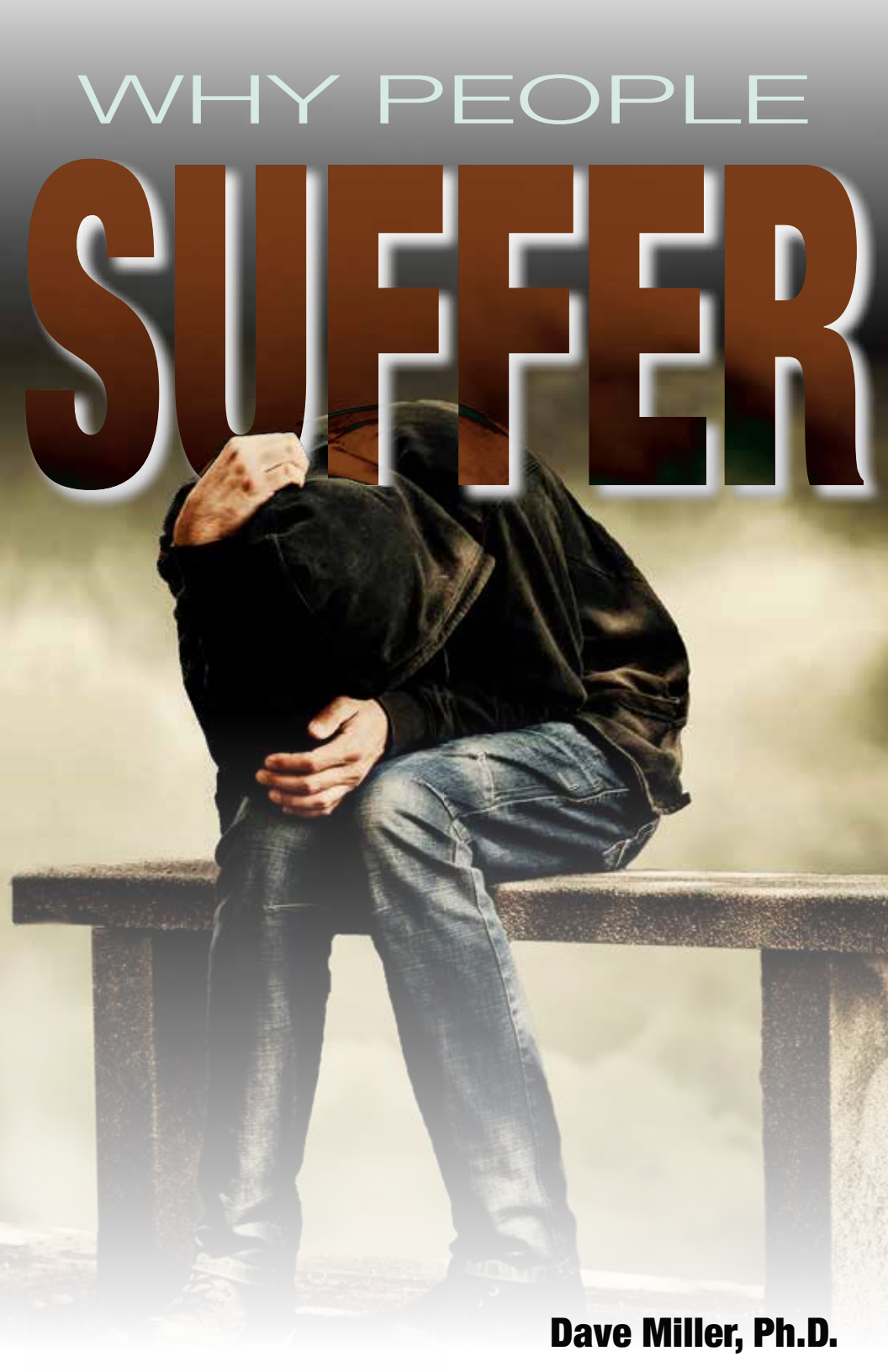
WHY PEOPLE SUFFER



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DEDICATION

To Deb—

whose positive influence on my
life has been inestimable,
profound, and eternal.

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When Calamity Strikes

No doubt about it: the amount of suffering in the world throughout human history has been staggering and unfathomable. Contemplate the following:

Natural Disasters

The natural disasters that have happened in human history are innumerable. Here are a few just from the last five centuries that resulted in catastrophic loss of human life. On January 23, 1556, some 830,000 people died when the Shaanxi earthquake hit China. On April 10, 1815, the volcanic explosion of Mount Tambora in Indonesia killed 92,000. Throughout China's history, extensive flooding has occurred countless times as a result of the mighty 3,000-mile-long Hwang Ho River. Several of the most terrible floods, with their ensuing famines, have been responsible for the deaths of more than a million people at a time. The southern levee of the river failed in Hunan Province in 1887, affecting a 50,000 square mile area. **More than two million people died** from drowning, starvation, or the epidemics that followed ("Huang He...," 2004).

One of the deadliest epidemics in history was the global flu outbreak of 1918 which killed 50 million people worldwide

(Vergano, 2014; Taubenberger and Morens, 2006). In 1931, one to four million people died from flooding in China. Half a million people died when the Bhola cyclone struck East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) on November 13, 1970. Between 650,000 and 779,000 died on July 28, 1976 as a result of the Tangshan earthquake in China. On April 26, 1989, 1,300 were killed when the Daulatpur-Salturia tornado struck Manikganj, Bangladesh. In 1999, over 15,000 died from torrential rains and mudslides in Venezuela. In 2003, 70,000 died from the European heat wave. The Indian Ocean tsunami that devastated Indonesia on December 26, 2004 killed 230,000.

These incidents do not even begin to convey the countless comparable occurrences of nature's destruction in human history. In reality, such events have occurred repetitiously throughout the history of the world, and continue to do so—constantly: hurricanes, cyclones, earthquakes, tornados, floods, tsunamis, droughts, and volcano eruptions. In fact, natural disasters kill **one million people** around the world each decade, and leave millions more homeless, according to the United Nation's International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction ("Disasters...," 1997). Natural disasters have snuffed out the lives of untold millions.

Man's Inhumanity to Man

Humans have unquestionably inflicted more suffering on each other than natural sources have inflicted on man. Indeed, there is no end to the twisted machinations by which humans have imposed misery on each other (cf. "The 15 Most...," n.d.; "Top 10 Most Gruesome...," n.d.). Consider but a tiny fraction from history.

Gladiatorial combat during the Roman Empire (circa 264 B.C. to A.D. 435) resulted in the deaths of some 3.5

million, while according to Josephus (*Wars of the Jews*, vi.ix.3), the Jewish Revolt of 68-73 B.C. ended in 1.2 million Jews killed in Jerusalem by the Romans.

During the Middle Ages, tortures included the "chevalet," in which an accused witch sat on a pointed metal horse with weights strung from her feet. Sexual humiliation torture included forced sitting on red-hot stools. "Gresillons" were designed to crush the tips of fingers and toes in a vice-like device. Excruciating pain was inflicted on victims by the Spanish Boot, used mostly in Germany and Scotland—a steel boot placed over the leg of the accused and tightened until the shin bone shattered. The "echelle" (more commonly known as the "rack") consisted of the accused lying on a long table to be stretched violently. On many occasions, the victim's limbs were pulled from their sockets and even torn from the body entirely.

Sometimes a "tortillon" was used in conjunction with the rack which would severely squeeze and mutilate the genitals at the same time as the stretching. The "lift" also stretched the limbs of the accused, with the victim's feet strapped to the ground and the arms tied behind the back while another rope tied to the hands pulled upwards, causing the arms to break even before the horrific portion of the stretching began. Drawing and quartering (chopped into four pieces), and even flaying alive, were also common in Medieval Europe ("Medieval Torture," n.d.). Muhammad Shah, Sultan of Kulbarga, fought Bukka I, Raya of Vijayanagar in 1366 and massacred 500,000 Hindus.

Zulu punishments in the early 19th century included a particularly barbaric form of impalement, called *ukujoja*, in which the victim was seated atop a sharply pointed stick elevated into the air. The weight of the victim's body would bear down as the stick burrowed its way upward through

body organs until finally reaching the heart and lungs to bring the release of death. Sometimes, a branched stick was used that would split once inserted (Berglund, 1976, p. 195, note 89; Bourquin, 1979; "Impalement," n.d.).

During the 20th century, Stalin's regime in Russia (1924-53) resulted in 20 to 30 million deaths of his own countrymen. In the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong's regime (1949-1975) resulted in 40 million deaths. The Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (1975-1978) killed some 1.6 million people. Tyrants and dictators have extinguished from the Earth literally billions of human beings over the course of history—often in cruel, excruciating ways ("Common Methods...," n.d.).

The total number of casualties in World War I, both military and civilian, was about 37 million: 16 million deaths and 21 million wounded. Over 56 million deaths occurred in World War II (counting both military and civilian deaths). Over half a million died in the American Civil War. Some 1.2 million died in the Korean War. Estimates range from one to three million deaths from the Vietnam War.

More recently, tortures employed by terrorist groups include the forcible extraction of all 10 fingernails, all 10 toenails, and all 32 teeth—before executing the victim by such barbaric techniques as slow decapitation via a butcher knife. The 2001 terrorist attack in New York by Muslim terrorists resulted in commandeered aircraft careening into buildings and killing some 3,000 unsuspecting innocent people. And imagine the unimaginable horror of mafia style thugs inserting a dental fixture into the mouth of their victim, forcing his mouth to remain open, while they release a venomous viper into his mouth which slithers down the esophagus and commences to perforate the

stomach lining with fangs that inject venom, initiating an excruciating death.

Consider the unspeakable suffering inflicted on children by depraved adults. Like the U.K. rock star that admitted to attempting to rape an 11-month-old baby boy and also conspiring to rape a baby girl (Sieczkowski, 2013). Some 45% of rapes reported to the police in South Africa are child rapes, and 50% of South Africa's children will be abused before the age of 18 (Krever, 2014). Consider the man in Louisiana who raped his eight-year-old stepdaughter, inflicting what the court styled "hurt and horror" on his victim (Miller, 2009). Large numbers of innocent children have been tortured, sexually abused, and discarded to endure a lifetime of unresolved torment and anguish (cf. "North American Man/Boy...," 2014). What's more, the lives of over 50 million unborn children have been extinguished (in America alone—400 million in China [Morse, 2013]), without ever seeing the light of day, by the grizzly techniques of abortion doctors (see "Abortion Techniques," 2014).

All such atrocities do not even include the host of circumstances that create untold suffering in the lives of millions: betrayal, divorce, depression, alcoholism, drug addiction, financial disaster (such as the loss of one's job and house), and crime. For youth between the ages of 10 and 24, suicide is the third leading cause of death in the U.S. ("Teen Suicide…," n.d.).

Seemingly Causeless Suffering

And what of the unprovoked and apparently undeserved host of heart-wrenching hardships to which the world of humanity is regularly subjected? Widespread and pervasive illness, sickness, and resulting death occur without any

apparent connection to an individual's own actions. In many cases, we inherit the genetic foibles of our ancestors that make us susceptible to heart disease, cancer, diabetes—and the list goes on and on. The average individual must endure the heart-breaking trauma of the death of loved ones—a spouse, parent, child, or dear friend—who die from unwarranted and undeserved physical ailments. Innocent children are born with debilitating birth defects through no fault of their own.

Think of the people in history who were forced to live in leper colonies—in conditions like those depicted in the movie "Ben Hur"—quarantined from society to live in caves and squalor. What about the countries and societies throughout history whose populations have endured mass starvation from famine and drought?

Human error and freak accidents have claimed many lives. Automobile accidents kill and maim thousands. Many innocent people have died from plane crashes due to mechanical difficulties or pilot error. Many lives have been lost on ships at sea (like the Titantic). Accidental shootings where guns discharge unexpectedly and unintentionally cause death and suffering. Where's the sense in the accidental drowning of children? Every day, about 10 people die from unintentional drowning—two of which are children under age 15. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission says 390 children die annually in pool and spa drownings ("New CPSC Data…," 2012). In fact, drowning ranks fifth among the leading causes of unintentional injury death in the United States ("Unintentional…," n.d.).

Need I go on? The world is literally drenched in heartache, misery, and agony. Life is saturated with horrific suffering. Multiplied billions of people have been the

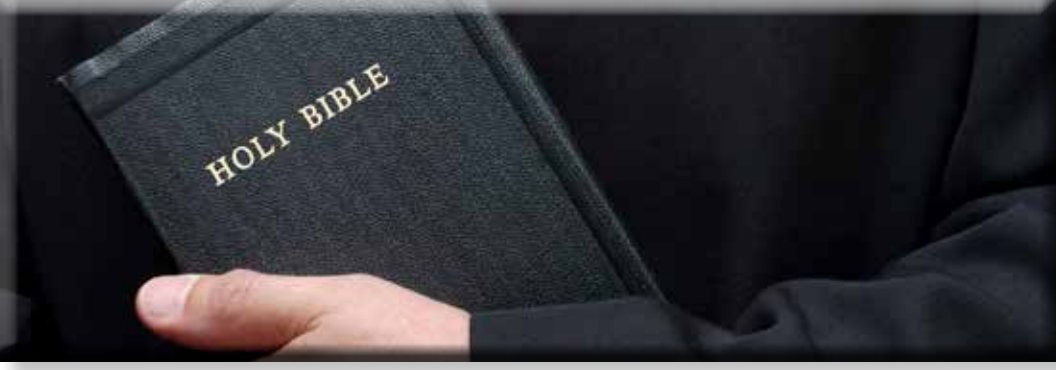
recipients of untold distress and misery throughout the millennia. Why? How can this be? Why do bad things happen to good people? **Where is God? Does He really exist? How can He stand idly by** while the teeming masses of humanity writhe in anguish and affliction? Or for that matter, why would He create a world in the first place—and then introduce humans into an environment where such circumstances prevail? Is He a sadistic monster that created humans so He could satiate a perverted desire to see others squirm in agony? Is atheist Richard Dawkins right when he insisted:

> The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully (2006, p. 31, emp. added).

"Come now, and let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18).

Thinking Points

1) List some of the natural disasters that cause human suffering.
2) List some of the acts committed by humans that cause fellow humans to suffer.
3) List some incidents of seemingly causeless suffering.
4) Make a brief list of incidents of suffering that you have experienced personally or seen experienced by friends or family.



The Beginning Point

No one has **all** the answers regarding the matter of suffering. However, that does not mean that we do not have logical, satisfactory explanations that are wholly sufficient to make sense of suffering. In fact, **only the Christian worldview and the explanations provided by the Bible can enable a person to fit all the puzzle pieces together to make sense of suffering.** Only the Bible provides a cohesive, consistent, sensible, satisfying whole (cf. Butt, 2007).

Unsatisfactory Approaches

If the **atheists** and **evolutionists** are correct, the physical realm, with its human inhabitants, has no purpose but, rather, is a monumental "cosmic accident" (Gould, 1989, p. 44). Hence, suffering is meaningless and serves no ultimate purpose. It is simply a chance phenomenon in a nonsensical Universe. As Cornell University professor and atheist, Will Provine, maintained:

> Let me summarize my views on what modern evolutionary biology tells us loud and clear—and these are basically Darwin's views. **There are no gods, no purposes, and no goal-directed forces of any kind**. There is no life after death. When I die, I am absolutely certain that I am going to be dead. That's the end of me. There is no ultimate foundation for ethics, **no ultimate meaning in life**, and

> no free will for humans, either (Provine and Johnson, 1994, 16[1], emp. added).

Atheists and skeptics maintain that if an infinite Being existed, He would exercise His perfect compassion and His omnipotence to prevent human suffering (e.g., Lowder, 2004; cf. Jackson, 2001). Even for many people who do not embrace formal atheism, the fact that God seems willing to allow misery and suffering to run rampant in the world, elicits a gamut of reactions—from perplexity and puzzlement to anger and resentment.

If the **astrologer**, the **psychic**, and the **fatalist** are correct, suffering is simply "fate." "It's written in the stars." It has all been pre-programmed into the fabric of the Universe. Therefore, the only way to cope is to gain insight into the future by tapping into the psychic forces and cosmic patterns in hopes of anticipating what lies ahead. (Apparently, just knowing what lies ahead is advantageous, though little can be changed.) If the **Buddhist**, **Hindu**, and the **New Ager** are correct, existence is cyclical and suffering is the result of passing repeatedly through multiple lives in an effort to "get it right" (whatever "right" is). Since we have no real recollection of mistakes we've made in past lives, the suffering now experienced is meaningless and ineffectual in helping us to correct our future lives. If **Islam** is correct, pain and suffering are the result of failing to submit to Allah, whose harsh, cruel response is to torment His creatures by sending forth terrorists to coerce humanity to submit or face beheading (*Surah* 47:4; see Miller, 2005, pp. 206-209).

The Approach that Satisfies

But there is a sensible alternative to these unsatisfactory approaches—one that soothes the natural longings of the

human spirit and interfaces with our deepest yearnings: the Christian worldview.

To set the stage for making sense of suffering, consider the following foundational truths that supply a consistent framework—a stable platform—from which one is able to approach life with certainty and confidence in the face of suffering:

1) I can know that the God of the Bible exists.
2) I can know that the Bible is His inerrant, inspired Word (and therefore I can know that it contains sufficient explanations to make sense of suffering).
3) I can know that Jesus is His Son, and therefore, that Christianity is the true religion.

These three "planks" each possess abundant evidence by which they may be substantiated. A consideration of that evidence is beyond the purview of this booklet. [NOTE: For the evidence that God exists, that the Bible is His inspired Word, and that Jesus is the Son of God, visit www.apologeticspress.org for a multitude of books and articles that supply that evidence.] Having established the existence of the God of the Bible, the divine inspiration of the Bible, and Christ's deity, a fourth plank follows that prepares the way for pinpointing specific reasons why suffering occurs.

4) The Bible teaches that our life on Earth is temporary and will end at death. When a person dies, his or her body goes into the grave, while the conscious spirit enters the hadean realm to await the final Judgment (see Luke 16:19-31). At some unknown point in the future, God will call a halt to human existence on Earth (1 Corinthians 15:20-58). The Second Coming of Christ will be accompanied by all spirits coming forth from hades to be resurrected

in immortal bodies (John 5:28-29; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). All will then face God in judgment, receive the pronouncement of eternal sentencing, and then be consigned to heaven or hell for eternity (Matthew 25:31-46; Revelation 20:11-15). That being the case, the doctrine of reincarnation (a person experiencing multiple lives on Earth) is untrue, and every person gets only "one shot" at this life. Life will not be repeated, and every person must live life with a vivid recognition that existence must be taken seriously in view of its inevitable end.

Since the Bible is the inspired Word of God (cf. Butt, 2007), it is the only document on the planet that was superintended by God when it was produced. The Bible, therefore, is the only reliable guide for ascertaining the meaning of life and human existence. Only the Bible can make sense of the circumstances that attend life on Earth. And, indeed, it provides the perfect explanations for the occurrence of suffering. Its handling of the subject is logical, sufficient, and definitive.

With these fundamental concepts in mind, one may turn to the biblical text in order to ferret out the basic purpose and central meaning of human existence as it relates to suffering. If the God of the Bible exists, He is the Creator responsible for the material Universe. So we must first ask: "Why did He create the Universe, specifically the Earth, and then create humans to inhabit the Earth?" We begin by asking the logically prior question: "What is the purpose of the created order?"

Thinking Points

1) Name some worldviews and religions that offer unsatisfactory explanations for suffering in the world.
2) Which worldview offers the only consistent, sensible explanation for suffering?
3) Name three foundational truths that provide the stable platform from which to make sense of suffering.

The Purpose of the Universe: What Life is All About

When God created the Earth, He intended to provide a realm—a suitable environment—in which human beings could live and prepare for eternity. Hence, **the purpose of the created order is to give every person an opportunity to decide where to spend eternity**. In creating this "realm of spirit preparation," God put into play every variable necessary to achieve this purpose. Humans must have access to all the necessary features, constituent elements, and characteristics of an environment that enable them to be truly free to make their own choice with respect to their eternal destiny. Humans must have free will and an environment in which to exercise their volition—their personal decision-making powers.

When God created beings in His own image (Genesis 1:26) as the objects of His infinite love (Psalm 33:5; Numbers 14:18; 1 John 4:7-16), those human beings had to be created with certain attributes that would enable them to decide their own eternal destiny. These essential

attributes of humanness include: (1) free moral agency; (2) immortality and ongoing existence beyond the physical realm; (3) culpability for one's own actions; (4) physical life that is spent in a physical realm as the one and only probationary period; and (5) recognition that a person's eternal fate is determined by his/her response to God in this life (see Warren, 1972, p. 19).

Observe further that these essential attributes of a human being are designed to go hand in hand with the essential characteristics of a spirit-preparing world. In other words, God tailored the Earth to be conducive to the accomplishment of the central purpose of human beings making preparations for eternity. This earthly environment was designed to: (1) supply humans with their basic physical needs; (2) allow free moral agency; (3) allow humans to be challenged; and (4) allow humans to learn the things they most need to learn (see Warren, p. 47), including spiritual development.

The "Vale of Soul-Making"

With these variables in mind, we can make sense of the role of suffering in the world. The world was created by God for the central purpose of serving as—what English poet John Keats (1795-1821) designated—"the vale of soul-making":

> Call the world if you please "The vale of Soul-making." Then you will find out the use of the world…. [H]ow then are Souls to be made?...**How, but by the medium of a world like this?**... Do you not see how necessary a World of **Pains and troubles** is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must **feel and suffer** in a thousand diverse ways! (1895, pp. 326-327, emp. added).

Here is the most fundamental feature of human existence which functions as the context for enacting the prime directive for all of humanity. We humans are on this planet for a singular reason that trumps all other purposes, functions, and intentions of life. We are in the midst of our "probationary period."

The Wisest Man's Assessment

While this concept permeates the Bible, Solomon's treatise, Ecclesiastes, provides a succinct expression of the principle. Solomon was declared to be unsurpassed in wisdom and insight into the meaning of life. Ecclesiastes is somewhat of an autobiography that reflects the details of Solomon's life reported in the early chapters of 1 Kings. Being king and wielding great power and influence, he was in a position to immerse himself in the vicissitudes of life with all the typical endeavors to which humans have devoted themselves throughout time. Consider briefly his earthly pursuits and attainments.

1. He devoted himself to great feats of labor, toil, and hard work. He involved himself in monumental construction projects—including a beautiful palace of cedar (that took 13 years to build) and a magnificent religious temple (1 Kings 6-7). He built an extensive irrigation system to accommodate the gardens, orchards, groves, and vineyards that he developed (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6). He also constructed a fleet of ships (1 Kings 9:26).

2. He sought to acquire knowledge, super intelligence, wisdom and insight, and to educate and enhance his intellect (Ecclesiastes 1:13,16-17; 2:12ff.,21,26; 7:11-12,19,23-25). His intellectual prowess was such that he became an author, poet, composer, and lyricist, generating an unexcelled literary legacy that included authoring thousands of proverbs

and over a thousand musical compositions (complete with singers and musical instruments of all kinds—Ecclesiastes 2:8). His vast research and acquired knowledge qualified him to be a botanist, zoologist, ornithologist, entomologist, and ichthyologist (1 Kings 4:29-34). People from all over the world visited him just to hear his unparalleled wisdom and insight (1 Kings 10:24).

3. He amassed great wealth and possessions. He had countless servants, herds, and flocks. He acquired "silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces" (Ecclesiastes 2:8). In fact, he accumulated **tons upon tons** of gold (1 Kings 9:28; 10:14-15). He regularly received gifts of gold, as well as great quantities of spices and precious stones (1 Kings 10:10,14). The drinking vessels in his palace were gold as well (1 Kings 10:21). His throne was made of ivory, overlaid with pure gold. Two lions stood beside the armrests. Six steps led up to the throne with 12 lions, one on each side of the six steps (1 Kings 10:18-20). Every three years merchant ships arrived bringing more gold, silver, ivory, and exotic animals (vs. 22). The inspired writer gives this summary of King Solomon's wealth: he "surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom" (vs. 23).

4. He wielded great military capability. He owned and operated thousands of horses, chariots, and horsemen (1 Kings 4:26-28). He assembled 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen; he stationed these forces in several storage cities that he built to accommodate the chariots and cavalry (1 Kings 9:17-19; 10:26). He raised a significant labor force using the survivors of conquered countries (1 Kings 9:20-21).

5. He secured significant political power, fame, and honor. He ruled over a considerable geographical area and received

tribute and services from vassal kings (Ecclesiastes 8:4; 1 Kings 4:21-25; 5:1; 10:1).

6. He had unprecedented access to fleshly, sexual pleasure: "the pleasures of men—many concubines" (Ecclesiastes 2:8—NASB; 7:26). It seems inconceivable that one man would have carnal access to literally hundreds of women, but such was the case with Solomon (1 Kings 11:1ff.; cf. Song of Solomon).

7. It seems he also gave attention to assessing and resisting the aging process in order to retain youthfulness (Ecclesiastes 11:9-10; 12:1-6). American culture most certainly identifies with this concern with its emphasis on creams, gels, hair coloring, clothing, health clubs, and surgical procedures to prolong at least the illusion of youthfulness. [NOTE: Physical exercise, in moderation, does yield some healthful benefits (1 Timothy 4:8).]

8. He also gave attention to the pursuit of pleasure and physical stimulation (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11). He sought to stimulate his body and gratify his flesh with alcohol. He focused on mirth, laughter, and entertainment. Indeed, he fully indulged his fleshly appetites, declaring: "Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure" (Ecclesiastes 2:10).

In essence, Solomon claimed: "I've had it all, I've seen it all, I've done it all! I have immersed myself in all the pleasures and pursuits that earthly life has to offer." Yet, he was forced to pronounce all these pursuits as "vanity" and a "chasing after the wind" when they are approached "under the Sun"—by which he meant **apart from God**. While many human endeavors are noble, pure, and worthwhile in themselves, no human endeavor is of any **ultimate** value unless undertaken in view of God and His will for human beings. Hence, Solomon brought his matchless

treatise on the meaning of human existence to a grand conclusion by announcing the central premise of life—the defining principle that gives life meaning and makes existence justifiable: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Here, indeed, is man's *raison d'etre*—reason for existing. Every single feature of life—money and possessions, fame and power, intelligence/wisdom/knowledge, sex, youthfulness, pleasure, toil/work, advancement, etc.—is **meaningless** if not approached in view of God's will and eternity. Life was literally designed by the Creator and intended to be centered on rendering obedience to Him. The only way to make sense of life—with its incessant suffering—is to assimilate this fundamental principle of existence into one's being. Rather than merely living "under the Sun," we must live life "under the Son."

Logically, Suffering Makes Perfect Sense

We humans have been provided with the **ideal** environment in which we may freely accept or reject God's will for our lives. As Christian philosopher Thomas Warren so eloquently explained, the one essential purpose which God had for creating the world was

> the creation of a being (who would have descendants like himself) who would be capable of entering into fellowship with him, who would be capable of becoming a son of God, who (thus) would have to be capable of deciding freely to believe him, to love him with all of his heart, to

> submit to him in obedience, and whom God could love and eventually glorify (1972, p. 44).

God created the ideal environment in which to achieve this purpose. Hence, He allows human beings to be subjected to unpleasant, tragic events—from nature's destructive forces like earthquakes, floods, tornados, and hurricanes to sickness, pain, and death. Why? These are the result of specific conditions that are necessary to God's providing humanity with this ideal environment. And they are "common to man" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

You see, when natural disasters occur, ravaging human life, no one can legitimately point the finger at God and pronounce Him blameworthy for having created such a world. Why? Because He had a morally justifiable reason for having done so. Human existence on Earth was not intended to be permanent. Rather, the Creator intended life on Earth to serve as a **temporary** interval of time for the development of one's spirit. Life on Earth is a probationary period in which people are given the opportunity to attend to their spiritual condition as it relates to God's will for living. Suffering due to natural disasters and the like provide people with conclusive evidence that life on Earth is **brief and uncertain** (see Warren, p. 58; Thompson, 1997). They help us to distinguish the temporary from the permanent. In the face of physical calamities, and the host of other features of the created order that can cause suffering, we humans would do well to contemplate our own fragility and finitude, and be driven to look beyond ourselves, and beyond the here and now, to a higher Power Who can inform us as to the meaning and purpose of life. Life is precarious—tomorrow may be too late.

Christians understand that no matter how catastrophic, tragic, or disastrous an event may be, it fits into the overall

framework of soul-making—preparation for one's departure from life into eternity. Likewise, the Christian knows that although the great pain and suffering one may experience may be unpleasant, and may test one's mettle, nevertheless, such suffering is not intrinsically evil. Nor is it a reflection on the existence of an omnibenevolent God. **The only intrinsic evil is violation of God's will.** What is required of all accountable persons is obedience to God's revealed Word (given in the Bible)—even amid pain, suffering, sickness, disease, death, and natural disasters.

Thinking Points

1) Why did God create the material realm?
2) Name some or all of the attributes of humanness.
3) Name some or all of the facets of our earthly environment that make it conducive to achieving the central purpose of human existence.
4) What expression, coined by poet John Keats, describes the purpose of the world?
5) We humans are in the midst of what period or phase of our existence?
6) What Bible character provides a splendid example of what it means to experience all this world has to offer?
7) List some of the features of his life that demonstrate the extent to which he immersed himself in earthly pursuits.
8) What conclusion did he reach from all these pursuits?
9) Where is the verse found that expresses this conclusion?
10) Why did God create earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, as well as sickness and pain?
11) Why is God not blameworthy for having created a world in which pain and suffering occur?
12) Identify two specific values of natural disasters.
13) Discuss whether natural disasters and physical suffering are "intrinsically evil."

The Decisions We Make—and Their Consequences

Once we understand the foundational meaning and purpose of life on Earth, we have the necessary vantage point from which to identify within this divinely orchestrated environment several specific sub-causes of suffering that are subsumed under the broader, "umbrella" purpose of "soul making." Among these, perhaps **the #1 cause of human suffering is sin**. This term is used in many different senses in current culture, but the Bible gives a very narrow, precise definition: violation of God's law (1 John 3:4). Nothing else is sin. For mankind, sin occurs only in terms of human action in relation to the will of God. Only the Bible can inform humans as to what sin is. [NOTE: The New Testament is the portion of the Bible that is specifically applicable to human behavior today. However, though originally addressed to the Israelites, much may certainly be learned from the Old Testament (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13); see Warren, 1974, pp. 41-43].

For example, burning the toast is not sin, but **lying** about it is (Colossians 3:9). Though not intended to be exhaustive, here is a listing of sins taken from the New Testament that aid in conceptualizing sin properly (Romans 1:29-31; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 4:31; Colossians 3:5-8; Revelation 21:8):

Listing of Sins in the New Testament		
sexual immorality	wickedness	covetousness
maliciousness	envy	murder
strife	deceit	gossip
backbiting	hating God	violence
pride	boasting	inventing evil things
disobedient to parents	untrustworthy	unloving
unforgiving	unmerciful	idolatry
adultery	homosexuality	sodomy
thievery	drunkenness	extortion
lewdness	sorcery	hatred
contention	jealousy	outbursts of wrath
selfish ambitions	dissensions	revelries
bitterness	rage	anger
brawling	malice	uncleanness
evil desire	blasphemy	filthy language
cowardice	unbelief	lying

[NOTE: One must examine Scripture and consult Greek authorities to arrive at accurate definitions of these terms.]

A great deal of suffering, misery, heartache, pain, and unpleasantness is generated by human sin. In fact, like the first human pair (Genesis 3), we bring much, perhaps most, of our suffering on ourselves. Sin is the direct result of free moral agents making choices that violate God's will (Romans 5:12; 1 John 3:4). Sin brought death into the world (Genesis 2:17; 3:16-19; Romans 8:18-23; 1 Corinthians 15:26). Prisons are full of individuals who are there due to their own decisions and their own actions. Likewise, much physical illness and disease is the result of humans making unwise, even detrimental, decisions regarding the use of our bodies (e.g., drugs, alcohol, tobacco, illicit sex, etc.).

Our Own Sin

Suffering from sin comes through two sources. First, we can suffer due to our own sin. When Peter wrote, "But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters…" (1 Peter 4:15), he acknowledged that many people, in fact, bring suffering and hardship upon themselves because they murder, steal, commit evil, and interfere in the lives of others. The police may very well shoot and kill or painfully wound a fleeing felon—instant suffering for sin. A person may smoke crack cocaine, receiving instant physical pleasure, but eventually resulting in horrible physical effects and even death. We can "sow the wind, and reap the whirlwind" (Hosea 8:7). We can choose to "sow to the flesh" and thus "reap corruption" (Galatians 6:8). No doubt about it: much suffering in human history has been self-inflicted.

The Sin of Others

The other source of suffering from sin is that which comes due to the sin of others. The drunk driver that

careens into a car occupied by a family of Dad, Mom, and their two small children, killing some of the occupants and maiming the others, not only suffers from his own sin; he also causes the innocent to suffer due to **his** sin. Indeed, the consequences of a person's own sins can wreak havoc on succeeding generations (Exodus 20:5). God explained to the first generation of Israelites out of Egypt that because of their sin—their unwillingness to trust and obey God by entering the Promised Land—they would have to meander aimlessly in the desert for 40 years. As a result, their children would have to "bear the brunt of your infidelity" (Numbers 14:33). The kids had to suffer for the sins of the parents. So it continues. Think of the drunken fathers across our land and the world who cause their battered wives and children to suffer.

Sin is far-reaching and extremely pervasive. Consider the decisions made by Arabian slave traders centuries ago to engage in what the Bible calls "manstealing" (1 Timothy 1:10—KJV), or kidnapping, by capturing individuals in Africa, crowding them into ships, and transporting them to America to be sold as slaves. Those decisions were made by people who you and I do not personally know. We had nothing to do with their decisions or their actions. Yet, those decisions, that inflicted immediate suffering on their victims, eventually led to civil war and thousands of additional deaths, and many years after the fact Americans are still suffering the consequences of those decisions. You and I can suffer for the sins of those who literally lived centuries before us. Such is the destructive, devastating, deadly effect of human sin.

Not Fair!

How are such circumstances fair? They are not. However, they do not reflect negatively on the justice of God or make Him blameworthy. In order to create the suitable environment for soul-making, free moral agency is inherently mandatory. And when humans are free to make their own decisions, they may well make **wrong** decisions. Blame, therefore, rests with the perpetrator—in the above instances, the drunk and the slave trader. Why blame God because persons, of their own free will, chose to drink alcohol and drive, or enslave their fellowman?

The very purpose of the created order would be thwarted if God intervened miraculously to prevent consequences every time humans chose to do wrong. God has literally done everything possible to discourage people from making wrong choices—short of interfering with their free will. He has provided evidence of Himself in nature (Psalm 19:1ff.; Romans 1:20). He has provided written communication, (the Bible) that is self-evidently inspired, to define sin and inform people regarding the need to refrain from sinning. Given the nature of man (a thinking being with volition) and the nature of God (a perfect, infinite Being), this world must of necessity include the possibility that people will choose to sin and, in so doing, hurt themselves and others.

To suggest that this vale of soul-making could have been adjusted by God to eliminate pain and suffering while still allowing humans free choice is to suggest the possibility of a round square or a 90-year-old teenager. The very idea is nonsensical and self-contradictory. The atheist or agnostic who insists that God does not exist because of suffering in the world—for if He existed, He would have arranged for pain and suffering not to occur—has taken a

nonsensical and self-contradictory viewpoint. As Warren cogently explained:

> God is infinite in power, but power meaningfully relates only to what *can* be done, to what is *possible* of accomplishment—*not* to what is *impossible*! It is absurd to speak of any power (even infinite power) being able (having the power) to do what simply *cannot* be done…. Rather than saying that God *cannot* do such (with the implication that he is *deficient* in *power*, so that if only he had *more* power he *could* do it), one should say that such simply *cannot be done*—that such is *not subject to power*, not even to *infinite* power! (p. 28, italics in orig.).

While God allows humans to exercise their own free will and commit sin, He is grieved by such choices. He desires that all people be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). He "is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God asked this rhetorical question in the hearing of Ezekiel: "Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die…and not that he should turn from his ways and live?" (Ezekiel 18:23). So we cannot indict God. We must admit: much of the pain, hardship, and suffering that we experience and see around us is the result of human sin.

We're Being Persecuted

Some suffering is due to righteous living that evokes hatred and opposition from those who have chosen to live in sin. Why did Cain kill Abel—when Abel had done nothing personally to Cain? Answer:

> And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth

> comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God (John 3:19-21).

Cain had ample opportunity to get his attitude straight and bring his actions into harmony with God's directives. God even gave him a pep talk: "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it" (Genesis 4:6-7). So why would Cain reject God's words and kill his brother? He despised the light and did not want the light of his brother's obedience to expose his own disobedience. As John further noted: "not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? **Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous**" (1 John 3:12, emp. added).

Much suffering has been levied in human history by the unrighteous against the righteous (cf. Hebrews 11:24). Nero lined the roads leading to Rome with crucified Christians and even provided nighttime illumination by setting them on fire (Tacitus, *Annals*, XV.44). Christians are neither surprised nor bewildered by such treatment. Jesus, in fact, warned the faithful to expect it:

> If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also (John 15:18-20).
>
> They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service…. These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have

> tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world (John 16:2,33).

Peter even stated that Christians ought to expect and anticipate hardship and suffering, and not be bewildered by it when it arrives—

> Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, **as though some strange thing happened to you**; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified (1 Peter 4:12-14).

The three Hebrew youths, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, were ordered to worship the idolatrous image King Nebuchadnezzar had erected or be burned alive in a furnace of fire. When they refused, they were brought before the king to offer an explanation. What they said on that occasion ought to be the attitude of every faithful follower of the God of heaven in the face of persecution:

> O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up (Daniel 3:16-18).

These three men were sufficiently convicted of the reality of God that they recognized that it might not be His will to intervene and deliver them from the persecution of the king. They might have to die. Nevertheless, they still refused to deny spiritual reality and behave as if God does not exist. Their suffering was an insufficient pretext for denying God.

We ought to be like the farmer's mule that fell into a pit. The farmer did not have the physical means to extract the mule, which would surely die a slow, agonizing death. So the farmer commenced to bury the mule by shoveling dirt into the pit. However, the stubborn mule refused to be buried. He shook each shovel full of dirt from his back and packed the dirt beneath him by stomping it with his hooves. Eventually, sufficient dirt accumulated under the mule's hooves that he was able to simply step out of the pit. The mule refused to give up and be buried. We ought to have the same determination as we face the hardships of life. Shake 'em off!

Thinking Points

1) What is the #1 sub-cause of human suffering?
2) Define sin and give a Bible verse.
3) Name 5 sins that can and often do cause suffering.
4) Name 2 sources of sin.
5) Why must God allow sin and the suffering it produces?
6) Give an example of the self-contradictory view of those who say God should allow free moral agency—but also prevent sin and suffering.

Self-Improvement: I Can Be a Better Person!

But there are other sub-causes of suffering. Consider the old blacksmith who was a collector of iron. On a typical day, he would select a piece suitable to his purpose and begin his work by holding the metal among flames until it turned white from the intense heat. Placing it in this super-heated condition on an anvil, he would strike the piece of iron with his hammer. This initial treatment of the iron was a test—a test to see if the metal would "take temper" and thus be capable of being fashioned into a useful object. If the initial test was unsuccessful, the hunk of worthless metal would be tossed onto the scrap heap. If the initial test was successful, the piece of iron would next be plunged into water, and then once again subjected to the flames. Now the smithy could begin his work, repeating the cycle over and over again—heating, striking, and cooling. With time, patience, and hard work, the formless hunk of metal gradually emerges from the arduous, seemingly endless process as a meaningful, valuable article for use.

Isn't life like that? It's painful, prolonged, and painstaking. Life can feel hot, life can feel cold, and life can feel like

we are being beaten down. But those very aspects of life can result in value, meaning, and capability that cannot be secured in any other way. The hardships of life can **improve and perfect us—preparing us for eternity**—if we will allow them to. We ought to beg God to enable us to take temper, endure the difficult process of molding and shaping, and not to throw us on the scrap heap as useless and incorrigible.

Furnace of Affliction

A common metaphor used in the Bible to describe life's adversities is that of the smelting process of "extractive metallurgy." When raw ore is mined from the ground, it must be refined and the impurities removed. Historically, the process by which this objective is achieved entails tremendous heat, although now chemical reducing agents are also used to decompose the ore, separating it from the silver, iron, copper, and other base metals. Reducing the ore to a liquid state in a furnace of fire allows the pure metal to separate from the dross or impurities.

God frequently alluded to the necessity of subjecting the ancient nation of Israel to this process, figuratively speaking. They had a history of defiance and rebellious rejection of God's will for them. Israelite prophets forewarned their people of the impending disaster, insisting that the coming captivity was deserved. The foreign aggressor would be God's rod of chastisement. But this calamity would also serve a useful purpose, figuratively represented by the smelting process.

Referring to the wickedness of Judah and the capital city of Jerusalem, Isaiah conveyed God's intentions: "Therefore the Lord says…I will turn My hand against you, and thoroughly purge away your dross, and take away all your

alloy" (Isaiah 1:24-25). "Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction" (Isaiah 48:10; cf. Jeremiah 9:7). Zechariah announced: "I will bring the one-third through the fire, will refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested" (13:9). Malachi asked:

> But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness (Malachi 3:2-3).

The psalmist summarized the principle by describing the process from beginning to end:

> Oh, bless our God, you peoples! And make the voice of His praise to be heard, Who keeps our soul among the living, and does not allow our feet to be moved. For You, O God, have tested us; **You have refined us as silver is refined**. You brought us into the net; You laid affliction on our backs. You have caused men to ride over our heads; We went through fire and through water; **but You brought us out to rich fulfillment** (Psalm 66:8-12, emp. added).

The references to "the net," "affliction on our backs," men riding "over our heads," and going through "fire and water" are likely figurative allusions to the very real threat of Assyrian conquest during the days of Hezekiah, which placed the nation in extreme danger and duress (2 Kings 18-19). All these references liken life's difficulties and hardship to a furnace in which the recipients are subjected to intense heat. Pain? Yes. Torment? Yes. Anguish? Yes. But surviving and coming through the adversity results in renewal, reassurance, and fortitude for the future. Our spiritual defects are purged that we may be made fit for life and divine service.

The Great Physician

Another metaphor for suffering is taken from the field of medicine. Though Job's friends fell short of their friendship responsibilities, they sometimes stumbled upon valuable nuggets of truth. Eliphaz was correct when he insisted that God can use adversity the same way a surgeon uses a scalpel: "Behold, happy is the man whom God corrects; therefore do not despise the chastening of the Almighty. For **He bruises, but He binds up; He wounds, but His hands make whole**" (Job 5:17-18, emp. added). When you think about it, what surgeons do is rather violent and seemingly barbaric—cutting the human body open, pounding, sawing, scraping—inflicting orchestrated, organized trauma upon a human being. The cardiologist that slices the chest and pries back the rib cage of the heart patient is inflicting considerable shock and distress that, without anesthesia, would be unbearable. Yet his actions are wholly calculated to save life and make well. Can we not see God in the same light?

Many Bible passages reinforce this reality. Paul, who endured many difficulties in life, was able to "glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts" (Romans 5:3-5). James said something very similar: "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (1:2-4). So hardships and suffering in life literally alter us in good ways! We become more patient, more able to endure, more able to cope. Our character is shaped and improved. We grow stronger and mature—so

much so that Paul actually gloried in tribulations, and James said we could consider suffering a joyous event. And this ongoing process is monitored and sustained by "the love of God poured out in our hearts."

The Great Parent

Yet another metaphor comes from the family. Parental discipline operates on this same principle. If parents are fulfilling their role properly, they dispense two forms of discipline regularly to their children, delineated by Solomon: "The **rod and rebuke** give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (Proverbs 29:15, emp. added). Verbal admonition and instruction as well as corporal punishment are both indispensable to a well-rounded upbringing (Proverbs 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15,17). Likewise our cosmic parent—the "father of our spirits" (Hebrews 12:9)—is deeply interested in bringing us to spiritual adulthood. Again, as Solomon encouraged: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor detest His correction; for whom the LORD loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights" (Proverbs 3:11-12).

Expounding on this very passage, the author of Hebrews explained:

> If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but **He for our profit**, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for

> the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (12:7-11, emp. added).

Sound reasoning! The person who whines or complains about chastening in life is like the prideful, resentful child that resists and rejects parental love and training. If we will submit ourselves to be trained by it, the unpleasant, even painful, suffering of life engenders "the peaceable fruit of righteousness." This fact highlights again the purpose of the created order being a vale of soul-making. The ranting atheist who rails against God is the picture of childish arrogance and stubborn pride—the opposite of thoughtful humility. God can speak through the suffering that people receive—but will they listen? Are they looking in the right places for answers? Or, sadly, do they "refuse to retain God in their knowledge" (Romans 1:28)?

The fact is that God **wants** us to survive life's hardships: "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, **that you may be able to bear it**" (1 Corinthians 10:13, emp. added). He does not test us in order to cause us to fall (James 1:13). That is Satan's desire and intention—not God's (Matthew 4:1-11). The words translated "temptation" and "tempt" in these verses mean to "put to the proof" and "to test." They do not carry any idea of trying to trip someone up or cause them to fall. A person may well fail a test—but neither the test nor the one who presents the test is blameworthy.

I Choose Pain?

But the fact is that we humans do not see **any** form of pain or suffering as desirable. As American civilization

deteriorates morally and spiritually, the population has cultivated a voracious appetite for entertainment, amusement, pleasure, and physical stimulation. Hence, an avoidance syndrome characterizes many people in which they fill their lives with "fun and games" in order to distance themselves from anything that is deemed difficult, harsh, arduous, or unpleasant. Drugs and alcohol often become the "buffer" that many choose to shield themselves from psychological, emotional, and even physical suffering. But this evasion is destructive.

If given the choice to go to a funeral or to go to a party or ballgame, who would choose the funeral? Yet, wise Solomon set the record straight when he asserted:

> Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for **that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart**. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance **the heart is made better**. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth (Ecclesiastes 7:2-4).

Who can believe it? The Puritans were correct in discouraging too much leisure time (Miller, 1939). These three verses express profound truth and meaning regarding life. Mourning and sorrow—more specifically, the circumstances and occurrences that cause mourning and sorrow—are of tremendous value in living life in preparation for the end of life on Earth. Yet these are the very things that so many people use as their justification for dismissing God and rejecting Bible religion!

Paul articulated the same concept in a discussion of his own hardships and sufferings: "Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2

Corinthians 12:9-10). Strength, i.e., moral and spiritual courage so necessary to living life peacefully, with confidence and contentment, comes through physical weakness and trauma? Absolutely. Paul insisted: "**then** I am strong." Indeed. You don't get diamonds without tremendous pressure. We are strongest and most valuable to God when we are subjected to hardship that brings us to our knees before the Supreme Ruler of the Universe—when we are "weak" from a human perspective.

Credit: Wisconsin Historical Society, Image ID 39917

White streaks in the desert

Proving Grounds

As a child, during the summer months, I would accompany my father on his Borden milk route which took us west from Phoenix, Arizona to rural grocery stores and restaurants in need of dairy products. On one occasion, I observed that the purple mountains in the distance had what appeared to be white streaks or gashes on them. My father informed me that the land was part of International Harvester's 4,000 acre Phoenix Proving Grounds to test

their trucks and earth-moving equipment built by the Harvester's industrial power division (operational from 1947 to 1983). The massive earthmovers would gouge the earth, turning over the soil to expose the limestone rocks and dirt beneath—hence, the white streaks.

Credit: Wisconsin Historical Society, Image ID 39935

TD-24 Crawler Tractor at International Harvester's Phoenix Proving Ground

Why would Harvester go to the trouble and expense of purchasing thousands of acres of land in a hot, rugged desert to create a "proving grounds"? Well, it's one thing to conceive of and build a truck or tractor; it's quite another to build one that is top quality and durable. Harvester sought to test their trucks and construction equipment under harsh desert conditions, putting their vehicles through torturous, rugged, merciless contact with rocks, boulders, cacti, and dry, hard ground. If their earthmovers could withstand that kind of torture, they would prove themselves as worthy to be sold to customers who would return again and again to purchase such quality, long-lasting, well-tested products. Indeed, the worth of the vehicles was evaluated by just how well they withstood the jarring, jagged, rock-strewn, abusive terrain to which they were subjected.

That's a portrait of human life! That's what you and I are enduring right now! This life is **our** proving grounds. We are being tested, tried, and proved. We are undergoing harsh, rugged conditions—the hard knocks, jagged rocks, and searing heat of life's trials and obstacles. We must face

many hindrances and impediments, a host of stumbling blocks and barriers, and a multitude of snags and straits.

Credit: Wisconsin Historical Society, Image ID 39941

International Harvester 27-75 earthmover being demonstrated in front of a grandstand at International Harvester's Phoenix Proving Ground in 1953

Consider for a moment what Paul faced as an apostle of Christ:

> Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

Have you and I experienced such hardship? Will we ever? Yet observe Paul's attitude about it all: "We are hard pressed on every side, **yet not crushed**; we are perplexed, **but not in despair**; persecuted, **but not forsaken**; struck down, **but not destroyed**" (2 Corinthians 4:8-9, emp. added). Yes, some seem to be beset with more tribulations. We cannot know all the "whys and wherefores" in such cases. But we can know that **everyone** faces hardship and suffering. It is part of life, part of being human. And the point is that we can make it! We can allow life's adversities to propel us to our intended destiny. And be reminded of Paul's earlier observation: "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is **common to man**; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able." You and I will not go through any adversity that others have not already gone through. Adversity is "common to man"—everyone faces it and people have been facing it for the entirety of human history. But God is trustworthy; we can count on Him to see us through the testing. "For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, **He is able to aid those who are tempted**" (Hebrews 2:18, emp. added).

Farmers Get It!

Farmers understand these principles. They literally live their lives in limbo. For most of American history, the average citizen lived on the farm. Hence, the average American understood firsthand the principle of endurance in the face of hardship. The farmer must sweat, toil, and work hard. But he has no guarantee that the fruit of his labors will be forthcoming. Many variables potentially threaten the outcome (weather, pestilence, etc.). For months, the farmer (and his family) must hope and pray that their arduous efforts will be rewarded. Their uncertainty and

anxious anticipation are forms of suffering. No wonder James used the farmer's plight as an appropriate example of what life entails:

> Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand (James 5:7-8).

So as we go through life, being tossed about by the unpleasant circumstances that come our way, we must ever be reminded that this is our proving grounds. We are being shaped for eternity. The old adage, "Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people" is accurate. We are being prepared—if we will yield ourselves to the disciplinary processes that facilitate that preparation.

Thinking Points

1) How is suffering in life like a blacksmith's job?
2) To what did the prophets often compare God's handling of Israel?
3) How is suffering comparable to the work of a surgeon?
4) According to Solomon, what 2 forms of discipline are necessary to rear children?
5) What does the Hebrews writer say will be the result if we will submit to God's discipline?
6) When we are suffering from being tested, why does God provide a way of escape?
7) According to Solomon, which is better for us—the party/banquet or the funeral?
8) What 2 benefits does Solomon say are to be gleaned from mourning?
9) Discuss the comparison between human suffering and the International Harvester Proving Grounds.
10) What does James say the farmer must do when agonizing over the outcome of his labors?

Satan is the Archenemy of God and Man

While we are convinced that the age of miracles is over, (see my discussion of the cessation of the supernatural in Miller, 2003), nevertheless, God continues to be very active in the world via non-miraculous, providential dealings. Similarly, so is Satan. The Bible repeatedly affirms and warns that Satan is the great adversary and deceiver who is constantly conniving to ensnare the righteous.

Hence, he can use hardship and suffering as a tool to discourage a person and cause that person to blame God and abandon God's will. The presence of Satan is yet another sub-cause of suffering in the world.

Consider a number of Bible passages that pinpoint this feature of Satan's activity on Earth. Paul instructed Timothy that, in his ministerial activities, it will be necessary for him humbly to correct "those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and **escape the snare of the devil**, having been taken captive by him to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:25-26, emp. added). Satan sets snares for us! Like the trapper

that places a trap to catch a bear, so Satan seeks to take us captive by redirecting our service from God to his own evil machinations. Every time a Christian departs from the way of life, gives in to worldliness, and abandons the church, that person (though not conscious of the fact) has been taken captive by Satan to do his bidding. And he does so of his own free will and cannot bemoan, "The devil made me do it."

What Paul called a "snare" in his communication to Timothy, he labeled "wiles" and "fiery darts" in his letter to the Ephesians. Read this passage carefully:

> Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against **the wiles of the devil**. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all **the fiery darts of the wicked one** (Ephesians 6:11-16, emp. added).

So when you or I experience some catastrophic setback, heartache, or physical hardship that momentarily stuns us and causes us to question God and our decision to be a Christian, we may well simply be the recipient of a clever scheme or ploy floated by Satan himself!

Old cowboy shows frequently depicted the settlers "circling the wagons" when under attack by Indians. One of the tactics employed by the attackers was shooting flaming arrows at the settlers' wagons, setting them on fire, and burning the cover provided by the wagon and its cloth covering. Have you considered the fact that when you face some hardship, it may well be nothing more than Satan shooting a flaming arrow at you? If that be the case, how will you react? Surrender? Give up? Walk away from the wagon train of fellow settlers who are on their way to the Promised Land of heaven? Ask yourself this critical question: will you give Satan the satisfaction of winning?

In addition to a "snare," "wiles," and "fiery darts," Paul noted Satan's "devices" in his letter to the Corinthian Christians. He urged them to forgive the wayward brother and reaffirm love to him when he has repented. Failure to do so would be unChristlike and it would open them up to a possible danger: "lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of **his devices**" (2 Corinthians 2:11, emp. added). Observe that Satan has "devices," or schemes, tricks, and ploys that he uses to try to take advantage of us, fool us, and capture us. No wonder Peter offered this pressing warning: "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8, NASB).

It is interesting, even ironic, that the Holy Spirit chose Peter to record this admonition. It was he who allowed himself to give into fear and succumb to the satanic temptation to betray Jesus. And what about that occasion when he conversed with Jesus about His impending passion?

> From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and

> be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" But He turned and said to Peter, "**Get behind Me, Satan!** You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:21-23, emp. added).

Jesus referred to Peter as Satan? At first glance, such a remark seems callous and unbecoming the Son of God. But on further reflection, Jesus was providing Peter with tremendous encouragement to get his thinking straight and thus to prepare himself for Satan's assault—rather than aiding and abetting Satan. When you or I encounter adversity in our lives, we are apt to "knee jerk" and react incorrectly, even destructively. No doubt Peter was merely concerned about his Lord and desired His protection. He did not want Jesus hurt by those who desired to do Him physical harm. Hence, Peter was reacting out of fear and his own premature assessment of the situation. He was being led by his flesh rather than subduing his flesh with spiritual thinking. He was responding to life's potentialities the way we typically do every day—from our own narrow perspective.

We are rather proud of our personal opinions and our own impressions of circumstances around us. But we need a healthy dose of James 1:19—"So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, **slow to speak**, slow to wrath." We need to proceed cautiously and make certain that we are not allowing life's threatening appearances to misassess what is happening. We must analyze life's difficulties through **spiritual** lenses, not fleshly ones. We must learn to think **spiritually**. Doing so will help us to subdue the psychological and emotional fallout of suffering, and to contextualize that suffering in a proper

perspective. And it will aid us in avoiding becoming an "offense"—a stumbling block—to ourselves and others.

Our Nemesis

In writing to the Christians at Corinth, Paul described the impact of some unidentified physical ailment from which he suffered:

> And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, **a messenger of Satan** to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9, emp. added).

Observe carefully: Since Paul was blessed with the exalted role of being an inspired apostle of Christ, receiving direct revelations from God, it would have been easy for him to become prideful. Hence, God allowed Satan to afflict Paul (just as Satan had afflicted Job; see pp. 67ff.). Whatever this "thorn in the flesh" may have been, it was of sufficient pain and torment that Paul repeatedly pleaded with God to remove it from his life. But God allowed it to remain because of the spiritual benefit Paul received as a result. Are we willing to endure suffering in order to receive spiritual improvement? What a tragedy it would have been if Paul had renounced God due to this "messenger of Satan."

Please remember that all these depictions of Satan's interactions in human affairs are neither mystical nor supernatural. He operates through the ordinary circumstances of life. When a specific calamity comes our way, we will not be able to determine whether the occasion was generated by Satan, or if the occurrence is due to another explanation. Even Job did not know that Satan was the

source of his suffering. **We** are given that insight, but so far as we know from the text, he was never informed that Satan was the ultimate instigator of his sufferings. God did not see fit to divulge the fact to him. Indeed, He did not need to do so—even as He need not step in and inform us. We simply need to be aware that the Bible teaches that Satan is **one** possible explanation for our sufferings—and then react accordingly.

We're Being Sifted

Sifting the chaff

Throughout Bible times, farmers grew wild cereal grains (such as rice, barley, oats, and wheat) in which the ripe seed is tightly enclosed by thin, dry, scaly "bracts" forming a dry husk (or hull) around the grain. Before the grain can be used, these seed casings must be removed, first through the process of threshing—which loosens and removes from the grain the casing, known at this point as chaff. This removal phase was traditionally achieved through pounding or milling the seed. Next, the loose chaff would have to be separated from the grain by means of winnowing. This phase was accomplished by tossing the grain upward into a light wind which would allow the heavier grain to fall back to the ground (usually into a wide collection basket) while blowing aside the lighter chaff which, in turn, was treated as a waste product by being ploughed into the soil or burned. The grain could be further purified by "sifting" through a sieve.

Rice winnowing in Bali, Indonesia

This interesting agricultural process is used in Scripture metaphorically to refer to the elimination of wickedness from the Earth and from one's own life. John the Baptizer warned that Jesus would soon arrive on the scene, and that "His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12). He would eliminate the wicked in eternity. The psalmist stated that the wicked "are like chaff that the wind blows away" (1:4). Those striving to live righteously must be ever vigilant to remove the chaff from their lives, even viewing suffering as a means to do so. Jesus forewarned Peter: "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat" (Luke 22:31). Satan apparently made the same request to God regarding Peter that he made concerning Job. He wanted to be allowed to test Peter to see whether he could handle the test. Sadly, he did not. Although, upon realization of his failure, he "got his act together" and became a great apostle in the church of Christ. We, too, can overcome life's bitter challenges, even when we stumble on occasion, rising to reaffirm our commitment to remaining faithful to God even in the face of suffering and tribulation.

Summary

It's a fact. Some of the suffering that comes our way in this life is generated by Satan, who seeks to deter us from

serving God. He seeks to "hinder us" (1 Thessalonians 2:18). He is waging war against "those who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 12:17). We ought to be emboldened on the occasion of tragedy to look Satan in the face (so to speak) and boldly respond: "It will take a lot more for me to turn on God!" Sadly, when Christians who are traumatized by some catastrophic event in their life "throw in the towel," leave the church, and abandon their religious convictions, they are accommodating Satan! They are doing precisely what he sought to get them to do. The next time you face adversity, be sure to ask yourself: Will I give Satan the satisfaction of knowing he's whipped me into submission and that he can now count me in his camp?

Thinking Points

1) Name 2 terms that Paul uses to identify the tools Satan uses to discourage us and create hardship and suffering in our lives.
2) Why did Jesus refer to Peter as "Satan"?
3) To whom did Paul attribute his thorn in the flesh?
4) When Satan sought to subvert Peter, how did Jesus describe Peter's plight?

Vindication of God

Another fundamental explanation the Bible gives for the existence of suffering, especially among Christians, is amply illustrated in the book of Job. You remember the occasion when Satan was allowed to present himself before God, and God asked him if he had noticed the righteous, spiritual condition of Job. Satan's response was to insist that Job's righteousness was due to God's having blessed Job abundantly and protected Job from harm, and that if God were to recall those blessings, stripping Job of his prosperity and well-being, Job would "surely curse" God. Consequently, God gave Satan limited permission to have power over Job's circumstances—without harming his person (1:6-12). Satan left the presence of God, returned to Earth, and commenced to wreak havoc in Job's life—to no avail. A second challenge of God by Satan resulted in God allowing Satan to physically harm Job's person without taking his life.

Consider carefully what was going on in these encounters. Satan was claiming that humans choose to obey God purely out of self-interest—what they get out of it. God, on the other hand, contended that Job was following God out of disinterested love of deity. Ostensibly, God's view was that even if Job was stripped of his material prosperity, his relatives, his friends, and even his health, he would still

worship and serve God, retaining his spiritual integrity. Why? Because God is worthy of worship apart from the blessings and benefits He bestows on His creatures!

That's not to deny that many people are religious because of some selfishly perceived benefit, whether physical, emotional, or psychological. Being a Christian and going to church may give one person a fertile field for business or sales prospects. It might give another the satisfaction that he/she is following in the footsteps of ancestors. It might provide a setting in which to enjoy social relations. More than one young man has admitted: "It's a great place to meet good Christian girls and find a mate." Humans are infected with a variety of motives and hidden angles in many phases of life—including religion. However, it does not follow that **every** person who is religious does so out of purely selfish motives. God noted that Job maintained his integrity, and that he remained a follower of God, even though he experienced tremendous heartache, exceptional physical catastrophe, and a diseased body.

So you see, God is worthy of our worship and devotion whether or not we receive any particular benefit. God is God! He is the great I AM! He is "worthy…to receive glory and honor and power" (Revelation 4:11) because He is the infinite, eternal Creator! He is the **only** worthy object of worship (Deuteronomy 6:13; Matthew 4:10). **All** human beings should "serve the LORD with gladness; come before His presence with singing. Know that the LORD, He is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves" (Psalm 100:2-3).

> For the LORD is the great God, and the great King above all gods. In His hand are the deep places of the earth; the heights of the hills are His also. The sea is His, for He made it; and His hands formed the dry land. Oh come, let

> us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. For He is our God (Psalm 95:3-7).

"For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe" (Deuteronomy 10:17). He is the majestic Ruler of the Universe who defies human comprehension. When we bump up against bad things in life, instead of pining, "Why? Why **me**?," in light of the infinitude and the magnitude of God, we ought to take a step back, bow our heads, and say, "Why **not**? Why **not** me? Do I really deserve anything less?" When we seriously reflect on the grandeur of God, our suffering seems trivial and paltry (Romans 8:18).

It was not uncommon to hear aged folk from the World War II generation speak of the frequent spankings they received in childhood from their parents with the words, "I got less than I deserved." That humility—that mature appraisal of reality—is indispensable to facing the suffering of life and viewing God from the proper perspective. I repeat: the Bible teaches us that, God is worthy of our worship **because He is God**, even if we receive nothing from Him—no physical blessings, no spiritual blessings, **nothing**—even if we were to be reduced to poverty and destitution, sitting on an ash heap, nevertheless, in the midst of our misery, we should **still** praise, honor, and glorify God for Who He is. Indeed, when we endure suffering, we vindicate God's point to Satan: that He is worthy of honor and worship no matter what.

Thinking Points

1) Why did God give Satan permission to afflict Job?
2) Name some motives people have for being religious and going to church services.
3) When faced with suffering, rather than asking, "Why me?," what should we ask?
4) What should we think about and focus on to help us dull our pain and assimilate our suffering?

Verification of Faithfulness

Another explanation given in Scripture for why some people, specifically Christians, suffer in this world is to demonstrate spiritual genuineness. This powerful concept is seen in Job in the third cycle of speeches when Job responds to the charge of his friends, specifically Eliphaz, concerning Job's doubtful spiritual condition (for further discussion of Job, see pp. 67ff.). Please read his rebuttal carefully:

> Even today my complaint is bitter; my hand is listless because of my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come to His seat! I would present my case before Him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know the words which He would answer me, and understand what He would say to me. Would He contend with me in His great power? No! But He would take note of me. There the upright could reason with Him, and I would be delivered forever from my Judge. Look, I go forward, but He is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; when He works on the left hand, I cannot behold Him; when He turns to the right hand, I cannot see Him. But He knows the way that I take; **when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold**. My foot has held fast to His steps; I have kept His way and not turned

> aside. I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food (Job 23:2-12).

This tortured soul pours out his heart in this passage, and does so quite respectfully without indicting or blaming God. Out of great anguish and pain, he yearns for an opportunity to be in God's presence in order to receive answers that would enable him to make sense of his devastated condition. He feels (naively) that perhaps he could present his case before God in view of the fact that he feels God seems to have some bone to pick with him. He is confident that God would not overwhelm him with His great power—but would give him due attention, listen to his concerns, and provide answers. The lack of direct contact with God—the thunderous divine silence that Job endured in the midst of his suffering—made him feel alone and unable to decipher his predicament.

Touchstone set

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Job then makes a stirring statement: "But He knows the way that I take." Job felt certain that despite the silence and his inability to secure an audience with God, nevertheless, God was surely aware of Job's spiritual condition and how he had been living his life. Hence he asserted: "When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." At first glance, one might think that Job was alluding to the metaphor of the furnace of affliction we discussed earlier. With that understanding, Job would have been saying that his sufferings serve the purpose of refining and purifying him. However, that is not the idea here. He is alluding to a "touchstone." Prior to the

more sophisticated chemical techniques used in modern metallurgical processes, the ancients used touchstones to ascertain the quality of raw ore. A touchstone was a finely grained, small tablet of dark stone used for assaying precious metal alloys. When soft metals (like gold or silver) are rubbed against it, a visible streak is left on the stone. Because different alloys of gold have different colors, one sample can be compared to samples of known purity in order to ascertain the quality of the gold.

Job's point? He believed that his hardships and suffering were manifestations of God "rubbing" him against stone, i.e., afflicting him with tribulation. However, he was confident that when that process of testing his spiritual status was complete, he would be demonstrated to be pure gold. In other words, some of the suffering that comes to the Christian has as its purpose to showcase theism and Christianity by calling attention to the righteousness of the sufferer.

While Job did not boastfully believe he was sinless, he nevertheless was unconscious of any glaring deficiencies in his efforts to serve God—certainly none that would account for the intense agony he was enduring. In the climax of his rebuttals to his friends, he reflected on his adult behavior to see if he was deserving of his accusers' allegations. His checklist of spirituality bodes well: he avoided illicit sexual desire; he treated fellow workers justly and kindly; he reached out to the poor, widows, orphans, and the needy; he refrained from covetousness; he avoided false religious allegiance; he loved his enemies; he was hospitable; and he confessed personal sin without fear of appearances (31:1-34). The conclusion of the book, as well as additional scriptural corroboration (Ezekiel 14:14,20; James 5:11), suggest that Job's surmising was accurate.

God was using Job to prove to Satan that some people are righteous and retain their righteousness regardless of their comfort level and in spite of their suffering.

God Likes Me!

Paul is a parallel example to Job on this very point. Recall, once again, Paul's remarks concerning his "thorn in the flesh":

> And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "**My grace is sufficient for you**, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:7-10, emp. added).

Key in on the words "My grace is sufficient for you." God's use of the word "grace" refers to the favor that God showed to Paul by appointing him an apostle and using him in the promotion of Christianity. Essentially, God was telling Paul that it was unnecessary for Him to remove the "thorn" of suffering in his life, since he had God's **approval and acceptance**. Question: are you willing to endure whatever suffering is thrown at you—whatever the hardship, trial, setback, sickness, heartache, or pain—as long as you know that God loves you, accepts you, and considers you a faithful child? Absolutely! That is precisely why Job could exclaim: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15).

Here is another rich, encouraging passage on this point:

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, **you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire**, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1:3-9).

Of all people on the Earth, Christians are those who have been the recipients of the mercy of God, a living hope, and an incorruptible inheritance. This spiritual assurance surpasses anything physical that may afflict us for now. If we remain faithful, focused on living a spiritual existence in harmony with God's Word, yes, we will be "grieved by various trials," but it will be only "for a little while." And the pain and suffering that we endure will demonstrate the genuineness of our faith. Our faith, i.e., our obedient submission to Jesus Christ, is "much more precious than gold." Gold is physical and perishes; but our faith is spiritual and will carry us into eternity in triumph (Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 2:10). Yes, our spiritual commitment may well be "tested by fire," but hanging firm and staying faithful will result in "praise, honor, and glory" when Jesus returns. Pray tell, what else on this entire planet, in all of human history, even begins to compare with such a life? I repeat: only New Testament

Christianity provides the proper perspective for facing suffering in this world. So the next time you find yourself afflicted, consider this: how do you know the distress you are experiencing is not simply one of those times when God is spotlighting your devotion to Him? His confidence in your spiritual stamina is such that He considers you capable of enduring the hardship and remaining faithful to Him! He is placing His stamp of approval on you and reassuring you of your place in heaven!

Thinking Points

1) What did Job say he would "come forth as" as a result of his sufferings?
2) To what physical process was he referring?
3) To what object does this process refer?
4) What did God tell Paul was sufficient for him in order to endure his thorn in the flesh?
5) What phrase did Peter use to describe the purpose of the trials his readers were experiencing?

Remember: We're Not Alone!

Before drawing this brief treatise on suffering to a close, let us recall some great fellow sufferers recorded for us in Holy Writ that offer tremendous support for our own encounters with suffering. Surely, other than our Lord, "Exhibit A" has to be Job, to whom we've already alluded. James urges us:

> My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as **an example of suffering and patience**. Indeed we count them blessed who **endure**. You have heard of the **perseverance** of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful (James 5:9-11, emp. added).

Job

When one reads the book of Job, one sees a level of suffering that most of us will never experience. Think of it: Complete financial collapse with the loss of his economic assets, followed immediately by the deaths of all 10 of his children—on the same day at the same location. How would you like to be the parent who receives such horrifying news and hurries to the scene to see the battered, bleeding, lifeless bodies of your children being pulled from the rubble? How would you like to have attended

that funeral—with 10 caskets lined up at the front of the church building auditorium? And then have to experience a severe, debilitating disease that brings excruciating pain and agony day and night, 24-7, only to be disappointed by your unsupportive wife as you attempt to cope. And then to be berated by your friends as a sinner and responsible for your own surreal predicament. You and I cannot claim that we have ever or will ever experience the magnitude of suffering that Job endured. As James suggested, we ought to take Job "as an example of suffering and patience." Let's consider his life for a moment.

Job's friends made no bones about it—they were adamant: Job had sinned and brought upon himself deserved retribution from God. They even claimed that Job's children died due to his unresolved sin. (Talk about cold-hearted!). They insisted his only hope was to repent of his sin. Job, on the other hand, was equally insistent that he had **not** sinned (so far as he was aware), and that his so-called friends were speaking falsehoods and hot air, mistreating him, failing to comfort him, and leaving him completely deserted. He suggested that suffering must apparently be indiscriminately levied against humanity regardless of spiritual condition.

When Job addressed himself to God, he dwelt on the devastation that he felt God had dealt him. Consider whether any of these metaphors for Job's suffering remind you of your own: he felt God had made him a "target" (7:20), hedged him in (3:23), scourged him (9:23), besieged him like a city (10:12; 16:14), made him an enemy (13:24), made him like a moth-eaten garment (13:28), shattered him and shook him viciously (16:12), captured him in a net (19:6), uprooted him like a tree (19:10), shot him with poison arrows (6:4), tossed him about like a tempest

(9:17), plunged him into a pit (9:31), made him prey to a lion (10:16), placed him in stocks (13:27), tore him like a wild animal would (16:9), walled him up (19:8), and threw him in the mud (30:19). These are graphic comparisons to which we can relate when we face some devastating event in our lives. Have you ever experienced a time in your life where either the physical or emotional torment was so great that you wished you were put out of your misery through death? Job repeatedly begged God to relieve his misery by ending his life (6:8-9; 7:15; 10:18).

It is interesting that Job's recounting of his predicament matches Christ's in several particulars: smitten of God (19:21; Isaiah 53:4); deserted (13:24; Psalm 22:1); falsely accused (15:5-6; Matthew 26:65-66); endured gaping mouths and facial slaps (16:10; Psalm 22:13; Micah 5:1; John 19:3); and mediated for others (42:10; 1 Timothy 2:5). Job, like other prominent Bible characters, is undoubtedly intended to be a "type" of Christ.

In the midst of his misery, Job admitted having a loose tongue and exaggerating out of intense pain—though he consistently maintained that he never renounced God (19:6-7; 23:2; 27:2). He admitted that the words he uttered out of his misery were rash (6:3), despairing (6:14,26), impatient (21:4), and without understanding (42:3). But he believed his complaint was a rebellion against his tormented condition (23:2). You no doubt understand this fact perfectly. There is a distinction to be made between the normal experience of expressing and manifesting grief, stress, misery, and mourning (7:11; 10:1) and the sin of murmuring or grumbling as the Israelites did when they essentially accused, criticized, and blamed God (Exodus 16:7; 17:7; Numbers 21). This is surely the case since God declares His unconditional endorsement of Job's righteous

character—both before the suffering ensues (1:22; 2:10) and after (42:7-9). If it were not true, Satan would have been correct in his claim that Job would abandon his righteousness, making God incorrect. What's more, James gives a blanket endorsement of Job's endurance, as we have seen.

Job was in such agony that he desperately desired answers to his questions that would help him make sense of his condition. If God would not speak to him directly, he longed for a suitable representative (9:33; 16:19; 17:3; 19:25,27). We can relate to Job's deep longing. We often face perplexities that we wish God would clarify for us audibly and directly.

This incredible treatise on the meaning of suffering includes the remarks of the shadowy figure Elihu. Compared to Job's three friends, Elihu is gracious. He is a deeper thinker and comes closer to grappling with the central issues. He is not concerned with condemning or convicting Job (as the three friends were), but is more concerned with defending God's justice and fairness. In contemplating our own suffering, consider Elihu's helpful remarks:

1) God is greater than man and so man should limit his words (33:12). Man should do much less talking and much more waiting (35:14).
2) Who is man that he should presume to expect God to give account of His actions? God does not owe man an explanation. Man is not in a position to offer guidance to God in His dealings (33:13; 34:33; 36:23).
3) Above everything that may be considered, God is just and cannot conduct Himself unjustly (34:12; 36:3).
4) Our decision to obey God should not be undertaken with a view to receiving certain advantages—as Satan suggested (35:3).

5) Man's behavior does not determine or affect God's being (35:6-7; cf. Isaiah 64:6; Luke 17:10; Acts 17:25; Romans 12:3; 1 Corinthians 10:12; 2 Corinthians 10:12).

6) Humans cannot comprehend God's ways (37:5).

7) Man shows pride when he presumes to expect God to answer all his questions (33:17; 35:12; 36:9; 37:24; cf. 15:25).

8) We should have an attitude of resignation rather than become agitated, frenzied, or attribute our hardship to God's hostility (36:18ff.).

These are useful observations that all sufferers should contemplate. They help us to get a fix on our standing in the material realm.

Incredibly, when God finally chooses to break the silence and "weigh in" on Job's agitated state, rather than offer specific explanations for Job's suffering, He directs Job's attention to a different plane. He challenges Job's knowledge and his finite humanity (38:2-5,18,21). Indeed, amidst life's perplexing moments of pain, we should acknowledge to ourselves our own inadequacies and ignorant awareness. God then affirmed to whom the Universe belongs ("who"—38:25). He created it and us. That fact alone ought to cause hesitation on our part to demand answers and explanations. God then showed Job that His attention to the created order is not limited to humans (38:26). He remains active in orchestrating the entire material realm, with complete concern for the human occupants—though He does not interfere with our choices. Further, He reassures Job that He is not his enemy. If we are striving to follow God's will, it is foolish for us ever to think He is our opponent.

Consider these fundamental themes that permeate the book of Job that give us the perspective we need to see the value of hardship in life:

1) It is true that the wicked will ultimately suffer for their sins. Job's friends were partially correct in that some of the suffering we receive is punitive—deserved recompense. In fact, God has punished people throughout Bible history because they deserved it. But it does not follow that everyone who suffers does so due to his or her own sin. One's earthly circumstances are not necessarily indicative of spiritual condition.
2) God is omnipotent (42:2), omniscient (12:13,16; 35:5), sovereign (9:12,32; 12:10; 23:14), and just.
3) Regardless of how things seem to humans, God does take note of righteousness and righteousness will ultimately prevail.
4) We should worship God regardless of life's circumstances—whether good or unpleasant.
5) Many of our questions about life's circumstances are unanswerable this side of eternity.
6) Life is brief, unpredictable, and transitory. It is to be compared to: a weaver's shuttle (7:6); breath (7:7); a shadow (8:9; 14:2; 17:7); a fast runner (9:25); a swift ship (9:26); a swooping eagle (9:26); a flower (14:2); a cloud (30:15); wind (30:15); and running water (14:11).
7) Life will include pain and suffering. But suffering can be good. Death itself can be a blessing, enabling one to escape further trials in this life while entering into the eternal realm to be with the Lord. Life is not to be clung to as if this life is all there is (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13).

These insights are of monumental assistance in viewing life properly and providing a structural framework out of which to view life.

Let us recap Job's experiences. Job was a righteous man (as God Himself vouched). Job knew God, and he knew that his life was ordered according to God's will. His intellectual grasp of God and his spiritual condition were congruent with his emotional makeup. But then affliction and suffering struck. He was traumatized and knocked off his secure, stable pedestal. He was jilted and jarred. He still **knew** what he knew before, but he was forced to struggle with the meaning of his afflictions in light of his past spiritual faithfulness. He did not **know the meaning** of his suffering. Thus, incongruity arose between what he had always **known and felt** about God versus what he now felt in the throes of his suffering. He now felt alienated, estranged, and distanced from God. He couldn't make sense of what he knew about God and his own history of righteous living in light of his sudden, overwhelming suffering. In defending his innocence to his friends, he allowed himself to be placed in the position of demanding an explanation from God. He thus bordered on making it appear that God may have been unjust in allowing Job to suffer.

But, beginning in chapter 38, he was brought face to face with God's power, knowledge, and sovereignty. He was awed by God's superintendence of the incredibly complex created order, and God's manifestation of His presence, causing Job to regret having asserted his expectation of an explanation. The climax of God's awesome presence culminated in Job's own psychological climax (42:5)—as if to say, "Now I see I don't need an explanation; nor do I need God to give account of Himself." His renewed

realization of the person of God was sufficient to get him through his ordeal. The answer to the question—"why must I suffer?"—is that when we focus on God and His awesome majesty, we don't need an answer to the question. His presence in our lives is sufficient for us to weather the storms of life. No matter what we face in this life, no matter how intense our suffering and hardship may become, when we genuinely shift our attention to **who God is**, we are enabled to cope with our suffering and survive the onslaughts of life. His splendor, His magnitude, His infinitude, His majesty, His spectacular person—these and a thousand other appellations help us to contextualize our lives (and suffering). What this is all about is Him—not me! And that is enough! I can face life calmly with resignation and deep, abiding contentment. Suffering gives the dedicated Christian a sense of certainty. It prepares us for the afterlife. It literally makes us better!

In like manner, when Peter focused on the waves and the winds, he took his mind off Jesus and began to sink. To keep from sinking and drowning amid life's adversities, we must not allow our **emotional** reactions to overshadow what we **know**. We must keep bringing our minds, our concentration, our thoughts back to the person of Jesus (discernible only through continual Bible study). Similarly, Paul was being told his thorn was bearable if he would keep his focus on God and His favor. James points out that the farmer, the prophets, and Job all show that the key is to remain focused on God. The distance between our current circumstances and the future state of release from adversity may be traversed only by remaining focused upon deity and spiritual reality (i.e., God's will as expressed through His written words).

Joseph

Consider another fellow traveler with whom we can relate: Joseph. Here was a fellow who was hated by his brothers. (Do you have kinfolk who are at odds with you?) Joseph's brothers could not speak a kind word to him. Their jealousy was eventually whipped up to such a high pitch that they fully intended to kill him when they got him away from their father. Only at the admonition of the oldest brother did they agree not to shed his blood, but then, without that brother's knowledge, instead sold him into slavery. The trade caravan took the traumatized boy away from family, home, and country to a foreign country and culture where he could not even speak the language. There he was placed on the auction block to be sold into the home of a high ranking Egyptian official. Though he made the best of his situation and conducted himself above reproach, he was continually tormented by the sexual advances of the official's wife. His consistent moral resistance only landed him in prison—the product of false allegations from a woman scorned! Though he again distinguished himself within the prison system, enabling him to "rub elbows" with a special class of inmates who had been in Pharaoh's employ, his ability to interpret dreams was rewarded with two more years of prison time.

Think of it: hated by family, threatened with death by brothers, sold by brothers into slavery, abandoned by his father, unjustly thrown into prison due to a completely bogus accusation, and left there **for years**. In fact, one gains insight into the extent and intensity of Joseph's suffering when, having risen to power under Pharaoh's favor at age 30, he marries an Egyptian girl and has two sons. The names he bestowed on the two boys are insightful. The first: Manasseh, meaning "one who causes to forget." Why

would he so name his son? His explanation: "For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house" (Genesis 41:51). This simple observation is packed with meaning. "Toil" suggests hard labor, unending, relentless service to his captors. His prison time transpired in what we would call a dungeon—not in the nice, air-conditioned hotels we provide criminals in America. When he was extricated from prison, they had to shave him and change his clothes. Joseph's allusion to "all my father's house" tells us he had been haunted all those years by memories of Dad and home. He had been literally ripped from his unfinished childhood, taken away from everything in his life that he held dear and that gave him stability and contentment, and thrust into a foreign, unfriendly environment in which he endured mistreatment and untold hardship. The second son he named Ephraim, which means "fruitful" or "productive." His rationale: "For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction" (vs. 52). "Affliction" speaks volumes. It could just as easily have been translated "trauma," "distress," or "hardship." While you and I marvel and wonder what it would have been like to be second in command over all Egypt, Joseph was still hurting from the enormous, long-term suffering he endured. He did not think of Egypt as the place where he now wielded great authority, or enjoyed the niceties of privileged life; he thought of it as **the land of his affliction**. Indeed, Joseph bore deep, deep emotional, psychological, and physical scars with which he lived the rest of his life. No doubt, our suffering will never compare with his.

Moses

Consider Moses. Selected by God to serve in the capacity of God's emissary to Pharaoh to gain the release of the

Israelites, Moses only reluctantly took on the task at age 80, thereby commencing the unenviable job of leading the nation out of Egypt and through 40 years of aimless desert meandering, never getting to enter the Promised Land himself. The writer of Hebrews provides us with the following after-the-fact appraisal of Moses' handling of his predicament:

> By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, **choosing rather to suffer affliction** with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the **reproach** of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the **wrath** of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, lest he who destroyed the firstborn should touch them. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land, whereas the Egyptians, attempting to do so, were drowned (11:24-29).

Let's get this straight. Moses **chose** suffering? He **chose** reproach? He **chose** to forsake riches and a comfortable lifestyle? He **chose** to relinquish his standing as the son of the daughter of Pharaoh? He **chose** to risk the wrath of Pharaoh? Whatever flaws and inadequacies Moses had, his faith—his strong trust in and commitment to God—carried him through the difficult periods of his life. He was able to assimilate the hardships and sacrifices that he made into an approach to life that was focused on an eternal goal. Now that's how to make sense of and endure suffering!

Jesus

The supreme example of suffering and hurt is that of Jesus Christ Himself. He surely models the pinnacle of

human suffering—in ways that we humans will never fathom or experience. Besides the lack of physical comforts (Matthew 8:20) and the frequent mistreatment He endured throughout His earthly ministry, finally He was seized by an angry mob carrying swords and clubs. He was positioned before a kangaroo court to face the accusations of false witnesses. He encountered the tirade of a raging High Priest who accused Him of blasphemy, and He had to hear the council's condemnation to death. He had people spit in His face, beat Him, and strike Him with the palms of their hands as they mocked and taunted Him. He was bound and taken before the Roman authorities where He experienced the further humiliation of a jeering crowd who chose a notorious criminal over Him for release. He then suffered further indignities at the hands of Roman soldiers who stripped Him, pressed a crown of thorns down upon His head, spit on Him, and struck Him on the head with the reed they had made Him hold as a scepter. They also subjected Him to the deadly brutality of a Roman scourging. Finally, He endured the excruciating, horrifying death inflicted by a Roman cross, as passers-by blasphemed Him, shook their heads at Him, and taunted Him to save Himself. Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him. All of this after the good He had done for so many! All of this when He was the loving Creator of the very ones mistreating Him! All of this when it was well within His power to end His suffering and destroy His cruel adversaries with the mere blink of an eye.

Where is God when you or I hurt? Where is God when a Christian loses a child? He is right where He was when He lost His own Son.

Whatever suffering or hurt you and I may experience pales in comparison to the hurt endured by our Lord. We need to remember: Sunday followed Friday. His suffering unto death provided an incredible outlet that you and I may share. "God commended His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Must we hurt?

> For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth"; Who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but **committed Himself to Him who judges righteously** (1 Peter 2:21-23, emp. added).

In fact, Jesus was "made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death…that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone" and, in so doing, He is able to "bring many sons to glory…for in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2:9-10,18). Jesus suffered great hurt and harm, but He endured for us. He bore the unsurpassed burden of bearing the sins of all humanity. May we endure for Him! We can and must be like Him. "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12).

Thinking Points

1) How does the extent of Job's suffering compare to ours?
2) To what did Job's "friends" attribute his suffering?
3) Name one of Elihu's points.
4) Name one fundamental theme from the book of Job.
5) Where should we direct our attention in order to not dwell on our pain and suffering?
6) List some of the causes of suffering in Joseph's life.
7) How was Joseph's suffering reflected in his sons?
8) What term does the Hebrews writer use to describe his suffering?
9) What two phrases does the Hebrews writer use to identify what Moses forfeited by his refusal to be the son of Pharoah's daughter?
10) What makes Jesus' suffering unique?
11) What is Jesus able to do "in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted"?

Conclusion

No matter what happens to the Christian in this world, that circumstance is temporary and only for the moment. Hardship is always accompanied by blessings, comfort, and encouragement that makes the tribulation bearable (cf. Job's acquisition of more children). Our goal is to leave this land of the dying to go to the land of the living. To borrow the words of the old hymn, this world is not our home; we're just passing through. With their worldview, the skeptic, atheist, and materialist have only this life with nothing to look forward to beyond the grave. No wonder the secular environmentalists and animal rights activists are trying to convince everyone to "save the planet." To them, that is all there is to life. Hence, suffering is dysteleological—purposeless. But to the Christian, all of life's events on Earth are mere "stepping stones"—the intermediate pathway from here to there.

Many years ago, popular radio commentator Paul Harvey expressed well the biblical view of what is happening to everyone in this life:

> We are all under the sentence of death. Most rational persons learn to live with that certain uncertainty and enjoy a reasonably full life in spite of it. The mother never lived who did not wish she could, as Christ said He would, fold her children under her wing and protect them from harm. Even He couldn't. For it is appointed to each of us, "once to

> die." First our children must be brought face-to-face with the irrefutable finality of that judgment. **Once they understand that Paradise is elsewhere, that we have to prove here that we deserve to be there**, then your youngster will understand why it isn't going to be easy. **It isn't supposed to be.** This is the shakedown cruise. This earthly while separates the men from the boys. Don't fear to confront your child with that fact. Youngsters want a challenge more than they want "peace and security." They will go out of their way to manufacture danger. The present war scare will subside, but there will be other uncertainties to take its place. These are best faced by persons who, however scared, **struggle forward through the dark toward the light** (1962, 4-A, emp. added).

For the atheist and the skeptic, there is no light toward which one is pressing. Their "paradise" is purely physical—a dismal existence. But for the Christian, even the negative realities of life make perfect sense; at least, we are in a position to put suffering in its place and assimilate the blows.

Recap

To recap, very real, very legitimate reasons are available to make sense of the existence of suffering in the world. Why do people suffer? Because…

1) This world—with all its positive and negative elements—was designed to serve the singular purpose of providing humans with the ideal environment in which to decide where to spend eternity.
2) All people sin and harm themselves and others.
3) We can be improved, matured, strengthened, perfected, and made fit for time and eternity.
4) Satan seeks to take as many people as possible with him to hell.

5) God is vindicated by those who choose to love and obey Him apart from any benefits He may bestow upon them.
6) Those who are faithful to God are verified in their spiritual genuineness through suffering.

These six realities provide ample explanation for the existence of suffering in the world.

Practicalities

So how do I bear up? Here are 10 succinct, summary suggestions from all we've said:

(1) Don't demand an explanation from God; tell Him you know He is in charge and that He'll provide you with what you need to survive;

(2) Face your own unworthiness. Embrace a deep sense of humility. Identify with David's humble resignation, when he asked God: "Who am I, O Lord God? And what is my house, that You have brought me this far?" (2 Samuel 7:18).

(3) Take a few deep breaths, close your eyes, and allow yourself to reflect upon God—His knowledge, power, sovereignty, justice, and love. Contemplate the wonders of His Universe. God is so great and unfathomable that when you continually reflect on His greatness, His infinitude, you are reminded Who is in control—the Supreme Governor of the entire Universe. Read again Job's stunning realization in Job 42:2-6, the moment when he comes to grips with his suffering (with my comments in italics):

> "I know that You can do everything" [*God is omnipotent!*]
> "and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You." [*God is sovereign—He wields supreme authority over everything and everyone!*]
> "You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?'" [*God's words to Job in 38:2*]

"Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand" [*Neither Job nor we are in a position to know the full significance or immediate meaning of why suffering occurs at any particular moment.*]

"Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." [*We must humbly admit our limited knowledge and marvel at the wondrous outworking of God's activities.*]

"Listen, please, and let me speak" [*I humbly beg you to allow me to express my regret at my demand for answers.*]

"You said, 'I will question you, and you shall answer Me.'" [*Job realizes his complete inability to answer God's plethora of penetrating questions by which He dazzled Job (and us!) with the marvels and complexities of the Universe.*]

"I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear" [*Before his suffering, he had a relationship with God and was following His teachings.*]

"but now my eye sees You." [*Armed with the overwhelming display of God's greatness, Job has been brought to a new plane of existence in which he realizes he does not need an answer.*]

"Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." [*I regret ever having questioned God about my predicament, I've got my thinking straight, and I bow before Him in humble resignation.*]

(4) Pray, pray, pray. The Bible is replete with admonitions to lay one's burdens before God. "[D]o not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7, ESV). Peace of mind is there for the taking. "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray" (James 5:13). "[M]en always ought to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1). "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy

and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Prayer can definitely enable us to cope!

(5) There is no substitute for reading the Bible regularly. Having God speak to you every day is critical! When you are feeling cast down or overwhelmed by circumstances that are trying your faith, turn quickly to the Word of God, especially passages that encourage us to hang in there and to remember what life is about. God's Word—unlike man's word—is powerful! His words can give you the strength you need to endure. Psalm 23 is one of those passages that has brought soothing comfort to millions. And remember this: when we're tempted to ask where God is when we suffer, we need to remember not only the sacrifice of His own Son, but also the fact that **He is allowing the necessary, and awaiting the meaningful outcome.**

(6) Remind yourself often of the goal: the eternal reward, a crown of life, and unending existence with God and Christ. These three verses are power-packed:

> Blessed is a man who **perseveres under trial**; for once he has been approved, he will receive **the crown of life**, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him (James 1:12, NASB, emp. added).
>
> Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, **that you may be tested**, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you **the crown of life** (Revelation 2:10, emp. added).
>
> To him who overcomes I will grant to **sit with Me on My throne**, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne (Revelation 3:21).

Can you imagine being permitted to sit with God and Christ?

(7) Remember that all suffering is **temporary**. "This, too, shall pass." Indeed, what might seem unbearable and unending is actually light and momentary!

> Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our **light** affliction, which is **but for a moment**, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are **temporary**, but the things which are not seen are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16-18, emp. added).

Thomas Warren put our suffering in perspective in a statement that deserves to be read and reread several times: "The stakes in eternity (i.e., the blessings of Heaven and the unending punishment of Hell) are of such magnitude as to render all pain and suffering in this life of no ultimate negative significance" (p. 85). Amen, and amen.

(8) Recall all the sufferers who have gone before. Be comforted that you are in good company.

(9) Take comfort that it may well be that you are being used by God as an example of righteousness.

(10) Reach deep down inside yourself and muster spiritual courage. **DO NOT GIVE UP!** Do not draw back. Read these words addressed to persecuted first century Christians:

> But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, **you endured a great struggle with sufferings**: partly while you were made a spectacle both by **reproaches and tribulations**, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the **plundering of your goods**, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For **you**

> **have need of endurance**, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: "For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him." But we are not of those who **draw back** to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul (Hebrews 10:32-39, emp. added).

What You Should Do

The logical and pressing conclusion of this study is obvious: you should obey the Gospel of Christ and bring your life into harmony with His will. "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). You should open your New Testament and read about Christ coming to Earth to die for human sin. You should believe in Him and His Word (John 8:24; Mark 16:16); repent of your sins, i.e., change your mind about your past beliefs and actions (Luke 13:3; Acts 17:30); orally confess that Jesus is the Son of God (Romans 10:9-10); and then be immersed in water to have your sins washed away by the blood of Christ as He adds you to His body, the church (Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

If you are an unfaithful child of God, who has allowed life's suffocating distresses to smother your spiritual commitments and priorities, rise up and return to the higher plane of spiritual existence that your God wants for you. Repent of your sins, confess them, and pray that God will forgive you and reinstate you in His good graces (Acts 8:22; James 5:16,19-20; 1 John 1:8-10).

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Thinking Points

1) Unlike the atheist and skeptic, what does the Christian have to look forward to?
2) Restate the 6 causes of suffering.
3) Name some of the practical suggestions for coping with suffering.
4) What is the #1 thing a person must do in order to cope with suffering—and make suffering worth enduring? And how?

Thinking Points Answers

p. 8—When Calamity Strikes

1. Found on pages 1-2
2. Found on pages 2-5
3. Found on pages 5-7

p. 13—The Beginning Point

1. Atheism/Evolution; Astrology, Psychics, Fatalism; Buddhism, Hinduism, New Ageism; Islam
2. Christianity
3. I can know the God of the Bible exists.
   I can know the Bible is of divine origin.
   I can know that Jesus is God's Son.

p. 23—The Purpose of the Universe

1. To give every person an opportunity to decide where to spend eternity
2. Free moral agency; Immortality and ongoing existence beyond the physical realm; Culpability for one's own actions; Physical life that is spent in a physical realm as only probationary period; Recognition that a person's eternal fate is determined by response to God in this earthly life.
3. Supplies humans with their basic physical needs; Allows free moral agency; Allows humans to be challenged; Allows humans to learn the things they most need to learn.
4. Vale of soul-making
5. Probationary period
6. Solomon
7. Labor; Knowledge/Wisdom/Education; Wealth/Possessions; Military capability; Political power; Sexual pleasure; Youthfulness; Physical stimulation
8. "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all" (NKJV).
9. Ecclesiastes 12:13

10. They are the result of specific conditions necessary to provide humans with the ideal environment for soul-making.
11. He had a morally justifiable reason: life on Earth is **temporary** in order to develop souls fit for heaven.
12. To prove to people that earthly life is brief; and to prove to people that earthly life is uncertain.
13. Physical suffering is not intrinsically evil. The only intrinsic evil is violation of God's will.

p. 33—The Decisions We Make

1. Sin
2. Violation of God's will/Word—1 John 3:4
3. See listing on p. 26.
4. Ourselves and others
5. People must be free to make their own decisions as part of the vale of soul-making
6. 90-year-old teenager; a round square

p. 47—Self Improvement

1. He subjects metal to intense abuse in order to produce a valuable article.
2. A furnace for smelting ore (extractive metallurgy)
3. Scalpels, saws, and other tools are used that inflict trauma on the body—but for good.
4. A rod and reproof
5. The peaceable fruit of righteousness (12:11).
6. That we may be able to bear the testing/hardship.
7. The funeral
8. We will take to heart the fact that our life will soon end, and the heart is made better.
9. See pages 42-44.
10. Wait patiently (5:7-8).

p. 56—Satan is the Archenemy of God and Man

1. Snare; wiles; fiery darts (flaming arrows); devices (schemes)
2. Peter was unwittingly aiding Satan's cause.
3. The messenger of Satan (2 Corinthians 12:7).
4. Satan wants to sift you as wheat.

p. 60—Vindication of God

1. To prove that Job possessed disinterested love of deity; to prove that God is worthy of worship apart from blessings He bestows.
2. To make business contacts; to find a dating/marriage partner; to please parents, spouse, or others; good place to socialize
3. "Why **not** me?"
4. The grandeur and awesome majesty of God

p. 66—Verification of Faithfulness

1. Gold
2. Metallurgical—ascertaining quality of precious metals
3. Touchstone
4. His grace
5. "that the genuineness of your faith…may be found"

p. 80—We're not Alone!

1. We have much less!
2. His sin
3. See pp. 70-71
4. See p. 72
5. The greatness of God as the Supreme Governor of the Universe and beyond
6. Hated by family; threatened with death by brothers; sold by brothers into slavery; unjustly thrown into prison; left in prison **for years**
7. See pp. 75-76 for discussion of their names
8. Affliction
9. "Passing pleasures of sin" and "the treasures of Egypt"
10. He endured it in behalf of humanity, tasting death for everyone
11. He is able to aid those who are tempted

p. 88—Conclusion

1. Life beyond the grave/heaven
2. See pp. 82-83
3. See pp. 83-87
4. Become a New Testament Christian through faith, repentance, confession, and immersion into Christ for the remission of sins. For a free booklet on ***Receiving the Gift of Salvation***, go to: http://apologeticspress.org/pdfs/e-books_pdf/Receiving%20the%20Gift%20of%20Salvation.pdf

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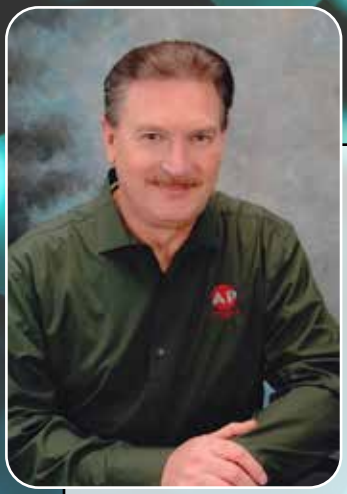

About the Author

Dave is the Executive Director of Apologetics Press—a 35-year-old organization dedicated to the defense of the Christian Faith. His formal education includes three Masters Degrees, as well as a Ph.D. in rhetoric and public address from Southern Illinois University.

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