

Is God Mean?

Part 1 - How Can A Good God Allow So Much Suffering?

“The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches the judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock.” (C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*)¹

It would be hard to disagree with Mr. Lewis’ assessment, for in a sense God has always been on trial (i.e. in the dock). The Bible states that man has free-will, the ability to choose right and wrong (see *Isaiah 7:15; Deuteronomy 30:19*). Free-will also means that man can choose whether to believe in God or not. The apostle Paul stated that this was behind man’s departure from God: “*For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*” (Romans 1:21–23 ESV)

The trial of God intensified with the Darwinian revolution, for if science now explains the existence of all things, there is no need for God. While I believe the evidence demands a Designer/Creator, the examination of the scientific evidence for or against the existence of God falls outside the scope of this series. I bring it up only to confirm that man has placed God on trial. However, you may be unaware that the trial of God has taken a new (actually a recurring) turn. Not only is God’s existence on trial, but also His character. The charge? Meanness and cruelty.

- Carl Sagan: “an immortal Creator is a cruel god, because He, never having to face the fear of death, creates innumerable creatures who do. Why should He do that? If He’s omniscient, He could be kinder and create immortals, secure from the danger of death.”²
- Bart D. Ehrman: “If there is an all-powerful and loving God in this world, why is there so much excruciating pain and unspeakable suffering? The problem of suffering has haunted me for a very long time. It was what made me begin to think about religion when I was young and, it was what led me to question my faith when I was older. Ultimately, it was the reason I lost my faith... I could no longer explain how there can be a good and all-powerful God actively involved with this world, given the state of things. For many people who inhabit this planet, life is a cesspool of misery and suffering. I came to a point where I simply could not believe that there is a good and kindly disposed Ruler who is in charge of it.”³
- Epicurus: “Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, but does not want to, he is wicked. If God can abolish evil, and God really wants to do it, why is there evil in the world?”⁴

The “Epicurean Paradox” sums up the charge: if there is a good, omnipotent God how could He allow the Holocaust, the murderous reigns of Stalin, Pol-Pot and Saddam Hussein, or natural catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina and the Thailand Tsunami? Why are young children raped, tortured and murdered? Why are millions starving? Is God powerless to stop it... or is He mean?

Some Preliminary Concerns

Yes, there is great suffering and pain in the world, but are we to conclude that God is responsible for all of it? If two people are in an argument and one strikes the other the resulting black eye did not come from God, but from the fist of the assailant. On a larger scale the suffering caused by Hitler, Stalin, Pol-Pot, etc. are the result of personal and sometimes national policies. Millions died because men acted cruelly. The question in these cases is not “does God cause the suffering?”, but “why does God allow the suffering?” Here we must consider free-will. This ability given to us by God can be used for good or evil. Could an omnipotent and benevolent God circumvent man’s free-will to eliminate pain? Sure He could, but at what price? You may want God to eliminate the free-will of mass-murderers, but wouldn’t He need to go further? Wouldn’t God need to eliminate all pain, even the pain caused by harsh words? Wouldn’t this require God to eliminate all free-will? Are you willing to lose this, the most cherished of human traits?

With regards to natural phenomenon we have a different matter. Hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, epidemics, famines, etc. cause tremendous suffering and pain. The wisdom of man reasons that since we cannot cause these natural disasters, and if God created the world, He should be held accountable for the pain and suffering that His creation causes. Thus, two charges are made against God: 1) He created a world in which pain and suffering exist and 2) He stands by and allows people to suffer.

Believers in God have offered several Bible-based explanations for why suffering exists:

- Sometimes suffering and pain are God’s punishment for sin.
- Sometimes suffering exists because of free-will.
- Sometimes suffering is for our good.
- Sometimes suffering is a product of the spiritual conflict between good and evil. Satan is warring against God and His people, hence good people suffer.

All of these explanations are true, but as stated none of them give a complete picture of why suffering exists. We have already noted that free-will accounts for the suffering produced by men, but not the suffering produced by natural events. Likewise, not all suffering can be attributed to punishment for sin. What sins have starving children committed? Likewise, what benefits do starving children derive from their suffering? Yes, Satan is at war with God’s people, but suffering is not limited to the just. What explanation can a believer give for the existence of pain? How can a good God allow so much suffering?

The Big Picture: Why Suffering Exists

“And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.” (Genesis 1:31 ESV)

“And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” (Genesis 2:25 ESV)

“but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Genesis 2:17 ESV)

These Scriptures provide the basis of our knowledge of man's earliest existence. According to the Bible suffering and pain were not part of the creation. Everything that God created was termed “very good,” hence the absence of evil and no pain and suffering. Man and woman could exist in the garden of Eden without clothing and without shame, or we might say with no mental pain or suffering. We also see that man had a law to live by, hence free-will to either obey God or to disobey God. So long as man obeyed, the consequences of sin: death, pain, suffering, etc. did not exist.

Now, skip a little further in the Genesis account. We read how man and woman were tempted (free-will) to violate the command of God. They did (sin) and the results were immediate.

- Physical suffering came into existence: *“To the woman he said, ‘I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’ And to Adam he said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, “You shall not eat of it,” cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”*” (Genesis 3:16–19 ESV)
- Mental suffering (shame) came into existence: *“Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.”* (Genesis 3:7 ESV)

From the Genesis account we can derive several explanations for why suffering and pain came into existence. First, there is the activity of the adversary (Satan). Second, there is the guilt of rejecting the divine will. Third, there is the divine retribution for man's disobedience.

However, there is a deeper, all-encompassing reason for why suffering and pain exist. Consider the following:

1. Suffering and pain were not God's will for man. *“And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.”* (Genesis 1:31 ESV)
2. Suffering and pain came into existence because of sin. *“of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”* (Genesis 2:17 ESV)

3. God cannot fellowship (live with) evil. *"This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."* (1 John 1:5–6 ESV)
4. Sin resulted in man being separated from God.
 - *"Then the LORD God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—' therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life."* (Genesis 3:22–24 ESV)
 - *"Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear."* (Isaiah 59:1–2 ESV)
5. Man's separation from God continues today.
 - *"In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."* (John 14:2–3 ESV)
 - *"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."* (1 John 3:2 ESV)
6. When man is finally reunited with God, suffering and pain cease to exist. *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.'" (Revelation 21:1–4 ESV)*

From these we conclude that pain and suffering exist for one reason: the separation between God and man created by sin. This also accounts for the suffering and pain caused by natural occurrences such as hurricanes and epidemics. When God was removed from the creation, the ground was cursed (Genesis 3:17) and all of creation was "subjected to futility," (Romans 8:20–22). So, suffering and pain do not diminish either the omnipotence or goodness of God. Rather, it tells us about the nature of God. A Being who is wholly good cannot fellowship that which is evil. When man exercised his God given free-will to violate the will of God, evil sprang into the creation resulting in the separation of God from His creation and the existence of pain, suffering and death. If the omnipotence and/or goodness of God are to be

seriously questioned, one must also question whether he is willing to give up free-will.

How Can A Christian Respond To The Pain And Suffering Of The World?

Before we conclude this discussion of God and suffering, let's consider the good that suffering can produce in our lives. This is not to say that all suffering occurs for a reason, *cf. Ecclesiastes 9:12*. Much of the suffering in this world is a by-product of the simple fact that the creation is separated from its Creator. Yet, the power and goodness of God are again demonstrated by the positive ways pain and suffering can shape us.

1. Pain and suffering can prompt us to place more trust in God. If pain and suffering exist because we are separated from God, shouldn't we want to be reunited with Him to be relieved from our suffering? To do so, we must trust Him.
 - *"let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good."* (1 Peter 4:19 ESV)
 - *"It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes."* (Psalms 119:71 ESV)
 - C.S. Lewis: "God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world... No doubt Pain as God's megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepentant rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul."⁵
2. Suffering can produce character.
 - *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."* (James 1:2–4 ESV)
 - *"For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness."* (Hebrews 12:10 ESV)
3. Suffering can expand our influence. *"But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness."* (Luke 21:12–13 ESV)
4. Suffering can show the genuineness of our faith.
 - *"In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."* (1 Peter 1:6–7 ESV)

- C.S. Lewis: “God has not been trying to experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who didn’t.”⁶
- 5. Suffering should cause us to examine our own lives and to repent of any wrongdoing. “*There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.’*” (Luke 13:1–3 ESV)
- 6. Finally, suffering should move us to compassion. Recall the parable of the good Samaritan and why the Samaritan’s conduct is to be emulated: “*But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.*” (Luke 10:33 ESV)

A Final Word

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16 ESV)

“But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5 ESV)

“But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” (2 Peter 3:13 ESV)

Suffering and pain exist only because the Creator is separated from the creation; He cannot fellowship evil. This evil exists because man has free-will, a gift that few would be willing to lose. Does God still love us? The gift of Jesus answers a resounding YES! God became flesh to suffer and die so that we would not have to suffer always. Now, we can await the new heavens and earth: the renewal of our existence with God, where righteousness dwells and suffering ceases.

But, what about the suffering that God causes in the form of punishment? Does divine punishment and the doctrine of Hell prove that God is mean? Parts 2 & 3 of this series deal with these issues.

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9-23-09

¹ Lewis, C.S. *God in the Dock*. The Family Christian Library: The Timeless Writings of C.S. Lewis. Page 464.

² Sagan, Carl. *The Varieties of Scientific Experience*. Page 29.

³ Ehrman, Bart D. *God's Problem*. Page 1,3.

⁴ wiki.epicurus.info/Problem_of_evil (The original written source of Epicurus' argument is lost to us; all we have to go by is how Lactantius, a hostile Christian critic, rephrases Epicurus' argument)

⁵ Lewis, C.S. *The Problem Of Pain*. Page 91,93-94.

⁶ Lewis, C.S. *A Grief Observed*. Page 52.