

Why God Permits Evil

“Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”—Genesis 2:17

Why doesn't God do something about all the suffering that is in the world today? Why does God allow an innocent baby to sicken and die? Multitudes are killed or maimed by tornadoes, cyclones, typhoons, and earthquakes—cannot God do something about this? When hundreds are killed in accidents over a single weekend, “Has God no pity?” As far back as history reaches, man has suffered and died in war, pestilence, famine, and calamities. And all in every generation have finally died, having been beaten down by the great enemy Death. Abel, a son of Adam, whose sacrifice was pleasing to the LORD, was the first to die, being murdered by his brother Cain. Today more than a hundred thousand humans die every day. Our hospitals and mental institutions are filled with the suffering and dying. No wonder many are wondering where God is, and what he is doing about the distresses of humanity.

Job Seeks the Answer

The question of why God permits evil is not a new one; it has been asked by thinking men and women throughout the ages. Thousands of years ago a faithful servant of God named Job became personally concerned with discovering the meaning of his own suffering. The record of this is found in a book of the Bible which bears Job's name. The first verse of this book informs us that Job was an upright man who feared God and shunned sin.

Job was a prosperous man, abundantly blessed by the LORD along material lines. “His substance ... was seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, and five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the men of the east.” (Job 1: 3) Job was also blessed with a large family, and he desired that they too should be blessed by the LORD. Job prayed for his family, and offered sacrifice, because “It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.” —vss. 4,5

But experiences were ahead for Job for which he was not wholly prepared. Satan, the great adversary of God and men, charged that this servant of the LORD was loyal to God only because of the abundance with which the LORD had blessed him. In answer to this charge God permitted Satan to inflict calamities upon Job to test his fidelity. God had no doubt about the outcome, and in his wisdom he knew that the temporary suffering he permitted would, in the end, prove to be a great blessing to Job.

Job did experience great trouble. “There was a day when his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: and there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them:

and the Sabians fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword, and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: and, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee."—Job 1:13-19

Job Still Loyal

Job's reaction to these evil tidings was: "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." We read that "in all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly." (vss. 21, 22) Then God permitted further troubles to come upon Job. His health was taken away. He was smitten with "boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown. And he took him a potsherd to scrape himself withal; and he sat down among the ashes." (Job 2:7,8) Then Job's wife turned against him and said, "Curse God, and die." To this Job replied, "Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"—vss. 9,10

Job did not turn away from God when trouble came upon him, as so many throughout the ages have done. His chief concern was to know why God permitted him to be afflicted with such bitter experiences, and throughout his book we find evidences of his search for this understanding. After Job was stricken down with disease, three of his friends came to comfort him. Later in the book we are informed that the views they expressed to Job were not correct.—Job 42:7

There is chapter after chapter of philosophizing by Job and his three friends. But what it all amounts to is that according to Job's friends he was suffering because he had committed some gross sins which he was hiding from them, and for which he had not repented and sought God's forgiveness. Job, of course, knew that he was not perfect, but he also knew that he had not willfully transgressed God's laws, so he did not accept this explanation.

Evil Men Prosper

Besides, Job knew that frequently evil men prospered, and apparently escaped the evils that come upon so many. So he answered his friends: "Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, are mighty in power? Their seed is established in their sight with them, and their offspring before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, neither is the rod of God upon them. Their bull gendereth, and faileth not; their cow calveth, and casteth not

her calf. They send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance. They take the timbrel and harp, and rejoice at the sound of the organ. They spend their days in wealth (*margin*, or, 'in mirth'), and in a moment go down to the grave [without suffering a long, painful illness].”—Job 21:7-13

While Job knew that the explanation offered by his friends was not the true one, yet he did not understand why God was allowing him to suffer so severely. In a beautiful, poetic manner he describes his search for an understanding: “Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: on the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him: but he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.”—Job 23:8-10

God’s Reply

Beginning with chapter 38 of this remarkable book, the LORD answers Job’s searching. This answer is couched largely in question form. The many questions were designed to remind Job that he really knew very little about God, and because of his limited knowledge in every field where the LORD manifests himself, he should not be surprised at failing to comprehend fully why he was being permitted to suffer.

Is this not an important viewpoint for us to keep in mind? When we ask why God doesn’t do something about human suffering, are we not assuming that if God had the intelligence we possess he certainly would do something? And then, perhaps, if we do not see our wishes carried out, we may tend to doubt that there is a God. If we find ourselves following this approach, it would be well to consider the questions which God asked Job.

There are four chapters of these questions. They all concern the wonders of God’s Creation. God asks Job if he was present when he laid the foundations of the earth; if he understood the laws by which the tides of the sea were controlled. He asks him about the instincts and habits of the various birds and animals, and even of the great monsters of the sea. Then Job is asked if he can explain the wisdom and power that are represented in these marvels of Creation.

As the questioning proceeds Job interrupts and says, “Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth. Once have I spoken; but I will not answer: yea, twice; but I will proceed no further.”—Job 40:4,5

Important Lesson for All

Job was beginning to understand that it was not for him to judge God according to his own limited understanding. This is also a good lesson for all of us. It is not for us to lose faith in God, or even to criticize him. The proper attitude is one of humility, and of earnestly seeking the answer to our questions from the only proper source, the Word of God.

Job finally learned the meaning of his severe trial. He learned that its loving purpose was to give him a clearer understanding of God, that he might serve him more faithfully and with greater appreciation. He speaks of this clearer understanding as ‘seeing’ the LORD, instead of merely having heard about him. “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee.” (Job 42:2-5) Since he had gained such wealth of understanding, Job’s brief period of suffering must have seemed to him to have been a most valuable experience.

Besides restoring Job’s health, we read that “the LORD blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses. He had also seven sons and three daughters ... And in all the land were no women found so fair as the daughters of Job: and their father gave them inheritance among their brethren.”—Job 42:12-15

An Illustration

God’s design in the general permission of evil throughout the ages was and is the same as in the case of Job. He created Adam a perfect human, in his own image. Being in the image of God implied an ability to reason. “Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts? or who hath given understanding to the heart?” (Job 38:36) It was the Creator. This was in contrast to what we call instinct, which had been given to the lower animals.

God did not desire his human creation to be like robots, without a sense of understanding. So man was given the ability to learn, and was free to govern himself by the knowledge he attained. What man would do with this knowledge was ultimately to determine his eternal destiny.

Man acquires knowledge through his five senses. He learns from *observation* by exercise of his sense of sight, and by *information* from what he hears. Man feels pain when he comes in contact with boiling water, and learns by *experience* to temper the water he uses. Man smells the fragrance of a rose and is delighted by it, but turns in revolt at the presence of unpleasant odors. Man appreciates the taste of wholesome food, but learns to avoid unpalatable things, even though they may appear beautiful. Thus we see that in the exercise of his five senses man learns from observation, information and experience.

If man was to continue as a faithful child of God, it was essential that he receive a knowledge of evil as well as of good, that he might be able to make an intelligent choice between the two. God does not desire blind worship, but a fidelity to and trust in him which is based upon understanding and appreciation. God desires those to worship him who “worship him in spirit and in truth,” Jesus said. (John 4:23,24) To accomplish this for Adam and his offspring is one of the major objectives of the permission of evil in the great Divine plan of human salvation from sin and death.

Information Not Enough

Right and wrong, as principles, are established by Divine law. The world today is filled with crime, chaos, and suffering because God's laws, his standards of right and wrong, are ignored and denied. While man was endowed with a conscience, the conscience itself is not aware of what is right and what is wrong unless it is furnished with this information from an authoritative source, which in the world today is the Word of God, the Bible.

Knowing that Adam possessed the ability to understand facts communicated to him, God placed a test of obedience upon him, defining the law which was involved. The Creator had provided our first parents with a wonderful home "eastward in Eden," possessing "every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food." (Gen. 2:8-17) There were the trees of life, and another which is described as "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." The LORD commanded Adam not to partake of this particular tree, and informed him that the penalty for disobedience would be death. "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." The Creator had a right to demand obedience of his human creatures.

This demand of obedience was a Divine law. And since God informed Adam that death would be the penalty for disobeying, we can say that by information he knew the result of transgression. He knew that disobedience would lead to death.

Experience Needed

But this information was not sufficient to deter him from taking the wrong course. He lacked a heart understanding of what was involved in his disobedience, because his knowledge was not based on experience. Doubtless Adam loved his Creator, but perhaps he falsely reasoned that since Eve had already transgressed, and would die, it would be better to die with her than to live without her. So, not having the strength that experimental knowledge would have given him, Adam transgressed Divine law and was plunged into death.

A Knowledge of Good and Evil

Adam's freewill disobedience was to lead ultimately to a fuller knowledge of God and of his standards of right and wrong. The tree of which he was forbidden to partake was 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. It followed that having partaken of this tree he would gain the knowledge implied by its name, even though in the process he would need to suffer and die.

After both Adam and Eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit, the LORD said concerning them, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil." (Gen. 3:22) This does not mean that the forbidden fruit had some magical effect upon our first parents, enabling them at once to have a full knowledge of good and evil.

We think the LORD's statement means, rather, that because of disobedience man was now destined to know both good and evil, and that he was to gain this knowledge through experience. And the education of our first parents soon began. They were driven out of

their garden home into the unfinished earth to die. They were to be plagued with all sorts of unfavorable elements spoken of as “thorns” and “thistles” (Gen. 3:18) which the earth would bring forth to them, and against which they would have to struggle until, in death, they would return to the earth from which they were taken.

God designed that our first parents should generate an entire race. God knew that in order for Adam’s children to really know him and have a true appreciation of his standards of right and wrong they also needed to learn by experience the terrible results of disobedience. He therefore allowed all of Adam’s offspring to be carried into death with him. Paul wrote, “By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men.”—Rom 5:12

Death Plagues All

For more than six thousand years, humanity has been exposed to evil, and by experience has been learning the awful results of disobedience. The seeds of death are manifest in everyone, by myriads of infirmities and diseases of mind and body. Neither the young nor the old have escaped. Upheavals of nature in an unfinished earth, accidents, and men’s own cruelties to one another in war and in crime all contribute to the process.

Throughout the ages God has not interfered with the great enemy, Death. Paul informs us concerning the people as a whole that “God gave them over to a mind void of judgment.” (Rom. 1:28, *Margin*) He has not restrained humanity from taking its own course, although selfish and sinful.

But God’s great design does not end with the human race prostrate in death, for through Jesus, the Redeemer, he has made a provision for all to be awakened from death and restored to life. Paul wrote, “By man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” (I Cor. 15:21,22) This provision of life through Christ is based on Jesus’ own death and resurrection. He said, “My flesh ... I will give for the life of the world.” (John 6:51) It was for this reason that Jesus was born into the world as a human.—Heb. 2:9,14

In describing the arrangement by which Jesus became the Redeemer of the world, the Bible uses the word “ransom.” (I Tim. 2:6) The word used in the Greek text means ‘a corresponding price of release’. Jesus was a perfect man, just as Adam was a perfect man before he sinned. Thus in death Jesus became a corresponding price for the forfeited life of Adam. And as all mankind lost life through Adam, so all mankind is redeemed from death through Christ.

Just and Unjust

This means that in God’s due time all will be awakened from the sleep of death. There is to be “a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.” (Acts 24:15) Yes, throughout the ages, while sin and selfishness have predominated, there have been noble

men and women who, for their faith and obedience, are spoken of by Paul as ‘just’. But these have been allowed to suffer, just as Job did—not to punish them, but to test and prepare them for exalted positions which the Creator has designed for them.

There have also been millions of noble, unselfish people who have had no faith in God. One reason for their unbelief has been their observation that the innocent suffer as well as the guilty. They could not understand why an infant is allowed to die. They could not reconcile the idea of a loving, powerful God with the fact that so many have suffered sickness, blindness, insanity or other cruel maladies. But had these unbelievers known the full plan of God, they would have understood these situations.

Moreover, God has been flagrantly misrepresented throughout the ages. Many of the professed believers in Christianity who bemoan the suffering they see around them, try to believe that all who die in unbelief will be tortured eternally in a burning hell of fire and brimstone. This blasphemous teaching has helped to create many unbelievers, for a properly reasoning mind cannot believe that a God of love would thus torture his creatures. Such cruelty is even contrary to the laws of civilized men.

The First and Second Lessons

Few in all the ages have as yet profited by their experience with evil. But we have seen, according to the Bible, those who sleep in death will be awakened, and given an opportunity then to profit from the experiences of the present life. Then they will enter another term, as it were, in their school of experience.

In Job’s case, when the experience was over, he could say “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee.” (Job 42:5) So it will be with the world of mankind. When the experience of suffering and death is over, and they are awakened from death, their faulty understanding of God will be corrected. Then they will learn of the gracious, loving provision the Creator made for them through Christ to ransom them from death, and restore them to life.

Joy in the Morning

The psalmist wrote, “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.” (Ps. 30:5) This ‘nighttime’ of sin, sorrow, and death began with the disobedience of our first parents. And it has indeed been a night of weeping. The sorrow that has borne down upon the human race has been bitter, and many in their distress have wondered whether God has any pity.

But there is to be a morning of joy for the human race! That morning of joy will be ushered in by the rising of “the Sun of righteousness,” who will have “healing in his wings.” (Mal. 4:2) Jesus is this glorious ‘Sun of righteousness’. The new day of blessing will be brought about through the establishment of his kingdom, which is a government of righteousness foretold by God’s holy prophets.—Acts 3:19-21

Associated with Jesus as rulers in his kingdom will be his faithful followers—those who have suffered and died with him. Jesus died, the just for the unjust, and his followers voluntarily suffer and die unjustly with him, and will be exalted to the highest of all spirit realms of life. Jesus said to his disciples, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” (John 14:2,3) The Scriptures also declare that these will reign with Christ a thousand years, being brought forth from death in “the first resurrection.”—Rev. 20:6

Christ and his followers, a “little flock,” (Luke 12:32) will be the invisible, spirit rulers of the world during the thousand years of his kingdom. They will be represented here on earth by another group of God’s faithful servants, each of whom proved loyal to God under adversity during the ages preceding the coming of Jesus. These will be made “princes in all the earth.” (Ps. 45:16) This group will consist of the ancient and worthy servants of God of past ages, beginning with righteous Abel. It will include such outstanding figures as Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Daniel, and all God’s holy prophets.

These ‘princes in all the earth’ will be awakened from death to human perfection, and for a thousand years will be the representatives of the Divine Christ among men. What a wonderful governmental arrangement this will be! It will establish universal and lasting peace, which man in his selfishness has been unable to do. Christ, the Divine Head of this government, is “The Prince of Peace,” and we are assured that “of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end.”— Isa. 9:6,7

The “House” of the LORD

In Micah 4:1-4 the kingdom of Christ is referred to as God’s ruling house. “In the last days ... the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it. And many nations shall ... say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the Law shall go forth of Zion, and the Word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken it.”

The ancient nation of Israel to whom this prophecy was first addressed was governed from a mountain: Mount Zion in Jerusalem. So the LORD uses this background in presenting this prophecy of Messiah’s kingdom. ‘The mountain’ of the LORD is the kingdom of the LORD, represented by the symbolic Zion of this prophecy.

Notice that under the rulership of this kingdom the people learn the LORD’s way. The entire period of Christ’s kingdom will be one of learning, of education. In this prophecy

one of the results of this education is that the people will learn war no more. Then the angels' message of peace on earth will be translated into reality. The Prince of Peace will then reign supreme.—Luke 2:13,14

Under Vine and Fig Tree

Also, there will be economic security. This is symbolized in the prophecy by the assurance that every man will dwell under his own 'vine and fig tree'. Much of the suffering in the world throughout the ages has been due to lack of food, clothing, and shelter. But this will be corrected in Christ's kingdom.

Nor will peace and security be the only blessings guaranteed to the people. Isaiah wrote, "In this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the LORD God will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him ... we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation."—Isa. 25:6-9

In addition to a supplying a 'feast of fat things', 'the vail' now covering the faces of the people will be removed. This clearly refers to a symbolic curtain which hinders the people from seeing and knowing God. Another prophecy says that then "the eyes of the blind shall be opened." (Isa. 35:5) Those literally blind will have their sight restored, and those spiritually blind will acquire a true vision of God and his glorious character.

All Evil to be Destroyed

Of this same time we read, "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea." (Isa. 11:9) There will be no more suffering and death as a result of Adam's transgression. Killing calamities will no longer be permitted. Peaceful and prosperous conditions will then exist, because the knowledge of the LORD will fill the earth 'as the waters cover the sea'.

The LORD will swallow up death in victory. (I Cor. 15:54) What a blessed assurance this is! Paul wrote that Christ would reign until all enemies are put under his feet, and that "the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." (I Cor. 15:25, 26) The result of this is described in Revelation 21:4, "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."

First Experience with Good

During the reign of Christ, Adam and his children in general will receive their first real experience with 'good'. This will complete their education respecting the importance of the standards of right and wrong. Though perfect when created, Adam did not have sufficient knowledge to prevent his transgression. But like Job, Adam and his race will 'see' God as a result of their experiences.

The God they will then 'see' will be the one they have longed to know and to serve. They will recognize the value of their experience. They will realize that the few short years of hardship through which they passed were as nothing compared with the eternity of joy then stretching out before them under the panoply of Divine love. No wonder they will say, "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him ... we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation."—Isa. 25:9

At the conclusion of the harrowing experiences which Job passed through, he was restored to health, and his family was also restored to him. This partially illustrates the great blessing which lies ahead for all mankind during the reign of Christ.

As we have seen, this loving provision for the human race includes those who have fallen asleep in death. This is the key to an understanding of why God permits evil, for it means that his viewpoint of human experience is not dependent upon man's present short span of life. God is viewing this as a lesson which, in the resurrection, can be compared with all the good that will then be showered upon the people.

A Time of Learning

This future period of blessing is also described in the Bible as one of judgment, or trial. Isaiah wrote that when the LORD's judgments are abroad in the earth, "the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness." (Isa. 26:9) All the inequalities of the present will then be righted. Those who now willfully oppose God and his laws, and unjustly treat their fellows, will then receive appropriate discipline designed to correct their wrongdoing. All the circumstances relative to each individual will be considered, and the people blessed or punished accordingly.

Even those who have died in infancy will be awakened, will mature to adulthood, and have an opportunity to enjoy God's blessings. In the comforting promise to mothers who lose their children, the prophet wrote: "Thus saith the LORD; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rahel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not. Thus saith the LORD; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the LORD; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy."—Jer. 31:15,16

Having had real experience with both good and evil, each individual will be able to choose intelligently between good, and live forever, or evil, and again be sentenced to death—a death from which there will be no resurrection. Christ will then be King, and Judge supreme. Peter also refers to him as a great "Prophet," and informs us that it shall

come to pass “that every soul, which will not hear [or obey] that Prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.”—Acts 3:22,23

During the present nighttime of sin and death all die—believers and unbelievers, the innocent and the guilty, the righteous and the unrighteous. But during the reign of Christ only those who willfully disobey the laws of God will be destroyed. All others will continue to live and mature toward perfection. If they continue faithful, they will enter as perfect humans into the everlasting future ages of happiness and life “with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads ... and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”—Isa. 35:10