

Why People Suffer (Part I)



DAVE MILLER, Ph.D.



EXISTENCE OF GOD

HUMAN SUFFERING

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Article In Brief.. 

Human beings have endured an unfathomable amount of suffering throughout the history of the world. Some conclude that this fact is sufficient proof that God does not exist and that life on Earth is essentially meaningless. However, the Christian viewpoint provides the one and only purpose for human existence which, in turn, enables a person to make sense of suffering.

[**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The following article is the first of a three-part series excerpted from Dr. Miller's recently published book *Why People Suffer* available through Apologetics Press.]

When Calamity Strikes

No doubt about it: the amount of suffering in the world throughout human history has been staggering and unfathomable. Contemplate the following:

Natural disasters

The natural disasters that have happened in human history are innumerable. Here are a few just from the last five centuries that resulted in catastrophic loss of human life. On January 23, 1556, some 830,000 people died when the Shaanxi earthquake hit China. On April 10, 1815, the volcanic explosion of Mount Tambora in Indonesia killed 92,000. Throughout China's history, extensive flooding has occurred countless times as a result of the mighty 3,000-mile-long Hwang Ho River. Several of the most terrible floods, with their ensuing famines, have been responsible for the deaths of more than a million people at a time. The southern levee of the river failed in Hunan Province in 1887, affecting a 50,000 square mile area. **More than two million people died** from drowning, starvation, or the epidemics that followed ("Huang He...", 2004).

One of the deadliest epidemics in history was the global flu outbreak of 1918 which killed 50 million people worldwide (Vergano, 2014; Taubenberger and Morens, 2006). In 1931, one to four million people died from flooding in China. Half a million people died when the Bholia cyclone struck East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) on November 13, 1970. Between 650,000 and 779,000 died on July 28, 1976 as a result of the Tangshan earthquake in China. On April 26, 1989, 1,300 were killed when the Daulatpur-Salturia tornado struck Manikganj, Bangladesh. In 1999, over 15,000 died from torrential rains and mudslides in Venezuela. In 2003, 70,000 died from the European heat wave. The Indian Ocean tsunami that devastated Indonesia on December 26, 2004 killed 230,000.

These incidents do not even begin to convey the countless comparable occurrences of nature's destruction throughout human history. In reality, such events have occurred repetitiously throughout the history of the world, and continue to do so—constantly: hurricanes, cyclones, earthquakes, tornados, floods, tsunamis, droughts, and volcanic eruptions. In fact, natural disasters kill **one million people** around the world each decade, and leave millions more homeless, according to the United Nation's International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction ("Disasters...", 1997). Natural disasters have snuffed out the lives of untold billions.

Man's Inhumanity to Man

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The Echelle or Rack

Humans have unquestionably inflicted more suffering on each other than natural sources. Indeed, there is no end to the twisted machinations by which humans have imposed misery on each other. Consider but a tiny fraction from history. During the Middle Ages, tortures included the “chevalet,” in which an accused witch sat on a pointed metal horse with weights strung from her feet. Sexual humiliation torture included forced sitting on red-hot stools. “Gresillons” were designed to crush the tips of fingers and toes in a vice-like device. Excruciating pain was inflicted on victims by the Spanish Boot, used mostly in Germany and Scotland—a steel boot placed over the leg of the accused and tightened until the shin bone shattered. The “echelle” (more commonly known as the “rack”) consisted of the accused lying on a long table to be stretched violently. On many occasions, the victim’s limbs were pulled from their sockets and sometimes even torn from the body entirely. Sometimes a “tortillon” was used in conjunction with the rack which would severely squeeze and mutilate the genitals at the same time as the stretching. The “lift” also stretched the limbs of the accused, with the victim’s feet strapped to the ground and the arms tied behind the back while another rope tied to the hands pulled upwards, causing the arms to break even before the horrific portion of the stretching began. Drawing and quartering (chopped into four pieces), and even flaying alive, were also common in Medieval Europe (“Medieval Torture”).

Gladiatorial combat during the Roman Empire (circa 264 B.C. to A.D. 435) resulted in the death of some 3.5 million, while according to Josephus (vi.ix.3), the Jewish Revolt of 68-73 B.C. ended in 1.2

million Jews killed in Jerusalem by the Romans. Muhammad Shah, Sultan of Kulbarga, fought Bukka I, Raya of Vijayanagar in 1366 and massacred 500,000 Hindus.



Gladiatorial Combat

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Zulu punishments in Africa in the early 19th century included a particularly barbaric form of impalement, called *ukujoja*, in which the victim was seated atop a sharply pointed stick elevated into the air. The weight of the victim's body would bear down as the stick burrowed its way upward through body organs until finally reaching the heart and lungs to bring the release of death. Sometimes, a branched stick was used that would split once inserted (Berglund, 1976, p.195, note 89; Bourquin, 1979; cf. "Impalement," n.d.).

During the 20th century, Stalin's regime in Russia (1924-53) resulted in 20 to 30 million deaths of his own countrymen. In the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong's regime (1949-1975) resulted in 40 million deaths. The Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (1975-1978) killed some 1.6 million people. Tyrants and dictators have extinguished from the Earth literally billions of human beings over the course of history.

The total number of casualties in World War I, both military and civilian, was about 37 million: 16 million deaths and 21 million wounded. Over 56 million deaths occurred in World War II (counting both military and civilian deaths). Over half a million died in the American Civil War. Some 1.2 million died in the Korean War. Estimates range from one to three million deaths from the Vietnam War.

More recently, tortures employed by terrorist groups include the forcible extraction of all 10 fingernails, all 10 toenails, and all 32 teeth—before executing the victim by such barbaric techniques as slow decapitation via a butcher knife. The 2001 terrorist attack by Muslim terrorists resulted in commandeered aircraft careening into buildings and killing over 2,500 unsuspecting innocent people. Imagine the unimaginable horror of mafia style thugs inserting a dental fixture into the mouth of their victim, forcing his mouth to remain open, while they release a venomous viper into his mouth which slithers down the esophagus and commences to perforate the stomach lining with fangs that inject venom, initiating an excruciating death. [See also "Common Methods of Torture...," n.d.; "The 15 Most Brutal...," n.d.]

Consider the unspeakable suffering inflicted on children by depraved adults. Like the UK rock star that admitted to attempting to rape an 11-month-old baby boy and also conspiring to rape a baby girl (Sieczkowski, 2013). Some 45% of rapes reported to the police in South Africa are child rapes, and 50% of South Africa's children will be abused before the age of 18 (Krever, 2014). Consider the man in Louisiana who raped his eight-year-old stepdaughter, inflicting what the court styled "hurt and horror" on his victim (Miller, 2009). Large numbers of innocent children have been tortured, sexually abused, and discarded to endure a lifetime of unresolved torment and anguish. What's more, the lives of over 50 million unborn children have been extinguished (in America alone—400 million in China [Morse, 2013]), without ever seeing the light of day, by the grizzly techniques of abortion doctors.

All such atrocities do not even include the host of circumstances that create untold suffering in the lives of millions: betrayal, divorce, depression, alcoholism, drug addiction, financial disaster (such as the loss of one's job and house), and crime. For youth between the ages of 10 and 24, suicide is the third leading cause of death in the U.S. ("Teen Suicide..." n.d.).

Seemingly Causeless Suffering

And what of the unprovoked and apparently undeserved host of heart-wrenching hardships to which the world of humanity is regularly subjected? Widespread and pervasive illness, sickness, and resulting death occur without any apparent connection to an individual's own actions. In many cases, we inherit the genetic foibles of our ancestors that make us susceptible to heart disease, cancer, diabetes—and the list goes on and on. The average individual must endure the heart-breaking trauma of the death of loved ones—a spouse, parent, child, or dear friend—who die from unwarranted and undeserved physical ailments. Innocent children are born with debilitating birth defects through no fault of their own.

Think of the people in history who were forced to live in leper colonies—like the cinematic depiction of Judah Ben Hur's mother and sister—quarantined from society to live in caves and squalor. What about the countries and societies throughout history whose populations have endured mass starvation from famine and drought?

Human error and freak accidents have claimed many lives. Automobile accidents kill and maim thousands. Many innocent people have died from plane crashes due to mechanical difficulties or pilot error. Many lives have been lost on ships at sea (like the Titanic). Accidental shootings, where guns discharge unexpectedly and unintentionally, cause death and suffering. Where's the sense in the accidental drowning of children? Every day, about 10 people die from unintentional drowning—two of which are children under age 15. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission says 390 children die annually in pool and spa drownings ("New CPSC Data..." 2012). In fact, drowning ranks fifth among the leading causes of unintentional injury death in the United States ("Unintentional...").

Need I go on? The world is literally drenched in heartache, misery, and agony. Life is saturated with horrific suffering. Multiplied billions of people have been the recipients of untold distress and misery throughout the millennia. Why? How can this be? Why do bad things happen to good people? **Where is God? Does He really exist? How can He stand idly by** while the teeming masses of humanity writhe in anguish and affliction? Or for that matter, why would He create a world in the first place—and then introduce humans into an environment where such circumstances prevail? Is He a sadistic monster that created humans so He could satiate a perverted desire to see others squirm in agony? “Come now, and let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18).

The Beginning Point

No one has **all** the answers regarding the matter of suffering. However, that does not mean that we do not have logical, satisfactory explanations that are wholly sufficient to make sense of suffering. In fact, **only the Christian worldview and the explanations provided by the Bible can enable a person to fit all the puzzle pieces together to make sense of suffering.** Only the Bible provides a cohesive, sensible, satisfying whole.

Unsatisfactory Approaches

If the **atheists** and **evolutionists** are correct, the physical realm, with its human inhabitants, has no purpose but, rather, is a monumental “cosmic accident” (Gould, 1989, p. 44). Hence, suffering is meaningless and serves no ultimate purpose. It is simply a chance phenomenon in a nonsensical Universe. As Cornell University professor and atheist, Dr. Will Provine, maintained:

Let me summarize my views on what modern evolutionary biology tells us loud and clear—and these are basically Darwin’s views. **There are no gods, no purposes, and no goal-directed forces of any kind.** There is no life after death. When I die, I am absolutely certain that I am going to be dead. That’s the end of me. There is no ultimate foundation for ethics, **no ultimate meaning in life**, and no free will for humans, either (Provine and Johnson, 1994, 16[1], emp. added).

Atheists and skeptics maintain that if an infinite Being existed, He would exercise His perfect compassion and His omnipotence to prevent human suffering (e.g., Lowder, 2004; cf. Jackson, 2001). Even for many people who do not embrace formal atheism, the fact that God seems willing to allow misery and suffering to run rampant in the world, elicits a gamut of reactions—from perplexity and puzzlement to anger and resentment.

If the **astrologer**, the **psychic**, and the **fatalist** are correct, suffering is simply “fate.” “It’s written in the stars.” It has all been pre-programmed into the fabric of the Universe. Therefore, the only way to cope is to gain insight into the future by tapping into the psychic forces and cosmic patterns in hopes of anticipating what lies ahead. (Apparently, just knowing what lies ahead is advantageous, though little can be changed). If the **Buddhist**, **Hindu**, and the **New Ager** are correct, existence is cyclical and

suffering is the result of passing repeatedly through multiple lives in an effort to “get it right” (whatever “right” is). Since we have no real recollection of mistakes we’ve made in past lives, the suffering now experienced is meaningless and ineffectual in helping us to correct our future lives. If Islam is correct, pain and suffering are the result of failing to submit to Allah, whose harsh, cruel response is to torment His creatures (see Miller, 2005, pp. 206-209).

The Approach that Satisfies

But there is a sensible alternative to these unsatisfactory approaches—one that soothes the natural longings of the human spirit and interfaces with our deepest yearnings: the Christian worldview. Consider: if the God of the Bible exists, He is the Creator responsible for the material Universe. So we simply must first ask: “Why did He create the Universe, specifically the Earth, and then create humans to inhabit the Earth?”

To set the stage for making sense of suffering, consider the following foundational truths that supply a consistent framework—a stable platform—from which one is able to approach life with certainty and confidence in the face of suffering:

1. I can know that the God of the Bible exists.
2. I can know that the Bible is His inerrant, inspired Word (and therefore I can know that it contains sufficient explanations to make sense of suffering).

These two “planks” each possess abundant evidence by which they may be substantiated. A consideration of that evidence is beyond the purview of this article. [NOTE: For the evidence that God exists and the Bible is His inspired Word, visit www.apologeticspress.org for a multitude of books and articles that supply that evidence.] Having established the existence of the God of the Bible and the divine inspiration of the Bible, a third plank follows that prepares the way for pinpointing specific reasons why suffering occurs.

3. The Bible teaches that our life on Earth is temporary and will end at death. When a person dies, his or her body goes into the grave, while the conscious spirit enters the hadean realm to await the final Judgment (see Luke 16:19-31). At some unknown point in the future, God will call a halt to human existence on Earth (1 Corinthians 15:20-58). The Second Coming of Christ will be accompanied by all spirits coming forth from hades to be resurrected in immortal bodies (John 5:28-29; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). All will then face God in judgment, receive the pronouncement of eternal sentencing, and then be consigned to heaven or h*** for eternity (Matthew 25:31-46; Revelation 20:11-15). That being the case, the doctrine of reincarnation (a person experiencing multiple lives on Earth) is untrue, and every person gets only “one shot” at this life. Life will not be repeated and every person must live life with a vivid recognition that existence must be taken seriously in view of its inevitable end.

Since the Bible is the inspired Word of God (cf. Butt, 2007), it is the only document on the planet that was superintended by God when it was produced. The Bible, therefore, is the only reliable guide for ascertaining the meaning of life and human existence. Only the Bible can make sense of the circumstances that attend life on Earth. And, indeed, it provides the perfect explanations for the occurrence of suffering. Its handling of the subject is logical, sufficient, and definitive.

With these fundamental concepts in mind, one may turn to the biblical text in order to ferret out the basic purpose and central meaning of human existence as it relates to suffering. We begin by asking the logically prior question: What is the purpose of the created order?

The Purpose of the Universe: What Life is all About

When God created the Earth, He intended to provide a realm—a suitable environment—in which human beings could live and prepare for eternity. Hence, **the purpose of the created order is to give every person an opportunity to decide where to spend eternity.** In creating this “realm of spirit preparation,” God put into play every variable necessary to achieve this purpose. Humans must have access to all the necessary features, constituent elements, and characteristics of an environment that enables them to be truly free to make their own choice with respect to their eternal destiny. Humans must have free will and an environment in which to exercise their volition—their personal decision-making powers.

When God created beings in His own image (Genesis 1:26) as the objects of His infinite love (Psalm 33:5; Numbers 14:18; 1 John 4:7-16), those human beings had to be created with certain attributes that would enable them to decide their own eternal destiny. These essential attributes of humanness include: (1) free moral agency; (2) immortality and ongoing existence beyond the physical realm; (3) culpability for one’s own actions; (4) physical life that is spent in a physical realm as the one and only probationary period; and (5) recognition that a person’s eternal fate is determined by his/her response to God in this life (see Warren, 1972, p. 19).

Observe further, that these essential attributes of a human being are designed to go hand in hand with the essential characteristics of a Spirit-preparing world. In other words, God tailored the Earth to be conducive to the accomplishment of the central purpose of human beings making preparations for eternity. This earthly environment was designed to: (1) supply humans with their basic physical needs; (2) allow free moral agency; (3) allow humans to be challenged; and (4) allow humans to learn the things they most need to learn (see Warren, p. 47), including spiritual development.

The “Vale of Soul-Making”

With these variables in mind, we can make sense of the role of suffering in the world. The world was created by God for the central purpose of serving as—what English poet John Keats (1795-1821) designated—“the vale of soul-making”:

Call the world if you please “The vale of Soul-making.” Then you will find out the use of the world.... [H]ow then are Souls to be made?...**How, but by the medium of a world like this?**... Do you not see how necessary a World of **Pains and troubles** is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must **feel and suffer** in a thousand diverse ways! (1895, pp. 326-327, emp. added).

Here is the most fundamental feature of human existence which functions as the context for enacting the prime directive for all of humanity. We humans are on this planet for a singular reason that trumps all other purposes, functions, and intentions of life. We are in the midst of our “probationary period.”

The Wisest Man’s Assessment

While this concept permeates the Bible, Solomon’s treatise, Ecclesiastes, provides a succinct expression of the principle. Solomon was declared to be unsurpassed in wisdom and insight into the meaning of life. Ecclesiastes is somewhat of an autobiography that reflects the details of Solomon’s life reported in the early chapters of 1 Kings. Being king and wielding great power and influence, he was in a position to immerse himself in the vicissitudes of life with all the typical endeavors to which humans have devoted themselves throughout time. Consider briefly his earthly pursuits and attainments.

1. He devoted himself to great feats of labor, toil, and hard work. He involved himself in monumental construction projects—including a beautiful palace of cedar (that took 13 years to build) and a great religious temple (1 Kings 6-7). He built an extensive irrigation system to accommodate the gardens, orchards, groves, and vineyards that he developed (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6). He also constructed a fleet of ships (1 Kings 9:26).
2. He sought to acquire knowledge, super intelligence, wisdom and insight, and to educate and enhance his intellect (1:13,16-17; 2:12ff.,21,26; 7:11-12,19,23-25). His intellectual prowess was such that he became an author, poet, composer, and lyricist, generating an unexcelled literary legacy that included authoring thousands of proverbs and over a thousand musical compositions (complete with singers and musical instruments of all kinds—Ecclesiastes 2:8). His vast research and acquired knowledge qualified him to be a botanist, zoologist, ornithologist, entomologist, and ichthyologist (1 Kings 4:29-34). People from all over the world visited him just to hear his unparalleled wisdom and insight (1 Kings 10:24).
3. He amassed great wealth and possessions. He had countless servants, herds, and flocks. He acquired “silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces” (Ecclesiastes 2:8). In fact, he accumulated **tons upon tons** of gold (1 Kings 9:28; 10:14-15). He regularly received gifts of gold, as well as great quantities of spices and precious stones (1 Kings 10:10,14). The drinking vessels in his palace were gold as well (1 Kings 10:21). His throne was made of ivory, overlaid with pure gold. Two lions stood beside the armrests. Six steps lead up to the throne with

12 lions, one on each side of the six steps (1 Kings 10:18-20). Every three years merchant ships arrived bringing more gold, silver, ivory, and exotic animals (vs. 22). The inspired writer gives this summary of King Solomon's wealth: he "surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom" (vs. 23).

4. He wielded great military capability. He owned and operated thousands of horses, chariots, and horsemen (1 Kings 4:26-28). He gathered 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen; he stationed these forces in several storage cities that he built to accommodate the chariots and cavalry (1 Kings 9:17-19; 10:26). He raised a significant labor force using the survivors of conquered countries (1 Kings 9:20-21).
5. He secured significant political power, fame, and honor. He ruled over a considerable geographical area and received tribute and services from vassal kings (Ecclesiastes 8:4; 1 Kings 4:21-25; 5:1; 10:1).
6. He had unprecedented access to fleshly, sexual pleasure—"the pleasures of men—many concubines" (Ecclesiastes 2:8—NASB; 7:26). It seems surreal that one man would have carnal access to literally hundreds of women, but such was the case with Solomon (1 Kings 11:1ff.; cf. Song of Solomon).
7. It seems he also gave attention to assessing and resisting the aging process in order to retain youthfulness (Ecclesiastes 11:9-10; 12:1-6). American culture most certainly identifies with this concern with its emphasis on creams, gels, hair coloring, clothing, health clubs, and surgical procedures to prolong at least the illusion of youthfulness. [NOTE: Physical exercise, in moderation, does yield healthful benefits (1 Timothy 4:8).]
8. He also gave attention to the pursuit of pleasure and physical stimulation (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11). He sought to stimulate his body and gratify his flesh with alcohol. He focused on mirth, laughter, and entertainment. Indeed, he fully indulged his fleshly appetites, declaring: "Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure" (Ecclesiastes 2:10).

In essence, Solomon claimed: "I've had it all, I've seen it all, I've done it all! I have immersed myself in all the pleasures and pursuits that earthly life has to offer." Yet, he was forced to pronounce all these pursuits as "vanity" and a "chasing after the wind" when they are approached "under the Sun"—by which he meant **apart from God**. While many human endeavors are noble, pure, and worthwhile in themselves, no human endeavor is of any **ultimate** value unless undertaken in view of God and His will for human beings. Hence, Solomon brought his matchless treatise on the meaning of human existence to a grand conclusion by announcing **the central premise of life**—the defining principle that gives life meaning and makes existence justifiable: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). Here, indeed, is man's *raison d'être*—reason for existing. Every single feature of life—money and

possessions, fame and power, intelligence/wisdom/knowledge, sex, youthfulness, pleasure, toil/work, advancement, etc.—is **meaningless** if not approached in view of God and His will. Life was literally designed by the Creator and intended to be centered on rendering obedience to Him. The only way to make sense of life—with its incessant suffering—is to assimilate this fundamental principle of existence into one’s being. Rather than merely living “under the Sun,” we must live life “under the Son.”

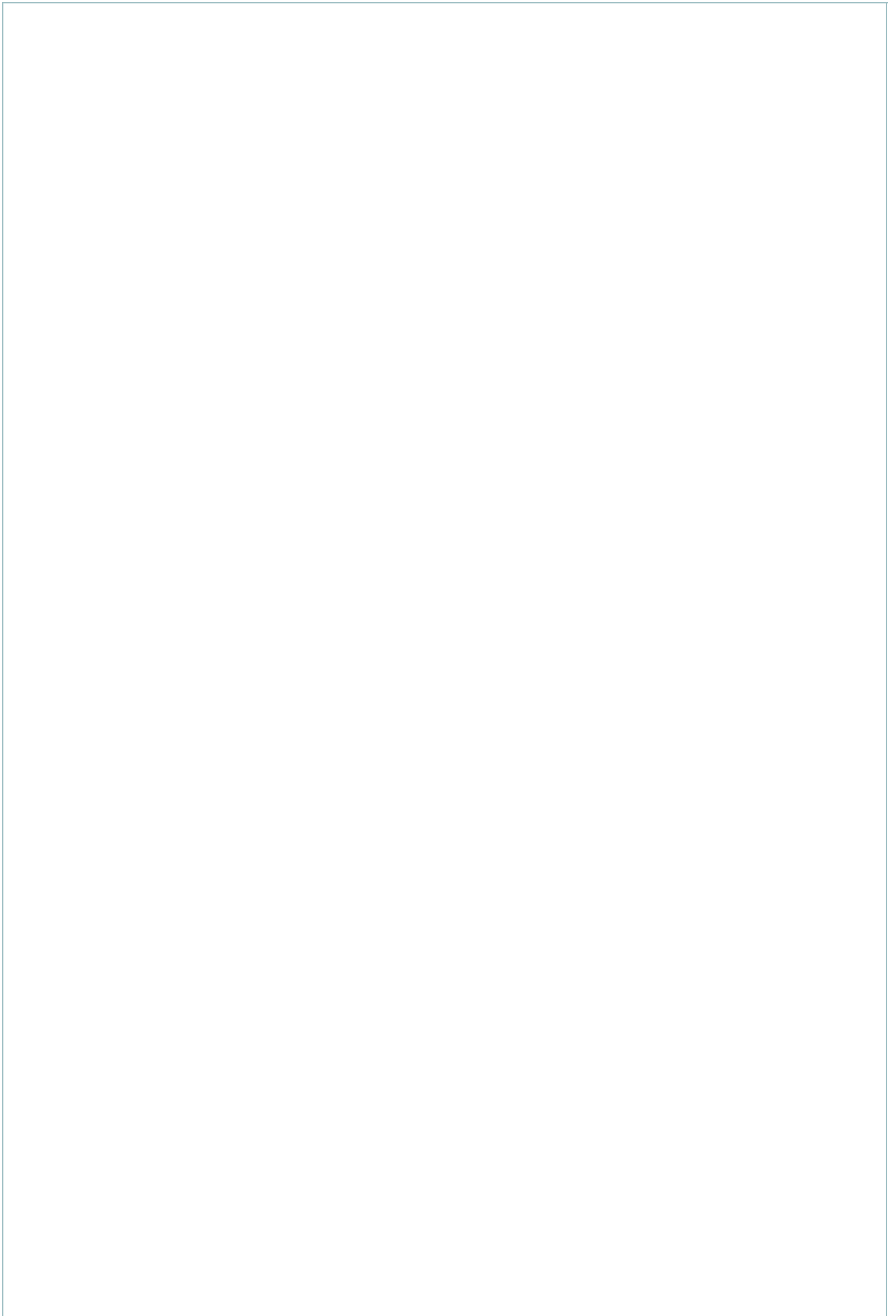
Logically, Suffering Makes Perfect Sense

We humans have been provided with the **ideal** environment in which we may freely accept or reject God’s will for our lives. As Christian philosopher Thomas Warren so eloquently explained, the one essential purpose which God had for creating the world was

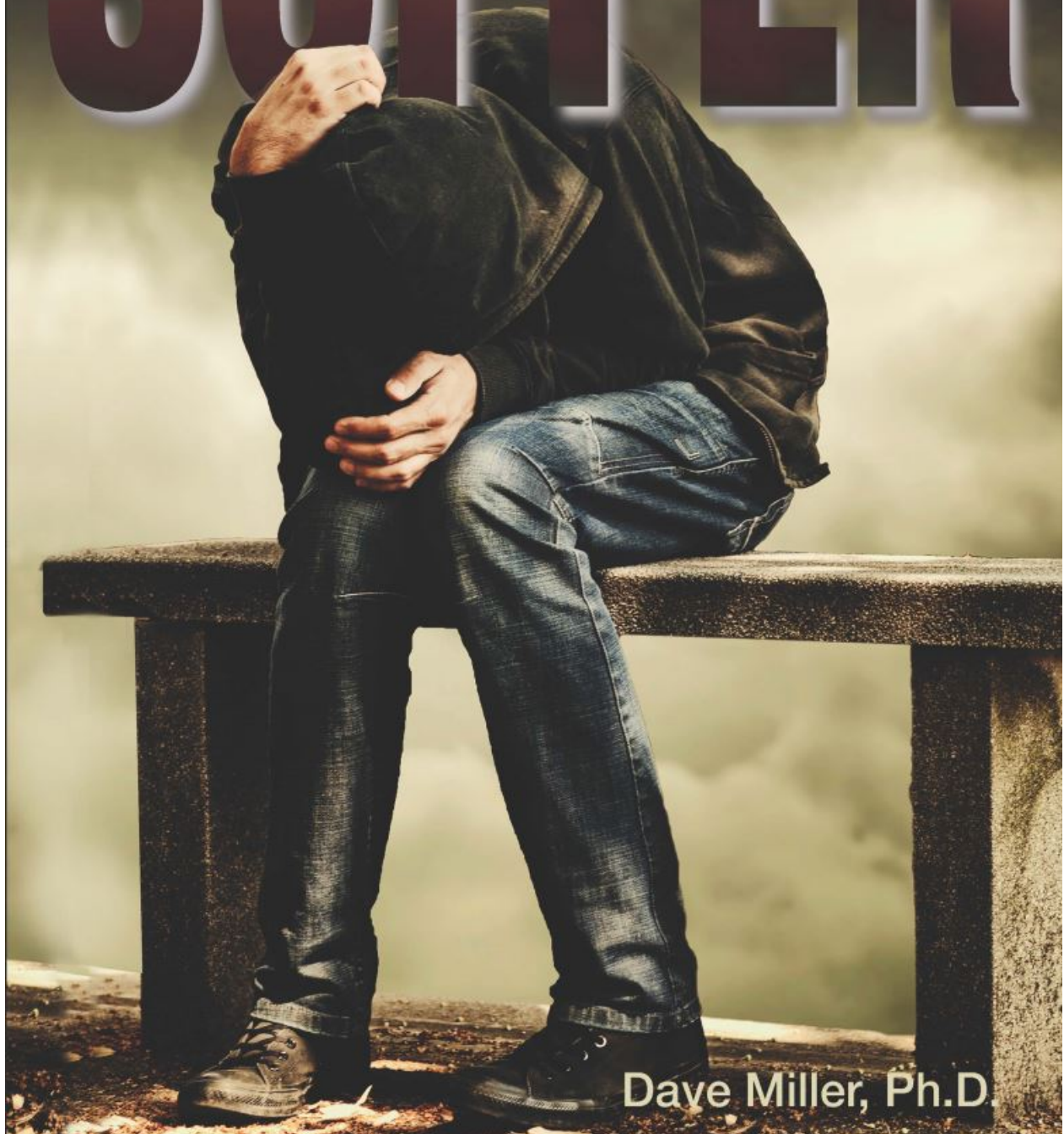
the creation of a being (who would have descendants like himself) who would be capable of entering into fellowship with him, who would be capable of becoming a son of God, who (thus) would have to be capable of deciding freely to believe him, to love him with all of his heart, to submit to him in obedience, and whom God could love and eventually glorify (p. 44).

God created the ideal environment in which to achieve this purpose. Hence, He allows human beings to be subjected to unpleasant, tragic events—from nature’s destructive forces like earthquakes, floods, tornados, and hurricanes to sickness, pain, and death. Why? These are the result of specific conditions (to be discussed in Parts II and III of this series of articles) that are necessary to God’s providing humanity with this ideal environment. And they are “common to man” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

You see, when natural disasters occur, ravaging human life, no one can legitimately point the finger at God and pronounce Him blameworthy for having created such a world. Why? Because He had a morally justifiable reason for having done so. Human existence on Earth was not intended to be permanent. Rather, the Creator intended life on Earth to serve as a **temporary** interval of time for the development of one’s spirit. Life on Earth is a probationary period in which people are given the opportunity to attend to their spiritual condition as it relates to God’s will for living. Suffering due to natural disasters and the like provide people with conclusive evidence that life on Earth is **brief and uncertain** (see Warren, p. 58; **Thompson**, 1997). They help us to distinguish the temporary from the permanent. In the face of physical calamities, and the host of other features of the created order that can cause suffering, we humans would do well to contemplate our own fragility and finitude, and be driven to look beyond ourselves, and beyond the here and now, to a higher Power Who can inform us as to the meaning and purpose of life. Life is precarious—tomorrow may be too late.



WHY PEOPLE
SUFFER



Dave Miller, Ph.D.

Christians understand that no matter how catastrophic, tragic, or disastrous an event may be, it fits into the overall framework of soul-making—preparation for one’s departure from life into eternity. Likewise, the Christian knows that although the great pain and suffering one may experience may be unpleasant, and may test one’s mettle, nevertheless, such suffering is not intrinsically evil. Nor is it a reflection on the existence of an omnibenevolent God. **The only intrinsic evil is violation of God’s will.** What is required of all accountable persons is obedience to God’s revealed Word (given in the Bible)—even amidst pain, suffering, sickness, disease, death, and natural disasters.

[to be continued]

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