.

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## **Trials and Rejoicing**

Jesus is a remarkable person, God in the flesh. It was important that he came in the flesh, to become part of humanity so that he could reconcile humanity with God. From birth to death, Jesus had a difficult life. He had moments of joy, and hours of pain — and we are no better than he is, so we cannot expect a trouble-free life. In this world, Jesus said, we will have trials. He warned his disciples about the cost of following him: They would have to take up the cross each day, willing to suffer and die, if need be, for their faith in Jesus Christ (Luke 9:23).

Whether or not we believe in Jesus Christ, we will have troubles. But when we believe in him, we can be confident that he *understands* our troubles. He knows what we are going through. That does not make our troubles go away, but it helps us to know that not even God in the flesh was exempt from trouble. Jesus learned from the things he suffered (Hebrews 5:8) and *because* of that, he is “able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18).

When we struggle with the downside of being human, it helps us to know that our Savior struggled with it, too. We have a Savior who knows what it’s like. In Jesus, we can see that God himself is willing to suffer. That means that even if we can’t understand our trials, we know that there is a good reason for them. Paul tells us that we will not only share in Jesus’ resurrection life, we also share in his life of suffering (Philippians 3:10-11). We have difficulties in this life, but many joys as well. The two go together.



## Rejoicing and trials

Peter wrote, “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Peter 1:6). Most non-Christians and even some Christians continue to be surprised and puzzled by this combination of trials and rejoicing. How is it possible to be joyful when we suffer? Of course, we are not rejoicing *that* we have a trial (there is no particular virtue in suffering itself), but we rejoice *despite* our trials. How can that be?

Let’s notice what Peter wrote: “In *this* you greatly rejoice.” What is the “this” that gives us great joy? In context, we see that it is salvation, the fact that we can be confident that God will give us an eternal inheritance. We have a wonderful future guaranteed for us. This has been demonstrated to us by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and God’s power is shielding us until we receive the promised glory (verses 3-5). The same power that raised Jesus will also raise us to glorious immortality!

Peter speaks of joy again in verse 8. He acknowledges that we do not yet see our Savior. We do not yet have our promised inheritance. In fact, we are

suffering grief in all kinds of trials. But yet we can rejoice. Why? Because “you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (verse 9). We rejoice in the salvation we are already receiving through faith.

Faith involves our minds, our hearts and our wills. It means that we understand and accept certain things about God. It means that we respond emotionally to these things, such as with love because we understand he loves us, and with joy because we understand that he is giving us so much, and with trust because we understand and believe his promises for our eternal salvation.

When our understanding and our emotions are in agreement, then our wills are also. The decisions we make throughout each day are pleasing to God because he has brought us to the point that we *want* to do his will.

But we do not yet have the promised inheritance. We have not yet reached the time when there is no more crying and no more death. We all experience both crying and death. Our pains and sorrows are caused by our enemy — sin. We rejoice because we know that Jesus has conquered our enemy, and he promises that we share in his victory!

We suffer because of our own mistakes and sins. We also suffer because the people around us are captives of sin, and sin hurts not only the sinner but innocent bystanders, too. We are often the innocent bystanders who suffer from the fallout of the sins of others. Satan, the enemy of God and the arch-deceiver, works hard to feed and encourage the sinful nature in every person, thereby bringing even more pain and destruction to all, including persecution on the saints.

God not only promises to help us in our trials, he also promises us *trials!* Christ did not come to bring us a trouble-free life. Instead, he warned us that we would have strife within our families because of him (Matthew 10:34-36), that we would have trials (John 16:33) and that we would be persecuted (John

15:20). We enter the kingdom through many trials (Acts 14:22), and every Christian will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). We should not think it unusual when trials afflict us (1 Peter 4:12).

Jesus said, If you want to follow me, take up your cross. Be willing to suffer, even to lose your life, if you want to follow me. The Christian life involves suffering; we should not be surprised when it happens. Jesus said that a servant is not greater than the master. If Jesus, our Lord and teacher, became a human to suffer and die to serve us, if suffering was part of his training (Hebrews 2:10; 5:8), it should be no surprise that it is also part of ours. In these trials, we can rejoice only because we know that Christ has promised us something far better.

### **Not worth comparing**

But despite the suffering we sometimes experience, we rejoice in salvation. How can we rejoice despite our sufferings? Paul gives an oft-quoted explanation: “Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

Paul explains that we will receive a great inheritance — in fact, we are “co-heirs with Christ” (verse 17). We will share in his inheritance of glory. Today, we share in his suffering, but the day will come when we will share fully in his glory. The present suffering is part of God’s plan for us. It is part of what prepares us to fully enter the glory of Christ. “We share in [Christ’s] sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (verse 17).

Our Lord was a man of sorrow, yet he was also full of joy (Isaiah 53:3; Luke 10:21). When he suffered, he did so with the assurance that deliverance and glory would follow in due time (Hebrews 2:12).

Jesus told his disciples to rejoice in their salvation. Truly, the glory ahead is so great that we can rejoice with Jesus and all believers despite our present-day difficulties. The joy of salvation and the hope of glory are so much

greater than our present pains, that there is no comparison. It's infinitely more than a million-to-one ratio!

May God grant us the eyes and ears of faith to believe in and stand on his great and precious promises! He is with us, his beloved children, even in our darkest moments. He never forsakes nor leaves us. He will see us through to the end, through every trial, every pain and every sin. He is always beside us and he never stops loving us, even when we are too weak to know it. Praise God for his eternal love!

### **Joy in the gospel**

We have been promised great rewards, and that gives us great reason to rejoice — no matter what the circumstances we happen to be in now. Paul wrote, “In all our troubles my *joy* knows no bounds” (2 Corinthians 7:4).

And our own joy is increased all the more by the salvation of *others*. Paul put it this way: “What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, *you* are our glory and joy” (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20). Just as there is joy in heaven whenever a sinner repents, there is also joy on earth, in all who see life from God's eternal perspective.

It is no surprise that the people of God find great joy in the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To the church at Philippi, Paul wrote: “The important thing is that in every way ...Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice” (Philippians 1:18). Paul rejoiced to learn of people who responded in faith to the message and would be present in God's family when our Lord and Savior comes.

The apostle John shared the same joy: “It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. I have *no greater joy* than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 3-4).

As the children of God, we share this joy with all believers, with the angels in heaven, and with God himself — joy in the preaching of the gospel, joy in hearing of people who come to faith in Christ and joy in people who continue to walk in the path of faith. Such pure joy in the redemption and salvation of people made in God’s image, such fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in us, shapes our passions, our values and our goals.

The use of our time, the habits of our thoughts, the health of our emotions and the quality of our words and actions toward one another are positively influenced by this life-cleansing joy in the love, kindness and power of God. Our private worship time, our collective worship with the church, our volunteer work, our giving of time both to the church and to people in need, our participation in small groups for prayer, study of the Word and worship — all these spring from the joy of God in us, joy produced by his gracious work in our lives and in the lives of others.

Even our financial support for the work of the church is a reflection of our joy in the things God values. Our giving to the church demonstrates the importance we place on the treasures of the kingdom of God as compared to the things of this world.

Through the church we reach out as the body of Christ with the gospel message, and we give the gospel credibility as we give ourselves to God’s transforming work in us. God desires that we each serve him in a personal way *and* that we serve him and one another as a body, the body of Christ. “You are all members of one another,” Paul wrote. We are not called to be in relationship with God without one another.

We are called into the *fellowship* of the people of God, into the *household* of God. In Christ, we have communion with God and, through Christ, with one another. Jesus’ command is that we love one another, and it is *as his body*, the church, that we proclaim the gospel in the world and teach his

ways.

Together, we can have an even greater impact than we can as individuals, even though our individual impact is also essential to the health of the whole body. The gospel is a great source of joy for us all — joy in receiving the message and in giving it to others!

### **Five facts about trials**

We have difficulties whether or not we believe in Jesus.

Jesus promised that his followers would have trials.

Jesus also promised that eternal joy would be vastly more than our temporary trials.

There is joy in heaven and on earth whenever anyone turns to God.

Faith in the future gives us reason to rejoice despite our troubles.

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## **Joy — Despite Pain and Suffering**

The apostle Paul had many pains and persecutions, but he also had much joy. In Romans 8, we see that hope and confidence dominated his outlook on life. Although God's children may groan inwardly, we also wait eagerly for our bodies to be liberated from the world of decay. "For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently" (verses 24-25).

Paul had confidence that God would bring his redeeming work to completion, and that when the all-powerful ruler of the universe is working for us, nothing can separate us from his desire to do good in our lives (verses 26 to 39). Even our trials will be part of the path, in God's wisdom, that leads us to learn obedience, endurance and character (Romans 5:3-4; James 1:2-4).

Paul recounted his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 6: "In great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger" (verses 4-5). It was a miserable life in these respects, but it was a burden Paul accepted. It was a choice that might be considered foolish were it not for Paul's confidence in a resurrection. "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

Because we have hope in Christ for future glory, our choices make sense. We give up temporary pleasures because we see the eternal pleasures Christ offers us. To those who cannot see the eternal, it seems foolish to give up temporary pleasures. But for us, there is no comparison. We can count it all for loss for the joy that is Christ.

Many Christians make sacrifices to serve Christ. Those sacrifices are evidence that they believe in future glory. Jesus showed that true reward



comes through sacrifice, that true exaltation comes through humility and that true joy comes through trial. This path can only be walked through faith in the Savior, and it is a path unknown to the world.

Paul knew great suffering, but he could also write, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4) — and he could write this from a prison cell! Paul illustrated life’s mixture of sorrow and joy in his own life: “Through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (verses 8-10).

What enabled Paul to live with such paradoxes? It was faith in the God of boundless love who holds the future in his hands. It was a faith that made all his sacrifices of little consequence. Sacrifice is part and parcel of a truly significant life. It is the way of the world to live mainly for one’s own comfort. Jesus calls us to something more significant — a life of sacrifice on behalf of others — and the paradox is that “whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:25).

Jesus has opened the door to our Father’s kingdom and invited us to leave behind what means so much in this world and enter the true life of the age to come: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done” (Matthew 16:25-27).

Jesus gives us a new outlook on life. Sacrifice and blessing are not necessarily contradictory. It is possible to have both. As we grow in Jesus, the more confident we become of eternal treasures, and the less worried we

become about material possessions. Faith changes us, so that we no longer live for ourselves, but for him who saved us (2 Corinthians 5:15).

The people of God rejoice in using his blessings to build his kingdom. Whether time, energy, goods or money, God's people are cheerful givers, sharing their material blessings because they live to serve Christ. The people of God are forgiving and accepting. They pass along what God has given them — forgiveness and acceptance. They love, forgive and accept others because Jesus loves, forgives and accepts them. Through the life of faith, Jesus lives in us and we live in him. We can rejoice in our suffering because it pleased Jesus to suffer for us to save us from our sins.

Praise be to God who shares every good with us!

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An Answer in the Dark

I stood there in unbelief as the man forced open the screen door and stepped into my living room, pointing a gun at my head. My baby was asleep on the couch, hidden from sight, but my two-year-old clung to my leg. I told her to sit down by the door. She sat.

“God help me!” I prayed silently. “Save us from this man!”

Five minutes ago this guy had knocked, asking for a pencil and paper. I had only opened the door a crack, but that’s all he needed. Now he gestured with his gun: “Lock the door.”

My greatest fear was suddenly becoming real. But without thinking twice, I grabbed up my daughter and yanked the door open. The man, all 200 pounds of him, lunged at me and tried to shut it again. I dug my shoulder into his chest and fought him all the way to the driveway.

“Okay, okay!” he finally muttered. “I’m going.” He ran off.

The police arrived within minutes of my call. When I described the intruder, they glanced at each other uneasily. They knew this man. He had mutilated several women in the city. He hadn’t yet let a victim go.

“And how,” they asked, “could you get the heavy door open and fight him off, carrying a child?”

I know how. We have a wonderful Father who gives his angels charge over us, to deliver us from the evil one.

Wait!

Why didn’t God stop this man before he came in the door? Or better yet: Why didn’t he stop him while he was planning to harm me? God could have diverted his attention, broken his leg, given him a stroke, or indigestion — anything! But he let him come clear into my home. Why? I soon found out.

You see, I grew up as an overprotected only child, crippled with phobias.

I lived in terror of the dark, of closed spaces, of spiders, and most deeply, of being left alone and defenseless. My mother had taught me that God was always near and heard my prayers, but for years my phobias competed with my faith.

Then I found myself newly married to a man being called into ministry. He worked his office job all day, then spent evenings and weekends visiting people and attending ministerial training. I was alone most of the time. I loved my husband dearly, but night after night I suffered miserably with fear.

Until, that is, the day the 200-pound attacker invaded my home. On that day, as I pushed my way past his bulk into the driveway, God reached in and lifted my phobias from my shoulders. Since that moment I have not feared being alone, or in the dark, or in closed spaces (although I still hate bugs). I know with all my “knowing” that God delivered me that day, not only from the man, but also from my fears.

Things happen for a reason when you are a child of God.

At what point did Joseph realize he was being sent to Egypt to save his family and thousands of other people? Was it when his brothers flung him into the pit? Or when Potiphar bought him as a slave in Egypt, or maybe when he landed in prison? No, not then.

When David ran from his enemies and his closest friends forsook and betrayed him, did he think he was just having a really bad day? Or did he know God was with him? David wrote Psalm 22, which we now know speaks of Christ’s sufferings and crucifixion. In his aloneness and despair, did David foresee the reason for his trials?

Think of Job! He *knew* some purpose was in the works. He staked everything on God’s righteousness and the hope that his life would turn out for good, even while he was losing everything that mattered to him.

The uncomfortable truth is, though, that we cannot always see any clear

“reason” for our trials, even after some time has passed. I have other stories to tell that fit that category. We all do.

But God is bigger than each of our lifetimes. When we utter a prayer, like a small child crying for help in the dark, God sets in motion the forces necessary to answer that prayer. It may be soon, or may take a lifetime, but God is patient, and he answers our prayers so that the results endure for eternity.

Trust him in that, and keep praying. He’s on it.

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The Suffering God

I don't get it. Why does God just stand by and let such horrible things happen as go on in this world, when he could stop them if he wanted to? Doesn't God care?

Yes, God cares. But I doubt anybody can give an entirely satisfying answer to that question. Here is what we do know: The way we best understand God and our suffering is to look at Jesus Christ. He is God; he is human, too. God became human, without ceasing to be God, for our sakes. That is what we mean when we say Christ was fully God and fully man.

When we say Jesus Christ is the Son of God, we do not mean that he is something less than God, or someone else in addition to God. We mean he is God, and as God, he took on the human condition for us.

I don't see what this has to do with our suffering. And I don't see how Jesus can be God and the Son of God at the same time. It seems like you are just changing the subject. I want to know why God doesn't stop horrible suffering if he is so almighty and good.

Fair enough. And that is just why we need to talk about Jesus Christ. Because it is in understanding Jesus that we can begin to understand something about why God allows human suffering.

Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. You'll notice I said *is*, not *was*. Jesus *was*, *is*, *is to come*, and always will be God in the flesh. When the Son of God assumed humanity, he took the human condition into himself, that is, into God. And in doing that, he purified humanity, redeemed it, and gave it eternal communion, or right fellowship, with God the Father. As a human, he took all human sin and corruption on himself, and through his crucifixion and death, all human sin and corruption found its end.

But death could not hold the Son of God made flesh. He was resurrected,

not as a spirit or as the fleshless Son of God, but as the very same man Jesus Christ who died for us, only glorified. That is what we Christians mean when we say we believe in the “bodily resurrection.” We mean Jesus himself was raised, the same fully God and fully human Jesus Christ who hung on the cross for us. He was raised with a glorified human body.

When we are raised from the dead, we will have a glorified body like that of Jesus — like the body Jesus still has (Philippians 3:21). When we are raised, we will be fully human, not fully God and fully human like Jesus. But in our raised humanity, we will be like the captain of our salvation, Jesus Christ the crucified and raised Son of God, is in his humanity. He is fully human.

When we say “fully human,” we do not mean as opposed to partly human. We mean “fully” in the sense of “everything humanity was intended to be.” We mean undistorted, uncorrupted, unbroken, untarnished. We mean, as it were, straight off the showroom floor — perfect, no dents, no rust, no stains, no rips, no tread wear, shiny, tuned, lubed, fueled, washed and ready to roll as we were meant to roll.

Without Christ, being fully human would be impossible for us. It would be impossible because we started right out, every one of us, in the junkyard. We were beat up old clunkers, gas hogs, leaking like sieves, with bald unmatched tires, scratched up, faded paint and torn upholstery, dented, dirty, rusted, backfiring heaps stuck in second gear. That is because of sinfulness, a condition we share with Father Adam and Mother Eve as we chug merrily along in the choking exhaust of their distrust of God.

When personalities turn against God, whether they are human or spirit personalities, the result is evil. Evil can be defined as anything that is not in communion with God, that opposes God. It is this evil, this senseless distrust of God, this usurping by humanity of God’s faithful and loving divine

fatherhood over us, that corrupts and attempts to destroy everything God originally made to be good.

Abused freedom

Can God stop bad things from happening? Yes, he can. So why doesn't he? Consider this: Bad things happen because people are *free* to do bad things.

Sometimes, people are careless, inconsiderate or selfish, which results in creating situations and circumstances that can and usually do bring harm to others. Sometimes they are lazy, greedy or cowardly, and because of it, people get hurt. Sometimes, people are even hateful, wicked and cruel.

What would happen if God were to stop all consequences of human choices and actions? For one thing, it would make human choices and actions meaningless. If God were to always stop us before we do bad things, then he would also be taking away our freedom to make our own choices. If God removed our freedom to think for ourselves and make our own choices, then there would be no possibility for us humans of a freely chosen love relationship with God.

God gave humans freedom, real freedom — a freedom upheld by and in God's own freedom, not a freedom independent of God (there is no such thing as freedom totally independent of God). But in Adam, humans have abused that freedom by choosing against God, which is choosing against themselves, because only in God are humans able to be what they really are.

That rebellion has rendered humanity less than it was created to be — completely in the dark about who God is and its utter dependence on him. In the midst of this blindness, humans no longer have the communion with God that Adam and Eve once enjoyed. Instead, the best they can do is grope for God in the dark in the hope that they might find him (Acts 17:27).

Redemption

As surely as humanity fell into sin and corruption, however, the Word of God who speaks all creation into being (Colossians 1:16) has also spoken the new word of redemption (verse 20) — the new creation, which is nothing other than the gracious redemption of all things (Ephesians 1:9-10). By God's grace, as they are held by God in Christ, humans can choose to trust in their Lord. On their own, they could never do that.

For one thing, their corruption would prevent it. For another, the creature is incapable of finding the Creator under its own steam; such finding is possible only by God's own gracious gift of himself. In this God-given freedom, humans can trust God or not trust God. They can accept or reject his sovereignty over them. Even if they do reject God, of course, God is no less God, and they are no less dependent on him for existence, even though they may refuse to believe it.

But life is more than mere existence. God wants his human children to be what he made them to be: fully human, not the broken-down shells sin has made of them. To make humans what he made them to be, God took broken-down humanity into himself and fixed it. He became flesh, God in the flesh, God Incarnate. He came as one of us for no other reason but to reconcile humanity to himself.

But let us not get the false impression that this reconciliation is some kind of divine chemotherapy that God finally injected into a terminally sick world to save a few of those who would live after Jesus in chronological time. No, this reconciliation is something that the Son of God, who is the eternal Word of God who speaks everything into being (John 1:1-3), has done, and has been doing, from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8).

In other words, in some sense we do not understand, God has always (in every sense that we can understand always) had something of humanity in himself: God reconciled us to himself in Christ before the foundation of the

world. He is for us, and he is for us eternally. When Jesus became incarnated as a human being, he was demonstrating in time what had been true from all eternity.

The One through whom all things continually exist (Hebrews 1:3), who as the divine Word continually speaks all things into being, is also the very same One who continually reconciles all things to the Father. His word of reconciliation for us restores us to the Father as surely as his word of creation gives us being in the first place. He is both Creator and Reconciler, and always has been. He is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

Perfect representative

How, exactly, did Jesus do it? He came in what the Bible calls the “fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4; Ephesians 1:10), or exactly when the time was right. To repeat: Don’t think Jesus’ atonement is good only for those who came after him in time; that would be to forget just who he is and would miss the point by a million miles. He came at the right time for all humanity, both before and after him. He came as a self-offering of God to us, that is, in Jesus Christ God gave us nothing other than himself. He also gave himself, the perfect, sinless human, as a self-offering of perfect humanity to God. Only Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, could do both.

How did Jesus give this self-offering of perfect humanity to the Father in a way that reconciles all humanity to God? He did it by taking all the sins of humanity upon himself (John 1:29; 1 John 2:2), becoming in himself sinning humanity estranged and alienated from God (2 Corinthians 5:21; Matthew 27:46), and suffering death for us in our place (Romans 5:8).

He could do that because 1) as God, he is the one against whom sin has been committed and the one who has been rejected and despised by us in our sinfulness, 2) as our Creator, he represents all of us, and 3) by becoming one of us in flesh and blood, he responds to God on behalf of all of us. He as Son

of man can take our sins on himself and bear the brunt of our collusion with the powers of evil; as the Son of God he can forgive our sins and restore our broken communion with God.

Death defeated

Wait a minute. You say Christ died for us, in our place. But in case you haven't noticed, we all still die anyway. How does that work?

You're getting ahead of the story, but it's too good a question to put off. Yes, we still die. But because of Jesus, death is the very thing that is overcome by resurrection. Because Jesus has taken up death into himself and thereby defeated it, when we die, we are drawn into none other than Jesus' death. When Jesus died, because of who he is, death itself could not contain him; death itself was swallowed up in victory.

Because the Son of God, the Lord of Life, took on death for us, every human death is a participation in the death of Jesus (John 12:32). And entry into the death of Jesus cannot end except in our resurrection into the resurrection of Jesus. Just as death cannot contain Christ, so death, because Christ died for us, cannot contain us either, precisely because we are, by God's grace, in Christ.

So everybody gets resurrected, even Hitler and Osama bin Laden?

Yes, everybody who dies gets resurrected (Revelation 20:12). Because the Son of God became human for humanity, and died and was raised for humanity, all humans die in Christ's death and are raised in his resurrection. There is no other resurrection into which humans can be resurrected but that of Jesus. If Jesus had not died and been raised for us, no human at all would be raised. But he did, and he did it because the holy and almighty Triune God is full of grace and mercy and free to be who he wants to be with us.

God with us

But if Hitler and all the bad guys get resurrected, how is that fair?

Good question. The answer is that it isn't fair. But then it isn't fair that you and I get resurrected either. The Bible tells us that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). None of us humans deserves anything but death. We've all opened our own God-business with ourselves as "God," even though we can't create a pot, much less keep ourselves alive.

However, the fact that everybody gets resurrected does not mean that everybody is saved. Although in Christ everyone is reconciled to God, only people who put their trust in Christ are saved, and as we have already seen, for most people, that blessing does not come before death.

I'm not sure I understand what you mean. How can someone be reconciled, but not be saved?

For God to become a human is to reconcile humanity to God. You see, whatever God is cannot help but be reconciled to God, because God is always and ever reconciled to himself. God is faithful to his humanity in Christ, and he has established our humanity in Christ, to whom he is faithful.

That's probably still confusing. Let me try saying it this way: God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — are one God, the Holy Trinity, perfect in union, and in perfect communion. The Father wills eternally that the Son be human for our sakes, and the Holy Spirit makes it so. Because Christ is God in the flesh, the perfect human for our sakes and in our place, that is, perfect humanity for humanity, and the Holy Spirit binds us with the Son in perfect unity, we are, because we are human in Christ only (there is no other way to be human because Christ is human for us), reconciled to God in Christ.

You think that is clearer?

Let's try this: Christ reconciled the whole world to God by becoming human for us. He is one with God, so that makes us one with God, and it is true simply because God says so. Is that better?

I get that part now. But how is it then that some are not saved?

The thing that keeps a reconciled person from being saved is unbelief. They don't trust God. It's that simple. Whoever will not trust God is not saved. That is because even though God says Yes to every person because of Christ, if people say No to God's Yes, that is, they won't trust him, then they cannot enjoy the fruit of God's Yes for them.

It is not that their No is louder than God's Yes or that their No negates God's Yes. God's Yes is still Yes and ever will be. But that very Yes of God for them is refused in their No, which is crazy, to be sure, but nevertheless tolerated by God because his Yes includes our freedom to say No.

To say No to God is to say No to God's love, to God's grace, to God's mercy, to God's authority, to God's wisdom, to God's power. It is to sit starving and diseased in the dark alone with nothing, thinking one is entirely self-sufficient, and to prefer that state to the joy and freedom of God's eternal banquet. To say No to God is to set oneself up as God (a birthday candle might as well set itself up as the sun).

Predestination?

So there is hope for everybody?

Because Christ lives, there is hope for everybody.

But hasn't God already decided who will be saved and who will not beforehand?

In one way, yes, but in another way, it is not played out until he plays it out with us in time and space in Christ. Yes, because God intends that everyone be saved, humanity itself is elect or chosen for salvation in Christ, the Elect for humanity and the One in whom all humanity is elect. But, no, because God not only purposes human salvation in Christ, he also fulfills his purpose in Christ, and that fulfillment takes place concretely in the space and time of history, a history that has been redeemed in Christ. He created us in the matrix of time and space, and he interacts with us according to the context

in which he created us.

All humanity is chosen, or predestined by God to be elect in Christ, and God works out his purpose in Christ in all humanity throughout all history. So in one sense, God knows, but in another sense, God is working out in time and space with us in Christ what he knows is his will for humanity, and he knows it because he is working it out according to his own purpose which he wills in Christ, who is the Elect for us.

Is that predestination?

Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that God predestines all humanity for salvation, and he works out that salvation with us in Christ freely and concretely in time and space. No, in the sense that God has not predetermined before all time and creation who will be damned and who will be saved. Rather, he actively works out his purposes with us in the real *created freedom* of time and space and history.

So our choices matter?

Yes, our choices do matter. They matter because they are choices made in Christ, in whom we live and move and have our being. In other words, we matter, and our choices and decisions matter, because God, in his uncreated freedom to be who he is with us, has graciously reconciled us to himself in Christ, who became human for us.

By God's grace, our right choices are Christ's choices, and our wrong choices are redeemed in Christ and made his choices if we deny ourselves and trust him to be our Savior, Lord and God — that is, if we repent and believe the gospel.

And further, our repentance (turning to God as sinners in need of mercy) and our faith (trusting God to be who he is and do what he has promised for our salvation) are originated, prompted and carried out in Christ through the Holy Spirit according to the Father's will for us. This means that we can even

trust Christ to 1) plead our pitiful cause and 2) to have for us the faith we need to be saved.

Christian hope

Now, we went through that so we could come to this: Our corrupt choices produce corrupt results, and humanity suffers because of it. But Jesus Christ, the perfect Human in whom God has established our humanity, also suffered with us and for us, so even though life on this earth stinks because of sin, it is redeemed in Christ, and therefore the life we hope for will be realized when we join him in his resurrection, and that is true not only for us, but for all suffering humans everywhere through all history whose agonies and tortured cries join in the cosmic groans of the whole creation (Romans 8:18-25; Revelation 21:3-4).

We don't know why God allows babies to suffer. Or why some people must endure mental and physical handicaps. Or why many starve to death, endure hideous diseases or undergo unspeakable suffering in any of the uncountable ways humans have suffered and continue to suffer.

But we do know this: God himself suffered in Christ for every suffering human being, and he did it to end all suffering, and when the whole world sits down to eat at the Lamb's eternal banquet, the cries of joy that will rise up will forever eclipse the groans of misery from which they emerged.

This hope is why we are Christians. Human suffering, evil as it is, is not in vain, but is given everlasting meaning in the suffering of our Creator who loves us so much in spite of ourselves that he is glad to suffer with us and for us so that in him every tear can at last be wiped away.

The final chapter of the tragic life stories of the teeming masses of humanity has been written precisely in the death and resurrection of the Son of God, into whose eternal joy all of humanity is drawn continually by the unremitting power of his love (John 12:32).

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About the Authors

Paul Kroll worked for Grace Communion International for many years, writing hundreds of articles for our magazines. He is now retired. He wrote most this material in the 1990s. He is the author of *Exploring the Word of God: The Book of Acts*, available as a series of seven e-books.

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Paul Louis Metzger, Multnomah University  
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Cherith Fee Nordling, Antioch Leadership Network  
Andrew Root, Luther Seminary  
Alan Torrance, University of St. Andrews  
Robert T. Walker, Edinburgh University  
N.T. Wright, University of St. Andrews  
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