



Lesson 6

Evil, Pain, and Suffering

EVIL, PAIN, AND SUFFERING

Many through the ages have abandoned their belief in God because of the presence of evil, pain, and suffering in their lives or in the lives of those close to them. In 1851, Charles Darwin's life set him irreversibly on the road to unbelief when his oldest daughter, Annie, fell ill. On April 23 of that year, she died at the tender age of ten. Darwin was devastated. Although his wife was a devout believer in God and Christianity, with Annie's death Darwin no longer could stomach such concepts. Samuel Langhorne Clemens (a.k.a. Mark Twain) became embittered against God after the death, in 1896, of his favorite daughter, Suzy.

In the mid-1960s, a devoutly religious young man from Chattanooga, Tennessee was a role model for all of his classmates. He led a prayer group, and planned to become a foreign missionary—until his sister died of leukemia and his father committed suicide. The boy's belief in God collapsed, and he subsequently became one of America's most outspoken unbelievers, humanists, and pro-abortion advocates. That boy's name?—Ted Turner, founder of world-famous CNN, the Turner Broadcasting System, and other well-known media enterprises.

But, of course, it is not just the famous who abandon their belief in God because of evil, pain, and suffering in their lives. The “man (or woman, as the case may be) on the street” is no less affected. Nearly everywhere one goes, questions arise: “If there is a God, why am I afflicted with this illness?” or “How could a benevolent God allow my son to be killed in a tornado?” These and hundreds of other questions have pierced the ears of listeners for millennia. How do theists reconcile the existence of suffering with the existence of an omnipotent and all-loving God? Is unbelief in God justified?

CAUSES OF EVIL, PAIN, AND SUFFERING

Even though man cannot explain in specific detail every instance of human suffering, contrary to what many believe, there are several logical reasons why people experience mental and physical pain. One of the foremost reasons is rooted in the fact that God is love (1 John 4:8), and His love allows freedom of choice. God did not create men and women as robots to serve Him slavishly without any kind of free moral agency on their part (cf. Genesis 2:16-17; Joshua 24:15; John 5:39-40). God does not control His creation as a puppeteer controls a doll. Rather, as an expression of His love, He has granted mankind free will, and that free will enables human beings to make their own choices.

Man frequently brings suffering upon himself because of the wrong decisions he makes. The apostle 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). When people suffer the consequences of their own wrong choices, they have no one to blame but themselves. If a person decides to kill someone, he very likely will suffer the unpleasant consequences of having made a terribly wrong choice. He may spend the rest of his life in prison, or perhaps be put to death himself. If a fornicator is found to have a sexually transmitted disease, it may be because she made the wrong decision to engage in illicit sex with someone who was infected. Thus, frequently mankind’s suffering results from a misuse or abuse of personal freedom.

On occasion, man also suffers because of the personal wrong choices of others. If God allows one person freedom of choice, then, to be consistent in His love for the world (John 3:16; 1 John 4:8), He must allow everyone that same freedom. God is no respecter of persons (cf. Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11). In 2 Samuel 11, we read where Uriah the Hittite suffered because of King David’s sins. Uriah ultimately lost his life because of David’s attempt to hide the sinful decisions he had made. Today, families may be affected adversely because a father is sent to prison on a drunk driving charge, or because a mother uses drugs. In each case, a single individual is the cause of an entire family’s suffering. If a man chooses to smoke cigarettes and then eventually dies of lung cancer, his family suffers because of his bad decision. But God hardly is to blame.

Another reason for the suffering that humans endure (and one that is closely related to the first two) has to do with the personal wrong choices of former generations. For example, why are hordes of people starving to death in various Third World countries today? While that admittedly is a difficult question with several possible answers, one partial answer has to do with the fact that these people’s ancestors, millennia ago, taught that it was wrong to eat certain animals because they might be eating one of their ancestors. The false doctrine of reincarnation, as this idea has come to be known, thus has deprived millions throughout the world of their health. Is God to blame when people will not eat the food He has provided—food that could provide them with proper nourishment? Again, the answer is “No.” There can be no doubt that many of the decisions of former generations have caused much pain and suffering for those living in the world today.

Consider this, also. We frequently hear (or offer!) complaints about reaping evil from the wrong choices of generations long since gone, but we rarely hear expressions of gratitude for the many blessings that have been passed down to us as a result of the hard work and sacrifices of those same people. We live longer and healthier lives because of numerous medical discoveries, and we have technological conveniences that make our daily lives all

the more pleasant. Truth be told, we eat of vineyards we did not plant; we drink of cisterns we did not dig. We owe much to many of the distant past. The fact is, while man often suffers because of the sins of former generations, he also benefits from their labors. If man truly is free, it must be possible for him to reap the benefits, as well as suffer the consequences, of his own decisions and the decisions of others.

People also suffer because of violations of natural law. Fortunately, God created a world ruled by specific laws that He established at the Creation. Those laws were implemented for man's own good, but if the laws are violated, then man will suffer the consequences. If a man steps off the roof of a five-story building, gravity will pull him to the pavement beneath. If a boy steps in front of a moving freight train, since two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time, the train will strike the child and likely kill him. Why? Because he has (knowingly or unknowingly) violated the natural order of this world. The natural laws that God created allow man to produce fire. But the same laws that enable him to cook his food also allow him to destroy entire forests. Laws that make it possible to have things **constructive** to human life also introduce the possibility that things **destructive** to human life may occur. How can it be otherwise? A moving car is matter in motion, and takes us where we wish to go. But if someone steps in front of that car, the same natural laws that operated to our benefit will similarly operate to our detriment. The same laws that govern gravity, matter in motion, or similar phenomena also govern weather patterns, water movement, and other geological/meteorological conditions. **All** of nature is regulated by these laws—not just the parts that we find convenient. If God suspended natural laws every time one of His creatures was in a dangerous or life-threatening situation, chaos would corrupt the Cosmos, and would argue more for a world of **atheism** than a world of **theism**!

Everyone (believer and unbeliever alike) must obey the natural laws that God established, or else suffer the consequences. In Luke 13:2-5, Jesus told the story of eighteen men who died when the tower of Siloam collapsed on them. Had these men perished because of their sins? No, they were no worse sinners than their peers. They died because a natural law was in force. Fortunately, natural laws work continually so that we can understand and benefit from them. We are not left to sort out some kind of haphazard system that works one day but not the next.

DO NATURAL DISASTERS NEGATE DIVINE BENEVOLENCE?

Throughout history, man has experienced great tragedies. In A.D. 526, an earthquake hit the country now known as Turkey, and left over 250,000 dead in its aftermath. A similar earthquake in China in 1556 killed more than 830,000 people. On September 21, 1989, Hurricane Hugo struck the south-

eastern coast of the United States, killing over 25 people and causing an estimated \$10 billion worth of damage. One month later (October 17, 1989), an earthquake registering 7.1 on the Richter scale struck the San Francisco Bay area in California. At least 62 people were killed, and damage estimates were placed at well over \$1 billion.

It is rare, it seems, for a single generation in a given locale to be spared at least some kind of natural disaster. Without warning, tornadoes sweep down from the afternoon sky and destroy in a moment's fury what took decades or centuries to build. Floods cover "old home places" and remove forever any vestige of what were once storehouses of hallowed memories. In a matter of seconds, earthquakes irreparably alter once-familiar landscapes. Hurricanes come from the sea, demolish practically everything in their paths, and then dissipate as if they never had existed. Each time, humanity suffers. And each time there are those who ask **"Why?"** Why does the Earth experience natural disasters in the first place, and why are such disasters not incompatible with a benevolent God?

Our Once-Perfect-But-Now-Flawed Planet

At the end of His six days of creation (Genesis 1:31), God surveyed all that He had made and proclaimed it "very good"—Hebrew terminology representing that which was both complete and perfect. Rivers were running, fish were swimming, and birds were flying. Pestilence, disease, and human death were unknown. Man existed in a serene paradise of happiness and beauty where he shared such an intimate and blissful covenant relationship with his Maker that God came to the Garden of Eden "in the cool of the day" to commune with its human inhabitants (Genesis 3:8). Additionally, Genesis 3:22 records that man had continual access to the tree of life that stood in the garden, the fruit of which would allow him to live forever.

The peacefulness and tranquility of the first days of humanity were not to prevail, however. In Genesis 3—in fewer words than an average sports-writer would use to discuss a Friday night high school football game—Moses, through inspiration, discussed the breaking of the covenant relationship between man and God, the entrance of sin into the world, and the curse(s) that resulted therefrom. When our original parents revolted against their Creator, evil entered the world. Moses informs us that as a direct consequence of human sin, the Earth was "cursed" (Genesis 3:17). Paul, in Romans 8:20-21, declared that the entire creation was subjected to "futility" and the "bondage of corruption" as a result of the sinful events that took place in Eden on that occasion. Things apparently deteriorated rapidly. Just three chapters later, Moses wrote of the saturated wickedness of man (Genesis 6:5-7).

Genesis 6-8 records the global destruction resulting from the Great Flood sent by God as His instrument of judgment. The text indicates that the waters that caused the Flood originated from two distinct sources: (a) “the fountains of the great deep”; and (b) “the windows of heaven” (Genesis 7:11). Water fell for forty days and nights (Genesis 7:12,17), and eventually covered “all the high hills under the whole heaven” (Genesis 7:19). We may only surmise the changes that the Flood wrought upon the Earth. Local floods can cause tremendous damage in very brief periods. Imagine, then, the damage that the waters of the Flood must have caused as they covered every mountain to a height of fifteen cubits (Genesis 7:20; approximately 22½ feet). As one writer has suggested:

The destructive power of flood-waters is evident from what flood waters in recent years have done. They moved blocks of granite weighing 350 tons more than a hundred yards. Boulders weighing 75 to 210 tons have been moved by flood waters only 15 to 20 feet deep.... What vast devastation must have been created when all those forces of the earth worked together; rain gushing down from the canopy above the firmament, earthquakes shaking the earth, many volcanoes erupting and exploding at one time, continents shifting, mountains lifting up, tornados, hurricanes and wild windstorms raging, gigantic tidal waves with crosscurrents and whirlpools raising havoc.... Truly, the Flood was the greatest and most violent catastrophe in the history of the world, with total destruction of all forms of life and of the entire surface of the earth (Sippert, 1989, pp. 78-79).

What were conditions like on the Earth prior to the Great Flood? Numerous scientific and biblical scholars have suggested that conditions were radically different than those we see today, and that the Earth was devoid of the many natural disasters that it presently experiences. In their classic text, *The Genesis Flood*, John C. Whitcomb and Henry M. Morris stated:

This is inferred from the fact that the “breaking-up of the fountains of the great deep” (Genesis 7:11), which implies this sort of activity, was one of the immediate causes of the Deluge; therefore it must have been restrained previously.... Thus the Biblical record implies that the age between the fall of man and the resultant Deluge was one of comparative quiescence geologically. The waters both above and below the firmament were in large measure restrained, temperatures were equably warm, there were no heavy rains nor winds and probably no earthquakes nor volcanic emissions (1961, pp. 242,243).

It is not unreasonable to suggest, knowing the changes caused by local floods, that the global Flood of Genesis 6-8 not only radically altered the face of the Earth, but simultaneously produced circumstances that are responsible for the many natural disasters experienced since that time. New, higher mountains and lower valleys were produced by God after the Flood

(Psalm 104:6-10). Approximately 71.9% of the Earth's surface remained covered with water. Temperature changes occurred, producing seasonal variations unlike any before. No doubt other factors were involved as well.

What causes natural disasters on the Earth today? One cause, of course, is the vastly different geological and meteorological phenomena now present on our planet. Tall mountains and deep valleys can be conducive to localized extremes in weather. The drastically changed components of the Earth's crust (e.g., fault lines, etc.) give rise to earthquakes. Vast bodies of water, and large global climatic variations, spawn hurricanes and tropical storms. In his second epistle, the apostle Peter referred to "the world that then was" and its destruction by the Flood (3:6). That world no longer exists. Today we inhabit a once-perfect-but-now-flawed Earth.

But, some will ask, why can't God "selectively intervene" to prevent disasters? Bruce Reichenbach has addressed this question:

...[I]n a world which operates according to divine miraculous intervention, there would be no necessary relation between phenomena, and in particular between cause and effect. In some instances one event would follow from a certain set of conditions, another time a different event, and so on, such that ultimately an uncountable variety of events would follow a given set of conditions. There would be no regularity of consequence, no natural production of effects.... Hence, we could not know or even suppose what course of action to take to accomplish a certain rationally conceived goal. Thus, we could neither propose action nor act ourselves (1976, p. 187).

How, exactly, could a livable, dependable world—governed by appropriate and understandable laws—be created and operated, other than the way ours presently is? And how, in such a world, could disasters be prevented, while maintaining both natural law and human freedom?

Taken at face value, the wickedness of mankind in Noah's day, which precipitated the Flood, is responsible **ultimately** for the changes that now produce various natural disasters. Upon whom should we heap blame for the suffering resultant from such weather? Is it fair to accuse God, when He initially created man's home free from such things (Genesis 1:31)? In all honesty, the answer has to be no. Sin robbed us of our original garden paradise, and sin was responsible for the global deluge (Genesis 3:24; 6:7). Again, God is not to blame.

CONCLUSION

Instead of blaming God when tragedies such as natural disasters strike, we need to turn to Him for strength and let tragedies, of whatever nature, remind us that this world never was intended to be our final home (Hebrews 11:13-16). Our time here is temporary (James 4:14), and with God's help, we can triumph over whatever comes our way (Romans 8:35-39; Psalm 46:

1-3). In the end, the most important question is not “Why did this happen to me?” but rather “How can I understand what has happened, and how am I going to react to it?” With Peter, the faithful Christian can echo the sentiment that God, “who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever” (1 Peter 5:10-11).

Remember, too, that there **are** times when suffering is **beneficial**. Think of the man whose chest begins to throb as he enters the throes of a heart attack. Think of the woman whose side begins to ache at the onset of acute appendicitis. Is it not true that pain often sends us to the doctor for prevention or cure? Is it not true also that at times suffering helps humankind develop the traits that people treasure the most? Bravery, heroism, altruistic love, self-sacrifice—all flourish in less-than-perfect environments, do they not?

Finally, no one can suggest—justifiably—that suffering per se is contrary to the existence or goodness of God, in light of the series of events that transpired at Calvary almost two thousand years ago. The fact that **even Jesus as the Son of God** was subjected to evil, pain, and suffering (Hebrews 5:8; 1 Peter 2:21ff.) proves that God loves and cares for His creation. He is not the unloving, angry, vengeful God depicted by atheism and infidelity. Rather, “when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Romans 5:10). God could have abandoned us to our own sinful devices but instead, “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:9-10).

The unbeliever, for reasons known only to himself, either is unable, or unwilling, to concede the love of God. That—not the evil, pain, or suffering that he currently endures—is the greatest tragedy of his life.

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Questions—Lesson 6

TRUE OR FALSE

DIRECTIONS: Write TRUE or FALSE in the blanks before the following statements.

- _____ 1. Very few have abandoned their belief in God because of the presence of evil, pain, and suffering.
- _____ 2. Man can explain in specific detail every instance of human suffering.
- _____ 3. Because God is loving, He gives man freedom of choice.
- _____ 4. The doctrine of reincarnation has deprived millions of people throughout the world of good health.
- _____ 5. Man frequently brings suffering upon himself because of the wrong decisions he makes.
- _____ 6. There are several logical reasons why people experience mental and physical pain.
- _____ 7. Only the famous abandon their belief in God because of evil, pain, and suffering.
- _____ 8. As the Son of God, Jesus never was subjected to evil, pain, and suffering.

MULTIPLE CHOICE

Circle the correct answer(s).

1. In 1851, this man's spiritual life changed for the worse after his daughter, Annie, fell ill and died.
- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| (a) Abraham Lincoln | (b) Charles Darwin |
| (c) Mark Twain | (d) Ted Turner |

2. The Flood described in Genesis 6-8 was :
 - (a) A local flood
 - (b) Not very severe
 - (c) Very destructive
 - (d) Not a result of sin
3. Uriah the Hittite suffered because of the sins of:
 - (a) Solomon
 - (b) Saul
 - (c) Abraham
 - (d) David
4. God created a world ruled by which of the following?
 - (a) Law and order
 - (b) Chance
 - (c) Chaos
 - (d) Disorder
5. How long did water fall from heaven during the Flood?
 - (a) 40 days and 40 nights
 - (b) 365 days and nights
 - (c) 24 hours
 - (d) 14 days and nights

MATCHING

Match the ideas on the left with the terms on the right (place the correct letter in the space provided by each number).

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| 1. ____ This man became an atheist after his sister died of leukemia and his father committed suicide | A. Beneficial |
| 2. ____ Covered the tallest mountains by 15 cubits | B. Jesus |
| 3. ____ Sometimes suffering can be | C. Fountains of the great deep |
| 4. ____ He suffered and died to save us from our sins | D. Global Flood |
| 5. ____ One of the sources of the Flood water | E. Ted Turner |
| 6. ____ Became embittered against God in 1896 after the death of his favorite daughter, Suzy | F. Mark Twain |

FILL IN THE BLANKS

1. God did not create men and women as _____ to serve Him slavishly without any kind of _____ moral agency on their part.
2. If God allows _____ person freedom of choice, He must allow _____ that freedom to be consistent in his love for the world.
3. _____ were implemented in the beginning for man's own good, but if these laws are violated, then man will suffer the _____.
4. The fact that even _____ as the Son of God was subjected to evil, pain, and _____ proves that God loves and cares for His _____.
5. "But let none of you _____ as a murderer, a thief, an evil-doer, or as a busybody in other people's matters..." (1 Peter 4: 15).
6. In his second epistle, Peter referred to "the _____ that then _____," and its destruction by the _____ (3:6).

NOTES/COMMENTS

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