



SUFFERING



God

Bible

Suffering

Jesus

Faith

BC is a series of five studies that parallel a faith journey toward Jesus Christ. Each builds on the one before, and interested readers will find themselves somewhere on the path.

This third study assumes the existence of God and relevance of the Bible, and uses the Bible to reconcile our suffering with a good God.

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“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1:2-3

We began this small study of biblical Christianity outlining why we can assume that God is real. We then looked at why it makes sense to see what the Bible has to say about God. If those were not issues you wanted to explore, you will be jumping into the series at this point.

So, the great fact of a Creator gives life a foundation for true meaning. There is glory, joy and thrill in being human. From the self sacrifice of parents to the tender self giving of awakened passion, to the simple bond of true friendship, we instinctively know that people are important. From homemade bread to classic novels to space satellites, we instinctively know that human beings can accomplish things of remarkable and lasting value. All this and much, much more testifies to a good God’s design and plan.

So given all that, how is it that so much of life seems so meaningless? There is an apparent problem, and a serious one, with the concept of a real, personal God: the oppressive weight of human anguish. How is evil and pain consistent with a benevolent divinity? If God *didn’t* exist, then life would not *have* to make sense, because nothing would have any ultimate meaning. But if God *does* exist, then this world and life as we know it ought to make sense. At least three hefty problems stand in the way: the problem of pain, the problem of evil and the problem of silence.

The Problem of Pain

First, there is the problem of human suffering and futility. While there is the blessing of parenthood, there is also the frustration of infertility and the horror of birth defects. Classic novels showcase human brilliance, but often do so by exploring the tragedy that haunts mankind in a thousand forms, lurking even in the shadows of our greatest achievements.

Life is exasperating for the most privileged and wracked with misery for everyone else. On the day I write these words I am numbed yet again by pictures of the latest trauma of refugees—sickening living conditions, nameless corpses, dying children. I need not tell you which political situation this was, since you no doubt have later and more recent examples to contemplate. Modern journalism barely touches on the sweeping natural and social plagues that afflict humanity like open sores. Exposure to even the smallest fraction of all this tragedy reduces all but the most hardy of us to depression.

Even for those who find life generally exciting and rewarding, it remains confusing—a roller coaster ride that is over just before you can get your bearings. You face the end before you can adequately formulate questions, let alone get any answers.

And that is the worst part of all; it is over too soon. Death seems to deny any possibility of the meaning we sense we must have. All but the famous few are forgotten almost immediately. The idea that “people live on in the memories of others” is a myth told to quiet the frightened child inside us; there is not enough truth in it to fill a yellowed obituary. (How much do you really know about your own great grandparents? Do you even know their full names? Do you think that two generations from now anyone will know yours?)

*As a man comes, so he departs,
and what does he gain,
since he toils for the wind?*

*All his days he eats in darkness,
with great frustration, affliction and anger. Eccl. 5:16-17*

Why is life so painful and futile if God is real?

The Problem of Evil

Second, there is the problem of human nastiness. It is not as if we are innocent guests trapped against our will in some frightful haunted house. Human beings have gone bad.

This is not to contradict the fact that we are truly wonderful creatures of unparalleled significance. Actually, it is *because* we are so wondrous that we can be evil. Only beings capable of good are capable of moral corruption. Rocks aren't evil, neither are ferns or crickets or zebras. Only people. Only us.

We humans are the ones who invented both the idea and reality of evil. While there is the tender self giving of awakened passion, there is also the heart-stabbing cruelty of betrayal, abuse or icy indifference. The same space satellites that probe the stars also stand ready to guide the flight of horrible death from halfway around the world. Those refugees I recently saw on TV did not get where they were because of a volcano or tornado; they were driven there by neighbors just like themselves who wish them woe.

We are very good at pointing the finger toward others whom we deem worse than ourselves, but none of us with any self awareness can say that we are unaffected by this moral disease. Not everyone practices evil equally, of course. But every race, every class of people, every nationality and each sex is demonstrably guilty of every sort of crime and moral lapse imaginable. In fact, the most high-minded and sensitive thinkers of any culture tend to be those who not only perceive humanity's flaws, but sense them most acutely in their own souls.

While the Bible defines many sins quite specifically, it lowers the working definition to those things we do which we condemn in ourselves, things we do that violate our own conscience.¹ Which of

us would want our private lives and inner motives publicized with brutal objectivity? No one is entirely at ease with what he or she sees when taking an honest look inside.

There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.
Ecclesiastes 7:20

Much of our suffering comes not from natural disasters or birth defects but rather from character defects, less tangible but no less real. It is most telling that when we are caught in a moral failure, we tend to excuse ourselves with, “Well, I’m only human.” Why? Why is humanity so morally defective, even by its own standards? Why are we condemned by our own consciences if we were made by a good God?

The Problem of Silence

Finally, there is the absence of divine communication. If our humanity is real, if our personhood is more than an illusion, then our Creator must be a Person himself. Why, then, is there silence? Why does he not speak to us—any and all of us, all the time?

This point is at the same time the most difficult and the most easy to document. Many people report religious experiences, but how many actually hear God literally speak to them? Accurate data is unavailable. But it is also unnecessary. Does God speak to you? I am not referring to comfortable religious sensations that make it feel as if God has spoken. We would not be satisfied with such *almost* encounters with other persons. Persons communicate best in language; if God is a real person, why is he so silent?

He has also set eternity in the hearts of men, yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.
Ecclesiastes 3:11

As the above quotes from just one book of the Bible demonstrate, the Scriptures are not afraid to deal with all these questions. The answers we find there are uncomplicated and direct,

but they are not flattering or easy to deal with.²

The Bible traces the origin of the human condition to the experiences of the first human beings on Planet Earth. Now, the notion of an historical record of our first ancestors may seem far fetched, but remember that this is revelation, not journalism. Moses did not discover these events from previous sources or observe any of it first hand. In some fashion, God communicated this account to Moses. Moses related it as stylized history,³ an epic narrative capturing the truth of the situation. Put aside the battle between evolution and creationism long enough to consider the message of this account—and remember that there had to be some pair, sometime, that began the species we know as humanity. The Bible distills the essence of their story.

Let's take a moment or two to review that story, one that many learned in Sunday School. When we're done, we'll contrast what we find with the modern mindset and see which deals better with the problem of pain and evil.

Genesis 1-3

God created the universe with a purpose: to glorify himself,⁴ that is, to express himself tangibly.⁵

Adam (meaning man) and Eve (meaning mother) were special creations, in that they had the unique distinction of being created in God's "image." This meant that humanity was created to reveal the character of God in our dominion over the earth.⁶ Being equipped for our dominion involved much that makes our species so special: rational and self conscious thought, ethical awareness, speech, tool making ability, social skills and so on.

God did two things to instruct us in the art of ordering the earth. First, God designed and built our first home, Eden, as a garden-prototype of the beautiful and productive place they were to make of the whole planet.⁷ Second, God designed our conscience around his definition of right and wrong. Since it is possible for free creatures to choose to go against their conscience, God

institutionalized his moral authority through the imaginative use of two trees.⁸ One was called the Tree of Life, since the purpose for our existence lay in our willing obedience to God's design. The other was called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—"knowledge" not in the sense of understanding, but in the sense of definition. Only the Creator has the right to define Good and Evil.

Adam was charged not to eat of the second tree, on pain of death. The tree was not poison. The only reason Adam was forbidden it was because God said he should not. By choosing to respect this tree, he would choose to respect God. By eating the fruit, Adam would reject the Creator's authority and claim the right to define his own life, as if he had no Creator.

Adam and Eve chose to pretend that they had no responsibility to their Creator.⁹ The Apostle Paul later generalized their choice in his description of all mankind ...

Although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised.

Romans 1:21-25

This is what the Bible calls "sin," and it is crucial to understand what it is. It is common to think of sin as some detestable or degrading act. Murder comes readily to mind, as well as rape, genocide and other heinous crimes. While the Bible recognizes these things as examples of sin, they are not the essence of sin, itself. Sin is the determination of a created being to define its own purpose. Sin is the determination of mankind to define how we live and use this planet, irrespective of God's authority and the conscience he put inside us.

This means that murder and sexual abuse, for example, are indeed sins—but not for the reason we think. We *know* they are sins because they offend *our* conscience. But they *are* sins because

they offend *God's* design and reject his authority.

Of course, anything that offends God is a sin, whether or not it offends us. Regrettably, even our most laudable efforts lack perfect motives. As an Old Testament prophet put it, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”¹⁰

Adam's choice resulted in the punishment he had been warned about: death. God had warned Adam that should he eat the forbidden fruit, he would die on that very day.

We might be confused to notice that Adam went on to live for many years. But actually, on the day Adam ate the forbidden fruit, he *did* die. Since he did not keel over right away, we realize that death must be a broader concept in the Bible than the one we commonly have in mind. The common notion of death is the cessation of crucial bodily functions. The Bible, however, would consider this more an evidence of death than death, itself. The Bible defines death as the judgment of God against human sin, and is experienced in two stages.

The first stage of death did begin with the immediate curse in Eden.¹¹ It was a deterioration of the order God intended. Not only did Adam and Eve find themselves estranged from each other, but God predicted significant changes in the way men and women would relate to one other and with the world around them. Things would no longer work as God had designed them to work. God's judgment began, therefore, not with aggressive punishment, but with passively allowing the creation order to unravel.¹² Earth would now resist our attempts at dominion. Nature would become our enemy as much as our friend. Indeed, we would now find it difficult to establish order in our society and even in our own homes.

This deterioration eventually disconnects body from soul—the body keels over and stops breathing as the soul loses its interface with the physical world. Neither body nor soul ceases to exist; rather, they deteriorate to the point that they can no longer remain

intact.

The second and eternal part of God's judgment has to do with the final tearing of our personal relationship with him. Not only did Adam and Eve hide from God, but for his part, God also drove them out of his sight.¹³ In the end, death is ultimate separation from God,¹⁴ the source of all life. We caused the rift when we rejected God as our rightful Lord, but death is also God's response. Human death, therefore, is not "natural" or "a part of life" but the result of God's righteous wrath against human sin, his curse to send us away from his sight.

The Bible would go on to describe Hell as where people are consigned when God is justly displeased with their attitudes and actions. When Hell is described, it is usually described as a place of isolation, darkness and lonely despair, a place to experience the unending torment of never knowing God or attaining one's proper purpose.¹⁵ How ironic that God's final judgment consists in giving mankind what it foolishly wants: life without him.¹⁶

Such is the essence of the Bible's story of mankind's beginning, and the rift between us and our Creator.

Two Different Perspectives

The biblical revelation of Genesis presents a radically different picture of humanity than the one cherished by the secular mind set. It is worth thinking about that difference.

The secular belief is that mankind is a freakishly lucky child of chance, a glorious cosmic accident which could just as well never have happened. According to this point of view, the only meaning we have is whatever we create for ourselves. This implies, of course, that we are essentially good beings (since we conveniently define "good" to suit ourselves).

In contrast, the Bible says that mankind was given birth by God.¹⁷ We are a unique, valuable and thoroughly purposeful creation, designed to reflect the personal characteristics of our Creator. According to this point of view, the initial human decision to define right and wrong for ourselves was criminal. Furthermore,

this initial decision shaped our nature like an ugly footprint in wet cement.¹⁸ This means that the entire human race is essentially “fallen,” sinful and spiritually broken—not necessarily as bad as we could be, but seriously corrupted in every part of life.

In short:

- The secular point of view asserts that we are essentially good but hopelessly insignificant.
- The biblical point of view maintains that we are corrupt but immensely significant.

Think about how these reversed perspectives affect one’s response to the very real problems of suffering, evil and the silence of God mentioned earlier ...

Dealing with the Human Condition

Biblical Christians are often chastened for being unable to account for human suffering, but it is the secularist who has the real problem.

Consider the secularist’s position. On the one hand, suffering feels like an indignity and insult, unfair because it is so undeserved by beings who are essentially good. The secular mind scoffs at the classic notion of God, since God would have to be either unable or unwilling to stop all this unfair pain. But on the other hand, the secularist views humanity as a cosmic accident in a universe that doesn’t care about us and has no future for us. In the larger scheme of things, what difference could our suffering (or anything else about us) possibly make?

The Bible presents quite a different perspective. On the one hand, from a biblical point of view human suffering is not unfair at all. It is the tragic but just and understandable result of human sin. This is not to say that the load of adversity carried by each individual directly corresponds to his or her personal sins, but rather that the messy side of human existence is rooted in the God-dishonoring nature we all share. The fact that some of us suffer considerably more than others is just another example of the disorder introduced by the breakdown of God’s intended order.

God is *both* all good and all powerful. He has consigned us to the perfectly just consequences of the independent course we have chosen. There is nothing unfair about that, just as there is nothing unjust about the final, eternal isolation of Hell, where God finally gives us up to our own devices.

But on the other hand, while the biblical point of view does not see human suffering as unjust, it does see the ruin of humanity as tremendously significant, something truly worthy of tears, even from God, himself. We are not two legged blobs of protoplasm with no past or future. We are creatures designed for the highest glory, whose temporal and eternal ruin is tragic beyond words. This is true not only on the large scale but also on the small, from the social decline of nations to the personal deterioration of multiple sclerosis or drug addiction. The immense significance of humanity makes every grave a place of genuine mourning. Notice God's own reaction:

The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.
Genesis 6:5-6

From the Bible's perspective, the tragedy of the human condition is not surprising at all. The Genesis text quoted above directly introduces the account of the Flood, "So the Lord said, 'I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth ... for I am grieved that I have made them.'"¹⁹ That is a reasonable response from a God who truly cares about the love and compassion and honor and integrity that we traded for greed and smugness and violence and unending pettiness. From such a point of view, human pain and evil are not surprising. The silence of God is not surprising. Only one thing is surprising, and it is the next verse of the Genesis text ...

But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. Genesis 6:8

The word “favor” in this context has the meaning of “grace,” undeserved merit. Noah’s deliverance was undeserved. Noah may have been a nice guy, but the Bible reveals him to be a man with serious faults like the rest of us. Nevertheless, Noah received the grace of God by faith.²⁰

This is the one thing that is surprising in the Bible: not the Flood, but the Ark. What is surprising is not divorce, not famine, not child abuse, not terminal cancer. What is surprising is not God’s wrath and anger and judgment, but rather his persistent effort to help us deal with the consequences of our own sin. What is surprising is not the human condition. What is surprising is a *deliverance* from the human condition provided by the very God whom we have offended, a deliverance which the Bible calls “salvation.”

Isn’t it time to see just exactly what this surprising salvation is all about?

The next pamphlet in this series is entitled “Jesus,” and explores why he is our unique link to God.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Romans 2:12-16.
- 2 In fact, the answers are threatening in the extreme, and perhaps I should caution the reader that this current study will only deal with the human condition, not its remedy. For that, please go on to the next booklet, “Jesus”.
- 3 Stylized history is factual, but broad in theme and selective in detail, relating only enough to make its point.
- 4 In this sense, “glorify” means to manifest or make visible. The Creator is not part of the physical creation and hence is literally invisible (cf. John 1:18; 1 Tim 6:15-16).

- 5 Psalm 19:1-4, Romans 1:20.
- 6 Genesis 1:26.
- 7 Genesis 2:8-9.
- 8 Genesis 2:9,15-17.
- 9 Genesis 3:1-7.
- 10 Isaiah 64:6.
- 11 Genesis 3:8-19.
- 12 Romans 8:19-25.
- 13 Genesis 3:22-24.
- 14 Compare the statement of Jesus concerning the true nature of life in John 17:3.
- 15 Jesus' favorite way of characterizing Hell was Gehenna, a hill outside of Jerusalem where ancient Jews sacrificed their children to idols, and later was used to burn refuse.
- 16 Note the repetitive language of Romans 1:18-32. Twice, God is said to have "given us over" to the very sin we have chosen.
- 17 Acts 17:29.
- 18 Adam's choices apparently passed spiritual tendencies on to his children. While Adam was created in God's image, the Bible is careful to state that Adam's children were created in his image (Genesis 5:1-3) after he embraced sin.
- 19 Genesis 6:7.
- 20 Hebrews 11:7.