

CHAPTER 18

Why Must We Suffer?

It has been said that only two things are certain in life: taxes and death. This list is incomplete. Three things are certain in everyone's life: taxes, suffering, and death. Society has accepted death and taxes, but suffering is a mystery. Six thousand years have elapsed from the time Adam and Eve left the garden, and every day since their eviction there has been suffering. Is there a connection?

A reporter for the magazine *US News and World Report* was conducting an interview with Bart D. Ehrman, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina. The reporter was gathering information for an article titled, "Why Must We Suffer?" that was to be published in the magazine's "Secrets of The Bible" edition. The article begins by explaining that the question, "Why must we suffer?" has perplexed scholars from the earliest Biblical times up to the present. Men such as Leibniz—theologian, philosopher, co-inventor of calculus, and author of the book *Theodicy*—wrestled with the question, "How can God be just, given the pain and misery in the world?" (62). Philosophers have added to the confusion by presenting three statements that are true in and of themselves, but which together create a conflicting argument. The first statement is, "God is all-powerful." The second statement is, "God is all-loving." The third statement is, "There is suffering" (62). Philosophers argue that the conflict comes when you agree that God is all-powerful and all-loving—but how do you make those beliefs fit a world where there is suffering? The question arises that if God loves us and is capable of doing anything He wants, then why does He allow suffering? Rabbi Harold Kushner argues, "God wishes he could do something about suffering, but he can't, because his hands are tied" (62). Elie Wiesel states in his book, *The Trial of God*, "that God is not all loving in the traditional sense of how man defines love" (62). The article ends with Professor Ehrman saying that nobody knows the answer, but "we can respond to it, which ought to be to try to alleviate suffering as much as we can, both on the local level and on the broader international level" (65).

My response to Mr. Leibniz's, Rabbi Kushner's, Mr. Wiesel's, and Mr. Ehrman's conclusions that God is not all-powerful, all-knowing, or all-loving is that they could not better demonstrate the imperfection and inadequacies of scholarly endeavors to discern the mind of God.

The following is my response to the question, "Why must we suffer?" God does not want bad things to happen to people—that is why He sacrificed His Son. Every kind of tragedy that has befallen humanity will continue to happen as a direct result of humanity's decision in Eden. Even natural disasters are a result of this decision in the garden, because all of creation is under the curse: "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now" (Romans 8:22, KJV). Remember, humanity made the choice in Eden to do things our way; therefore, there are consequences for wrong decisions.

To begin to understand why we suffer, humanity must not separate itself from Adam and Eve's rebellious act in the Garden of Eden. The following verses make it perfectly clear that the entire human race is as responsible as the first couple for the decision to disobey God's command:

"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come" (Romans 5:12–14, NKJV).

Therefore, the world is guilty, and consequences must follow for our admonition and instruction. If God did not allow these consequences to happen, how would people learn that God is the only source for life, hope, peace, and joy, and that without Him, there is hopelessness, war, suffering, and death? God is a good Father—and like all good fathers, He must allow His children to experience the consequences of their actions. I would guess that you have had to do the same with your own children.

Even though God's ways are above our ways, His original plans for His children are made clear in the beginning chapters of the book of Genesis. God was a father to the first couple, and He provided them with a home that was a garden paradise free from pain and sorrow. God the Father had a personal and intimate relationship with His children, even desiring to walk with them daily during the cool of the day. It was perfect. However, for a reason beyond comprehension, they severed their relationship with God by a rebellious act. Over time, the relationship between people and God became an impersonal, religious affair.

Even though God's plans for His children have been interrupted, God has not changed His mind: "I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him. That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past" (Ecclesiastes 3:14–15, KJV). From this understanding, we must formulate our beliefs and test our answers concerning what has been and is happening in the world.

Humanity will always struggle with the question "Why must we suffer?", because it is a spiritual issue and the natural mind cannot discern the spiritual. For Christians that are asking this question, have you forgotten that in the beginning when God created the human race, we did not suffer? Not only did we not suffer, but God placed us in a garden paradise where He provided for all of our needs. However, our rebellious hearts changed all of that. Here is a better question to ask: "Why do we blame God for our suffering?" We act like spoiled children who did something very wrong, and when the consequences of our actions cause us to suffer, we blame our parents. We further reveal our selfishness by telling our parents that they do not love us anymore.

It is never easy to accept responsibility and ownership for one's actions. However, when we start blaming others for our mistakes, we should have a déjà-vu experience. The blame game started with Adam's response, when confronted by God, for his disobedience: "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat" (Genesis 3:12, NKJV). Eve's response was, "The serpent beguiled me and I did eat" (Genesis 3:13, NKJV). Adam was blaming God for giving him a woman, and Eve was blaming the serpent. Humanity has had thousands of years to perfect the art of blaming others and God for their troubles. When will we ever learn that God is not the problem, but the solution?

Take comfort in the fact that God has not changed His mind about His children living in a world where there is no suffering or death. Our heavenly Father is also anxious to get things back to the way they were. Keep in mind that Adam and Eve's disobedience in the garden caused God to sacrifice His only begotten Son. The day is fast approaching when God will restore all things—but in the meantime, He is lovingly leading His children to an understanding about themselves so that what happened will never happen again.

The tragedies in the world today prove that God was not lying when He told Adam and Eve that if they ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they would die—not only die, but also suffer:

"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" (Genesis 3:17–19, ESV).

From that day forward, God has been teaching humanity a lesson by allowing the human race to experience the tragic consequences of a world run by a will other than His. In response to Rabbi Harold Kushner's comment, God's hands are not tied. The only thing tied was humankind's (forewarned) destiny to its rebellious act of disobedience. Suffering occurs because God is not a liar. Read again Genesis 3:17–19. As far as Mr. Wiesel's comment that God does not love in the traditional sense as man defines it—God is love. God's love for the human race defies the imagination in its intensity and passion. When Jesus said, "It is finished," the war was won, Satan was defeated, Christ was the victor, and the establishment of God's new kingdom is but days away. Remarkably, Jesus did all of this for you. A love demonstrated at the cross and that defies explanation. No greater love is shown than when one lays down his or her life for someone else.

In a "we concede" sort of a way, we should be happy that there is suffering, because if today there was peace, love, joy, and happiness on earth, then God would have been wrong—or worse, God would have been a liar. If there was no pain and suffering in the world, it would prove that humanity does not need God to live a peaceful and fulfilling life. If this were true, an even scarier thought would be that Satan spoke the truth when he conversed with Eve on that fateful day in paradise. Think about the ramifications of this scenario on the lives of every living being—past, present, and future.

If God would intervene by stopping all suffering, what then would the human race learn about the decision made in the Garden of Eden? Time has not eroded God's memory of that act of disobedience in His garden paradise, because it interrupted His plans. On God's calendar, it happened only six days ago. "But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Peter 3:8, ESV). A thousand years to God is but one day. The Lord speaks in terms that exclude time, because God's world is timeless. As long as humanity fails to take into account God's concept of time, we will always struggle to understand God's intentions. God has not forgotten or changed His plans about His crowning glory of creation living in paradise under His sovereign will and protection.

People use time as a rug under which to sweep bad experiences or past problems, in the hope that they and others will forget. However, remember, "Wherefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the hearts" (Corinthians 4:5, ASV).

In the US News and World Report article "Why Must We Suffer?", it says that the suffering in the world is God punishing those who are disobedient. God is a loving Father, not a mean judge just waiting to pounce if someone does something wrong. There are enough Christians doing that. Yes, God does chasten His children, but that is not why there is suffering in the world. A decision was made thousands of years ago that had a cataclysmic impact on all of creation. God, being a loving father, has to let His children experience the consequences of that decision, which is the root cause for a suffering world. The new kingdom will consist of a new heaven and new earth, and the inhabitants will be the sons and daughters of God who have learned this lesson. Finally, the only will left in the universe will be God's perfect will. "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" – The Lord's Prayer.

God's mission is to eliminate our suffering, and He began this quest by sending His Son to pay our debt. The cost was staggering, for Jesus suffered a degrading and gruesome death. However, because of a love that defies the imagination, Jesus took our place and paid the penalty with His life. The heavenly Father's love for humanity moved Him to fulfill His own laws and to keep His promises—regardless of the sacrifices. Even though the consequences from that rebellious act in the Garden of Eden are still being felt, they are our tutor to teach and remind us that only God's will is perfect.