

WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN?

A suicide bomber kills innocent people. A teenager suffers paralysis from an automobile accident. An earthquake shatters a city. A young boy sobs uncontrollably after being beaten by his step-father. A massive hurricane devastates the lives of tens of thousands of people. A woman is raped by her boyfriend. Soldiers and civilians are slain and crippled in war. A small child contracts a fatal disease.

Why do such things happen? If God loves us, as Christianity teaches, why is there so much pain and suffering in the world? Is God powerless to stop it? Or does He just not care enough to do anything about it? If we expect easy answers to these questions, we are fooling ourselves. But there are answers. We will begin with the self-restraint of God.

Free Will. If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that human beings are the primary cause of suffering in this life. Most of the evils you can name—violence, substance abuse, adultery, slander, and so on—are caused by a human being hurting others, or himself, through words or deeds. Truly, the human race’s pain is largely self-inflicted. But doesn’t God permit all of this evil? Of course He does. He has to.

Christianity teaches that God loves us, more than we can possibly comprehend. However, God’s love is not a one-way street. God wants us to love Him back; He wants us to have a loving relationship with Him. The “greatest commandment” is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”¹ In the Bible, God describes His relationship to us as that of a Father—a loving Father who wants us to be happy.² However, love cannot be commanded, bought, sold, or required. It must be freely given.

What is this “love” that God wants from us? The Greek word is *agapaô*, which refers to “the kind of love shown even when the one loved

¹ Matthew 22:37-38; see also Mark 12:28-30. (All quotations herein are from the *New American Standard* translation.)

² See, for example: Deuteronomy 32:6; Isaiah 63:16; Jeremiah 3:19; Matthew 5:16, 5:45, 5:48, 6:1, 6:4, 6:6, 6:8-9, 6:14-15, 6:18, 6:26, 6:32, 7:11, 10:20, 10:29, 18:14, 23:9; Mark 11:25-26; Luke 6:36, 11:13, 12:30, 12:32; John 4:21, 4:23; Romans 8:15-16; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3-4, 4:4-7; Ephesians 1:2, 4:6, 6:23; Philippians 1:2, 4:20;

has no merit for that love. It is love that must be chosen and willed”;³ “giving love that seeks the highest good for the other”;⁴ love that is deliberate and self-sacrificing.⁵ It is “the antithesis of selfishness.”⁶ In other words, *agapaô* is not a feeling, but a choice. Most of the references to “love” in the New Testament use the term *agapaô* or a derivation of it.⁷

If this is what God wants from us, then He must give us a real *choice*. Machines cannot love in this way, nor can animals. We can. But introducing choice into the world means that some of us will choose badly. We can choose to follow God and try to obey Him, or we can choose to reject Him and disobey Him. When we reject God, we embrace, at least to some degree, the evils that He hates:⁸ selfishness, greed, hatred,

³ *The Life Application Concise New Testament Commentary* (at Romans 12:14-21), in *Bible Explorer 3.0* software.

⁴ *Ibid.* (at Ephesians 5:28)

⁵ *Ibid.* (at 1 Peter 2:17)

⁶ *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, in *Bible Explorer 3.0* software.

⁷ The following New Testament verses use the Greek term, *agapaô*, or a form of it, such as *agape*: Matthew 5:43-44, 5:46, 6:24, 19:19, 22:37, 22:39, 24:12; Mark 10:21, 12:30-31, 12:33; Luke 6:27, 6:32, 6:35, 7:5, 7:42, 7:47, 10:27, 11:42-43, 16:13; John 3:35, 5:42, 8:42, 10:17, 13:34-35, 14:15, 14:21, 14:23-24, 14:31, 15:9-10, 15:12-13, 15:17, 17:26, 21:15-16; Romans 5:5, 5:8, 8:28, 8:35, 8:39, 12:9, 13:8-10, 14:15, 15:30; 1 Corinthians 2:9, 4:21, 8:1, 8:3, 13:1-4, 13:8, 13:13, 14:1, 16:14, 16:24; 2 Corinthians 2:4, 2:8, 5:14, 6:6, 8:7-8, 8:24, 9:7, 11:11, 12:15, 13:11, 13:14; Galatians 5:6, 5:13-14, 5:22; Ephesians 1:4, 1:15, 2:4, 3:17, 3:19, 4:2, 4:15-16, 5:2, 5:25, 5:28, 5:33, 6:23, 6:35; Philippians 1:9, 1:16, 2:1-2; Colossians 1:4, 1:8, 2:2, 3:14, 3:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 3:6, 3:12, 4:9, 5:8, 5:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 2:10, 3:5; 1 Timothy 1:5, 1:14, 2:15, 4:12, 6:11; 2 Timothy 1:7, 1:13, 2:22, 3:10; Titus 2:2; Philemon 1:5, 1:7; Hebrews 6:10, 10:24, 12:6; James 1:12, 2:5, 2:8; 1 Peter 1:8, 1:22, 2:17, 3:10, 4:8, 5:14; 2 Peter 1:7; 1 John 2:5, 2:10, 2:15, 3:1, 3:10-11, 3:14, 3:16-18, 3:23, 4:7-12, 4:16-21, 5:1-3; 2 John 1:1, 1:3, 1:5-6; 3 John 1:6; Jude 1:2, 1:12, 1:21; Revelation 1:5, 2:4, 2:19, 12:11.

In contrast, the following New Testament verses use the term *phileô* (referring to brotherly love), or a form of it: Matthew 6:5, 10:37, 23:6; Luke 20:46; John 5:20, 11:3, 12:25, 15:19, 16:27, 21:15-17; Romans 12:10; 1 Corinthians 16:22; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 Timothy 3:3, 6:10; Titus 2:4, 3:4, 3:15; Hebrews 13:1, 13:5; 1 Peter 1:22; 3 John 1:9; Revelation 3:19, 22:15. (There is some duplication in these lists, because a few verses contain both *agapaô* and *phileô*: John 21:15-16; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22.)

These lists were derived from the NASB Greek-Hebrew Dictionary, found in *Bible Explorer 3.0* software.

⁸ Some will argue that choosing to reject God inevitably leads to evil practices, while others believe that we always have the choice to do good or evil regardless of our relationship with God. That is a topic for another time. For our purposes here, the difference is unimportant. We have a choice to follow God or to reject Him. Whether we turn to evil because of our rejection of God, or we demonstrate our rejection of God

immorality, and so on.⁹ As a result of our choosing badly, people get physically and emotionally hurt. As sad as that situation is, God must live with it, because the only alternative is to eliminate the opportunity for us to have a loving relationship with Him.

In the movie, *Oh God Book II*, a child asks God why bad things happen, and He responds by saying, “I could never figure out how to make anything with just one side to it.” God could certainly eliminate evil by taking away our free will, but *agapaô* love would go with it. If we could no longer choose evil, we could also no longer choose God. And so God does what He can to persuade us to make good choices: He commands,¹⁰ He entreats,¹¹ He threatens,¹² He promises;¹³ and He sent Jesus to demonstrate His love in the flesh. He gave mankind the following choice long ago, and continues to do so today:

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him. . . .”¹⁴

by the evil choices we make, the result is the same—we follow our own path instead of God’s ways, and we hurt each other as a result.

⁹ Paul refers to such evil as the “deeds of the flesh”: “Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. . . .” (Galatians 5:19-21) In contrast, the “fruit of the Spirit” results from following God: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. . . .” (Galatians 5:22-23)

¹⁰ For example, see Exodus 20:1-17 (the Ten Commandments), or Deuteronomy 6:5 (“you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”). See also: Deuteronomy 10:12, 11:1, 11:13, 11:22, 19:9, 30:16; Joshua 22:5.

¹¹ Joshua 23:11: “‘So take diligent heed to yourselves to love the LORD your God.’” And see Psalm 31:23: “O love the LORD, all you His godly ones!”

¹² See 1 Corinthians 16:22: “If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed.” See also Deuteronomy 7:10, 11:16-17, 30:15-20; Psalm 145:20.

¹³ See James 1:12: “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.” See also Deuteronomy 7:9, 11:13-15, 11:22-25, 30:15-20; Nehemiah 1:5; Psalms 18:1-3, 97:10, 145:20.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 30:19-20

If we insist on living our lives apart from God, He must live with the consequences. And so must we. That is the price of freedom.

Cause and Effect. But free will is not a complete answer to the question of why bad things happen, is it? Maybe God feels compelled to let us choose, even if that means a lot of us will choose unwisely, but He could still prevent the resulting pain and suffering, couldn't He? For example, God certainly has the power to keep a drunk driver from hurting himself and others. So why doesn't He? Any parent, teacher, or judge can probably answer that one.

When I was a child, I saw a prickly pear cactus on my uncle's property. Carefully avoiding the long pointy needles, which were obviously sharp and threatening, I touched the apparently smooth skin of the cactus, and learned a painful lesson—the “smooth” skin has very tiny needles that hurt like a splinter in your finger. Since then, I have always been very careful around cactus. Sometimes experience really is the best teacher. When a child misbehaves and is punished, she learns not to misbehave. When an adult commits a crime, he is sent to jail in the hope that he will learn not to commit crimes. Our suffering teaches us not to do foolish things. And sometimes we learn through the suffering of others. But we learn only because poor choices have consequences.

Substance abuse experts know that when an alcoholic is protected by friends and family members from the adverse effects of his drinking, he is very unlikely to stop drinking—because for him there are no adverse consequences. The best (and perhaps the only) hope for the alcoholic is to remove these shields and allow him to suffer the full effects of his drinking, even if that means the loss of job, money, family, friends, and even self-respect. Similarly, if God protected us from the adverse consequences of our bad choices, we would never learn to choose rightly. We would never learn to choose God. And we would be the worse for it.

But I believe the problem goes even deeper: when we ask why our poor choices have unpleasant consequences, we are asking the wrong question. It is like asking, “why does a bad dog bite?” The dog doesn't bite because he's a “bad” dog—he is a bad dog because he bites. Similarly, decisions don't have harmful consequences because they are “bad” decisions; they are bad decisions because of their harmful consequences. If I choose to rake the leaves in my yard, that is not ordinarily a bad decision. But what if my yard is a minefield? The fact that I could blow myself up by raking leaves suddenly makes this a poor choice. The only difference is the potential harmful consequences. Moral choices are no different. God did

not prohibit theft and murder because He wanted to deprive us of something fun, but because those acts cause harm to people. “Bad” choices are “bad” because of their adverse consequences—to the victim, obviously, and also to the perpetrator. The purpose of the vast majority of God’s commands in the Bible is to save us from the consequences that inevitably flow from our poor choices, by teaching us how to make good moral decisions. In the Bible God has warned us to stay away from minefields, and He has even told us where the minefields are—why then do we blame Him when we go there anyway and get blown up?

But perhaps you are now wondering why the consequences of our bad choices are often so severe. Why does a teenager who drives foolishly have to end up dead, or permanently crippled? Couldn’t God mitigate the consequences? Well, in many cases He does: physical pain generally subsides; emotional pain diminishes; we adapt to disabilities; and we learn from our mistakes so that we do not have to repeat them. All of these factors help to mitigate the adverse consequences of our choices. In addition, God gave us the resiliency to bounce back and go on with life. Yet what about the ultimate consequence: death? Why does God allow people to die—especially at a young age? To understand this, we must address the final and ultimate answer to why bad things happen.

The Eternal Perspective. We have discussed the fact that God allows suffering because that is the inevitable cost of allowing us to make our own moral choices, and that He gives us that freedom because He doesn’t want robots, but people who can respond to Him in love and obedience. Yet that is still not a complete answer to the problem, because not all suffering is caused by our choices. Victims of an earthquake, tornado, hurricane, or other natural disaster do not usually suffer because of any choice they have made, but because of circumstances beyond their control. Similarly, terrible and fatal diseases afflict people every day, often without regard to any choices they have made in life. And sometimes people—even very young children—die from such things. How can a loving and powerful God possibly permit this to happen?

I am convinced that the secret lies in the ephemeral nature of this life, which we too often lose sight of, or simply refuse to see. Christ walked this earth approximately two-thousand years ago, and none of us will live one-tenth that long. God, however, is eternal.¹⁵ He has a different view of this life, because He realizes, as we often do not, that the life that begins after we

¹⁵ See, for example: Deuteronomy 33:27; Isaiah 9:6; Romans 16:26; 1 Timothy 1:17

die is the one that truly matters. Paul realized this when he said: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”¹⁶ And: “If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.”¹⁷ The primary focus of the New Testament is not on this temporary existence, but on God’s promise of eternal life,¹⁸ and on how to attain it. (For more on how to attain eternal life, see “For God So Loved the World.”)

So what does eternal life have to do with the bad things that happen in this life? Everything. What we now think of as “bad” may not be bad at all, when viewed from God’s eternal perspective. For example, would you rather be a child who dies at a young age and goes to Heaven, where crying, pain, and death do not exist,¹⁹ and where “God will wipe every tear from their eyes,”²⁰ or a person who endures 90 years of pain, sorrow, and trouble in this life? Heaven is a wonderful place; rather than dreading death, we should look forward to it. As Paul said, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”²¹ We may one day conclude that the most fortunate among us were those who died young and reached Heaven quickly.

Yet this is only half of the answer, for I believe God has a far more important reason for not abolishing the diseases and natural disasters that are so frightening and destructive. That reason is pride—our pride. Now I do not mean the pride that enhances self-esteem and self-worth, or the pride of a job well done. No, I am referring to the arrogant pride that makes a person feel more important, more capable, and more accomplished than he really is; pride that bestows feelings of self-sufficiency and independence; pride that feeds the illusion of invincibility. This type of arrogant, self-inflated pride is the great enemy of God. It drives a wedge between God and His people, by convincing us that we do not need God. His Truth, and even His existence, become trivial matters, unworthy of our attention, because we believe we can get along very nicely without God. I was once such a person.

This type of arrogant pride is defeated by fear and suffering, which force us to realize how fragile and helpless each of us truly is. We are at the

¹⁶ Romans 8:18

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:19

¹⁸ See, for example: Matthew 19:29, 25:46; Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30; John 3:15-16, 3:36, 4:14, 4:36, 5:24, 6:27, 6:40, 6:47, 6:54, 10:28, 12:25, 12:50, 17:2-3; Acts 13:46-48; Romans 2:7, 5:21, 6:22-23; Galatians 6:8; 1 Timothy 1:16, 6:12; Titus 1:2, 3:7; 1 John 2:25, 5:11-13; Jude 21.

¹⁹ Revelation 21:4

²⁰ Revelation 7:17 and 21:4

²¹ Philippians 1:21

mercy of powerful forces all around us. And when we finally understand our own weakness, we are ready to turn back to God for protection and hope.²² The saying that “there are no atheists in foxholes” illustrates this principle—fear, pain, and suffering drive us back to God. If in the process I also receive eternal life, then the event that prompts my reconciliation with God is not “bad,” even if it does cause temporary pain, suffering, or fear. From the eternal perspective of God, the cancer that takes your life could be the best thing that ever happened to you.

Conclusion. The pain, suffering, and unhappiness that we experience in this life have many causes—a lot of them of our own making—but these “bad things” also serve a purpose, much like guardrails on a highway. Guardrails can be damaging and painful if your car hits them, but they keep you on the road and protect you from greater dangers—such as oncoming cars or a sudden drop off a cliff. Similarly, the hurts of this life help to redirect us back to a loving relationship with our Creator, and are intended to protect us from something far worse than suffering in this life: missing out on the chance for eternal life. As Jesus said, “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?”²³

²² Perhaps nowhere is this principle better illustrated than in the Old Testament book of Judges. Time after time, the Israelites fall away from God and begin practicing evil, and each time they are brought to repentance through suffering. See Judges 3:5-9, 3:12-15, 4:1-3, 6:1-6, and 10:6-10. For some other examples of people turning to God amidst fear or suffering, see: Exodus 2:23; 1 Chronicles 5:19-20; 2 Chronicles 18:31;

²³ Mark 8:36; see also Matthew 16:26