

Why People Suffer (Part III)



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EXISTENCE OF GOD

HUMAN SUFFERING

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Article In Brief... 

The Bible provides the only plausible, sensible, satisfactory explanation for the existence of suffering in the world. Additionally, it provides several subcauses. Two of these were discussed in the second installment. In this third installment, three additional subcauses of suffering are examined: (1) the existence of Satan, (2) the vindication of God in light of Satan, and (3) as a means of verifying faithfulness to God.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article is excerpted from Dr. Miller's recently published book, *Why People Suffer*, available through Apologetics Press. **Part I** of this three-part series appeared in the January issue. **Part II** appeared in the February issue. Part III

follows below and continues, without introductory comments, where the second article ended.]

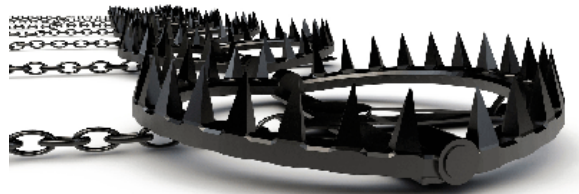
Satan is the Archenemy of god and man

While we are convinced that the age of miracles is over (see my discussion of the cessation of miracles in [Miller, 2003](#)), nevertheless, God continues to be very active in the world via non-miraculous, providential dealings. Similarly, so is Satan. The Bible repeatedly affirms and warns that Satan is the great adversary and deceiver who is constantly conniving to ensnare the righteous. Hence, he can use hardship and suffering as a tool to discourage a person and cause that person to blame God and abandon God's will. The presence of Satan is yet another sub-cause of suffering in the world.

Consider a number of Bible passages that pinpoint this feature of Satan's activity on Earth. Paul instructed Timothy that in his ministerial activities, it would be necessary for him humbly to correct "those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and **escape the snare of the devil**, having been taken captive by him to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:25-26, emp. added). Satan sets snares for us! Like the trapper that places a trap to catch a bear, so Satan seeks to take us captive by redirecting our service from God to his own evil machinations. Every time a Christian departs from the way of life, gives in to worldliness, and abandons the church, that person (though not conscious of the fact) has been taken captive by Satan to do his bidding. And he does so of his own free will and cannot bemoan, "The devil made me do it."

What Paul called a "snare" in his communication to Timothy, he labeled "wiles" and "fiery darts" in his letter to the Ephesians. Read this passage carefully:

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against **the wiles of the devil**. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all **the fiery darts of the wicked one** (Ephesians 6:11-16, emp. added).



So when you or I experience some catastrophic setback, heartache, or physical hardship that momentarily stuns us and causes us to question God and our decision to be a Christian, we may well simply be the recipient of a clever scheme or ploy floated by Satan himself! Old cowboy shows frequently depicted the settlers “circling the wagons” when under attack by Indians. One of the tactics employed by the attackers was shooting flaming arrows at the settlers’ wagons, setting them on fire, and reducing the cover provided by the wagon and its cloth covering. Have you considered the fact that when you face some hardship, it may well be nothing more than Satan shooting a flaming arrow at you? If that be the case, how will you react? Surrender? Give up? Walk away from the wagon train of fellow settlers who are on their way to the Promised Land of heaven? Ask yourself this critical question: will you give Satan the satisfaction of winning?

In addition to a “snare,” “wiles,” and “fiery darts,” Paul noted “devices” in his letter to the Corinthian Christians. He urged them to forgive the wayward brother and reaffirm love to him when he has repented. Failure to do so would be unChristlike and it would open us up to a possible danger: “lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of **his devices**” (2 Corinthians 2:11, emp. added). Observe that Satan has “devices,” or schemes, tricks, and ploys that he uses to try to take advantage of us, fool us, and capture us. No wonder Peter offered this pressing warning: “Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8, NASB).

It is interesting, even ironic, that the Holy Spirit chose Peter to record this admonition. It was he who allowed himself to give in to fear and succumb to the satanic temptation to betray Jesus. And what about that occasion when he conversed with Jesus about His impending passion?

From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!” But He turned and said to Peter, “**Get behind Me, Satan!** You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men” (Matthew 16:21-23, emp. added).

Jesus referred to Peter as Satan? At first glance, such a remark seems callous and unbecoming the Son of God. But on further reflection, Jesus was providing Peter with tremendous encouragement to get his thinking straight and thus to prepare himself for Satan’s assault—rather than aiding and abetting Satan. When you or I encounter adversity in our lives, we are apt to “knee jerk” and react incorrectly, even destructively. No doubt Peter was merely concerned about his Lord and desired His protection. He did not want Jesus hurt by those who desired to do Him physical harm. Hence, Peter was reacting out of fear and his own premature assessment of the situation. He was responding to life’s potentialities the way we typically do every day—from our own narrow perspective. We are rather proud of our personal opinions and our own impressions of circumstances around us. We need a healthy dose of James 1:19—“So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.” We need to proceed cautiously and make certain that we are not

allowing life's threatening appearances to misassess what is happening. We must analyze life's difficulties through **spiritual** lenses, not fleshly ones. We must learn to think **spiritually**. Doing so will help us to subdue the psychological and emotional fallout of suffering, and to frame that suffering in proper perspective. And it will aid us in avoiding becoming an "offense"—a stumbling block—to ourselves and others.

Our Nemesis

In writing to the Christians at Corinth, Paul described the impact of some unidentified physical ailment from which he suffered:

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, **a messenger of Satan** to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9, emp. added).

Observe carefully: Since Paul was blessed with the exalted role of being an inspired apostle of Christ, receiving direct revelations from God, it would have been easy for him to become prideful. Hence, God allowed Satan to afflict Paul (just as Satan had afflicted Job). Whatever this ailment may have been, it was of sufficient pain and torment that Paul repeatedly pleaded with God to remove it from his life. But God allowed it to remain because of the spiritual benefit Paul received as a result. Are we willing to endure suffering in order to receive spiritual improvement? What a tragedy it would have been if Paul had renounced God due to this "messenger of Satan."

Please remember that all these depictions of Satan's activity in human affairs are not mystical or supernatural. He operates through the ordinary circumstances of life. When a specific calamity comes our way, we will not be able to determine whether the occasion was generated by Satan, or if the occurrence is due to another explanation. Even Job did not know that Satan was the source of his suffering. We are given that insight, but so far as we know from the text, he was not informed that Satan was the instigator of his sufferings. God did not see fit to divulge the fact to him. Indeed, He did not need to do so—even as He need not step in and inform us. We simply need to be aware that the Bible teaches that Satan is **one** possible explanation for our sufferings—and then react accordingly.

We're Being Sifted

Throughout Bible times, farmers grew wild cereal grains (such as rice, barley, oats, and wheat) in which the ripe seed is tightly enclosed by thin, dry, scaly "bracts" forming a dry husk (or hull) around the grain. Before the grain can be used, these seed casings must be removed, first through the process of threshing—which loosens and removes from the grain the casing, known at this point as chaff. This removal phase was traditionally achieved through pounding or milling the seed. Next, the loose chaff would have to be separated from the grain by means of winnowing. This phase was

accomplished by tossing the grain upward into a light wind which would allow the heavier grain to fall back to the ground (usually into a wide collection basket) while blowing aside the lighter chaff which, in turn, was treated as a waste product by being ploughed into the soil or burned. The grain could be further purified by “sifting” through a sieve.



Sifting the chaff



Rice Winnowing in Bali, Indonesia

This interesting agricultural process is used in Scripture metaphorically to refer to the elimination of wickedness from the Earth and from one’s own life. John the Baptizer warned that Jesus would soon arrive on the scene, and that “His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12). He would eliminate the wicked in eternity. The psalmist stated that the wicked “are like chaff that the wind blows away” (1:4). Those striving to live righteously must be ever vigilant to remove the chaff from one’s life, even viewing suffering as a means to do so. Jesus forewarned Peter: “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat” (Luke 22:31). Satan apparently made the same request to God regarding Peter that he made concerning Job. He wanted to be allowed to test Peter to see whether he could handle the test. Sadly, he did not. Although, upon realization of his failure, he “got his act together” and became a great apostle in the church of Christ. We, too, can overcome life’s bitter challenges, even when we stumble on occasion, rising to reaffirm our commitment to remaining faithful even in the face of suffering and tribulation.

It’s a fact. Some of the suffering that comes our way in this life is generated by Satan, who seeks to deter us from serving God. He seeks to “hinder us” (1 Thessalonians 2:18). He is waging war against “those who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 12:17). We ought to be emboldened on the occasion of tragedy to look Satan in the face (so to speak) and defiantly react: “Is that the best you can do?” Sadly, when Christians who are traumatized by some catastrophic event in their life “throw in the towel,” leave the church, and abandon their religious convictions, they are accommodating Satan! They are doing precisely what he sought to get

them to do. The next time you face adversity, be sure to ask yourself: Will I give Satan the satisfaction of knowing he's whipped me into submission and that he can count me in his camp?

vindication of god

Another fundamental explanation the Bible gives for the existence of suffering, especially among Christians, is amply illustrated in the book of Job. You remember the occasion when Satan was allowed to present himself before God, and God asked him if he had noticed the righteous, spiritual condition of Job. Satan's response was to insist that Job's righteousness was due to God's having blessed Job abundantly and protected Job from harm, and that if God were to recall those blessings, stripping Job of his prosperity and well-being, Job would "surely curse" God. Consequently, God gave Satan permission to have power over Job's circumstances without harming his person (1:6-12). Satan left the presence of God, returned to Earth, and commenced to wreak havoc in Job's life—to no avail. A second challenge of God by Satan resulted in God allowing Satan to physically harm Job's person without taking his life.

Consider carefully what was going on in these encounters. Satan was claiming that humans choose to obey God purely out of self-interest—what they get out of it. God, on the other hand, contended that Job was following God out of disinterested love of deity. Ostensibly, God's view was that even if Job was stripped of his material prosperity, his relatives, his friends, and even his health, he would still worship and serve God. Why? Because God is worthy of worship apart from the blessings and benefits He bestows on His creatures!

That's not to deny that many people are religious because of some selfishly perceived benefit, whether physical, emotion, or psychological. Being a Christian and going to church may give one person a fertile field for business or sales prospects. It might give another the satisfaction that he/she is following in the footsteps of ancestors. It might provide a setting in which to enjoy social relations. More than one young man has admitted: "It's a great place to meet good Christian girls and find a mate." Humans are infected with a variety of motives and hidden angles in many phases of life—including religion. However, it does not follow that **every** person who is religious does so out of purely selfish motives. God noted that Job maintained his integrity, and that he remained a follower of God, even though he experienced tremendous heartache, exceptional physical catastrophe, and a diseased body.

So you see, God is worthy of our worship and devotion whether or not we receive any particular benefit. God is God! He is the great I AM! He is "worthy...to receive glory and honor and power" (Revelation 4:11) because He is the infinite, eternal Creator! He is the **only** worthy object of worship (Deuteronomy 6:13; Matthew 4:10). **All** human beings should "Serve the LORD with gladness; come before His presence with singing. Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves" (Psalm 100:2-3).

For the LORD is the great God, and the great King above all gods. In His hand are the deep places of the earth; the heights of the hills are His also. The sea is His, for He made it; and His hands formed the dry land. Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. For He is our God (Psalm 95:3-7).

“For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe” (Deuteronomy 10:17). He is the majestic Ruler of the Universe who defies human comprehension. When we bump up against bad things in life, instead of pining, “Why? Why **me?**,” in light of the infinitude and the magnitude of God, we ought to take a step back, bow our heads, and say, “Why **not?** Why **not** me? Do I really deserve anything less?” When we seriously reflect on the grandeur of God, our suffering seems trivial and paltry (Romans 8:18).

It was not uncommon to hear aged folk from the World War II generation speak of the frequent spankings they received in childhood from their parents in the words, “I got less than I deserved.” That humility—that mature appraisal of reality—is indispensable to facing the suffering of life and viewing God from the proper perspective. I repeat: the Bible teaches us that God is worthy of our worship **because He is God**, even if we receive nothing from Him—no physical blessings, no spiritual blessings, **nothing**—even if we were to be reduced to poverty and destitution, in the midst of our misery, we should **still** praise, honor, and glorify God for Who He is. Indeed, when we endure suffering, we vindicate God’s point to Satan: that He is worthy of honor and worship no matter what.

verification of faithfulness

Another explanation given in Scripture for why some people, specifically Christians, suffer in this world is to demonstrate spiritual genuineness. This powerful concept is seen in Job in the third cycle of speeches when Job responds to the charge of his friends, specifically Eliphaz, concerning Job’s doubtful spiritual condition. Please read his rebuttal carefully:

Even today my complaint is bitter; my hand is listless because of my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come to His seat! I would present my case before Him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know the words which He would answer me, and understand what He would say to me. Would He contend with me in His great power? No! But He would take note of me. There the upright could reason with Him, and I would be delivered forever from my Judge. Look, I go forward, but He is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; When He works on the left hand, I cannot behold Him; when He turns to the right hand, I cannot see Him. But He knows the way that I take; **when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold**. My foot has held fast to His steps; I have kept His way and not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food (Job 23:2-12).

This tortured soul pours out his heart in this passage, and does so quite respectfully without indicting or blaming God. Out of great anguish and pain, he yearns for an opportunity to be in God's presence in order to receive answers that would enable him to make sense of his devastated condition. He feels (naively) that perhaps he could present his case before God in view of the fact that he feels God seems to have some bone to pick with him. He is confident that God would not overwhelm him with His great power—but would give him due attention, listen to his concerns, and provide answers. The lack of direct contact with God—the thunderous silence that Job endured in the midst of his suffering—made him feel alone and unable to decipher his predicament.



Touchstone set

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Job then makes a stirring statement: “But He knows the way that I take.” Job felt certain that despite the silence and his inability to secure an audience with God, nevertheless, God was surely aware of Job's spiritual condition and how he had been living his life. Hence he asserted: “When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold.” At first glance, one might think that Job was alluding to the metaphor of the furnace of affliction we discussed earlier. With that understanding, Job would have been saying that his sufferings serve the purpose of refining and purifying him. However, that is not the idea here. He is alluding to a “touchstone.” Prior to the more sophisticated chemical techniques used in modern metallurgical processes, the ancients used touchstones to ascertain the quality of raw ore. A touchstone was a finely grained, small tablet of dark stone used for assaying precious metal alloys. When soft metals (like gold or silver) are rubbed against it, a visible streak is left on the stone.

Because different alloys of gold have different colors, one sample can be compared to samples of known purity in order to ascertain the quality of the gold.

Job's point? He believed that his hardships and suffering were manifestations of God "rubbing" him against stone, i.e., afflicting him with tribulation. However, he was confident that when that process of testing his spiritual status was complete, he would be demonstrated to be pure gold. In other words, some of the suffering that comes to the Christian has as its purpose to showcase theism and Christianity by calling attention to the righteousness of the sufferer.

While Job did not boastfully believe he was sinless, he nevertheless was unconscious of any glaring deficiencies in his efforts to serve God—certainly none that would account for the intense agony he was enduring. In the climax of his rebuttals to his friends, he reflected on his adult behavior to see if he was deserving of his accusers' allegations. His checklist of spirituality bodes well: he avoided illicit sexual desire; he treated fellow workers justly and kindly; he reached out to the poor, widows, orphans, and the needy; he refrained from covetousness; he avoided false religious allegiance; he loved his enemies; he was hospitable; and he confessed personal sin without fear of appearances (31:1-34). The conclusion of the book, as well as additional scriptural corroboration (Ezekiel 14:14,20; James 5:11), suggest that Job's surmising was accurate. God was using Job to prove to Satan that some people are righteous and retain their righteousness regardless of their suffering.

God Likes Me!

Paul is a parallel example to Job on this very point. Recall, once again, Paul's remarks concerning his "thorn in the flesh":

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "**My grace is sufficient for you**, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:7-10, emp. added).

Key in on the words "My grace is sufficient for you." God's use of the word "grace" refers to the favor that God showed to Paul by appointing him an apostle and using him in the promotion of Christianity. Essentially, God was telling Paul that it was unnecessary for Him to remove the "thorn" of suffering in his life, since he had God's **approval and acceptance**. Question: are you willing to endure whatever suffering is thrown at you—whatever hardship, trial, setback, sickness, heartache, or pain—as long as you know that God loves you, accepts you, and considers you a faithful child? Sure you are! That is precisely why Job could exclaim: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15).

Here is another rich, encouraging passage on this point:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, **you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire,** may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1:3-9).

Of all people on the Earth, Christians are those who have been the recipients of the mercy of God, a living hope, and an incorruptible inheritance. This spiritual assurance surpasses anything physical that may afflict us for now. If we remain faithful, focused on living a spiritual existence in harmony with God's Word, yes, we will be "grieved by various trials," but it will be only "for a little while." And the pain and suffering that we endure will demonstrate the genuineness of our faith. Our faith, i.e., our obedient submission to Jesus Christ, is more precious than gold. Gold is physical and perishes; but our faith is spiritual and will carry us into eternity in triumph (Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 2:10). Yes, our spiritual commitment may well be "tested by fire," but hanging firm and staying faithful will result in praise, honor, and glory when Jesus returns. Pray tell, what else on this entire planet, in all of human history, even begins to compare with such a life? I repeat: only New Testament Christianity provides the proper perspective for facing suffering in this world. So the next time you find yourself afflicted, consider this: how do you know the distress you are experiencing is not simply one of those times when God is spotlighting your devotion to Him? His confidence in your spiritual stamina is such that He considers you capable of enduring the hardship and remaining faithful to Him!

conclusion

No matter what happens to the Christian in this world, that circumstance is temporary and only for the moment. Hardship is always accompanied by blessings, comfort, and encouragement that makes the tribulation bearable (cf. Job's acquisition of more children). Our goal is to leave this land of the dying to go to the land of the living. To borrow the words of the old hymn, this world is not our home; we're just passing through. The skeptic, atheist, and materialist have only this life with nothing to look forward to beyond the grave. No wonder the secular environmentalists and animal rights activists are trying to convince everyone to "save the planet." To them, that is all there is to life. Hence, suffering is dysteleological—purposeless. But to the Christian, all of life's events on Earth are mere "stepping stones"—the intermediate pathway from here to there.

Many years ago, popular radio commentator Paul Harvey expressed well the biblical view of what is happening to everyone in this life:

We are all under the sentence of death. Most rational persons learn to live with that certain uncertainty and enjoy a reasonably full life in spite of it. The mother never lived who did not wish she could, as Christ said He would, fold her children under her wing and protect them from harm. Even He couldn't. For it is appointed to each of us, "once to die." First our children must be brought face-to-face with the irrefutable finality of that judgment. **Once they understand that Paradise is elsewhere, that we have to prove here that we deserve to be there**, then your youngster will understand why it isn't going to be easy. **It isn't supposed to be.** This is the shakedown cruise. This earthly while separates the men from the boys. Don't fear to confront your child with that fact. Youngsters want a challenge more than they want "peace and security." They will go out of their way to manufacture danger. The present war scare will subside, but there will be other uncertainties to take its place. These are best faced by persons who, however scared, **struggle forward through the dark toward the light** (1962, 4-A, emp. added).

For the atheist and the skeptic, there is no light toward which one is pressing. Their "paradise" is purely physical—a dismal existence. But for the Christian, even the negative realities of life make perfect sense; at least we are in a position to put suffering in its place and assimilate the blows.

To recap, very real, very legitimate reasons are available to make sense of the existence of suffering in the world. Why do people suffer? Because...

1. This world—with all its positive and negative elements—was designed to serve the singular purpose of providing humans with the ideal environment in which to decide where to spend eternity.
2. All people sin and harm themselves and others.
3. We can be improved, matured, strengthened, perfected, and made fit for time and eternity.
4. Satan seeks to take as many people with him to hell as possible.
5. God is vindicated by those who choose to love and obey Him apart from any benefits He may bestow upon them.
6. Those who are faithful to God are verified in their spiritual genuineness through suffering.

These six realities provide ample explanation for the existence of suffering in the world. The God of the Bible exists and the one true religion is New Testament Christianity.

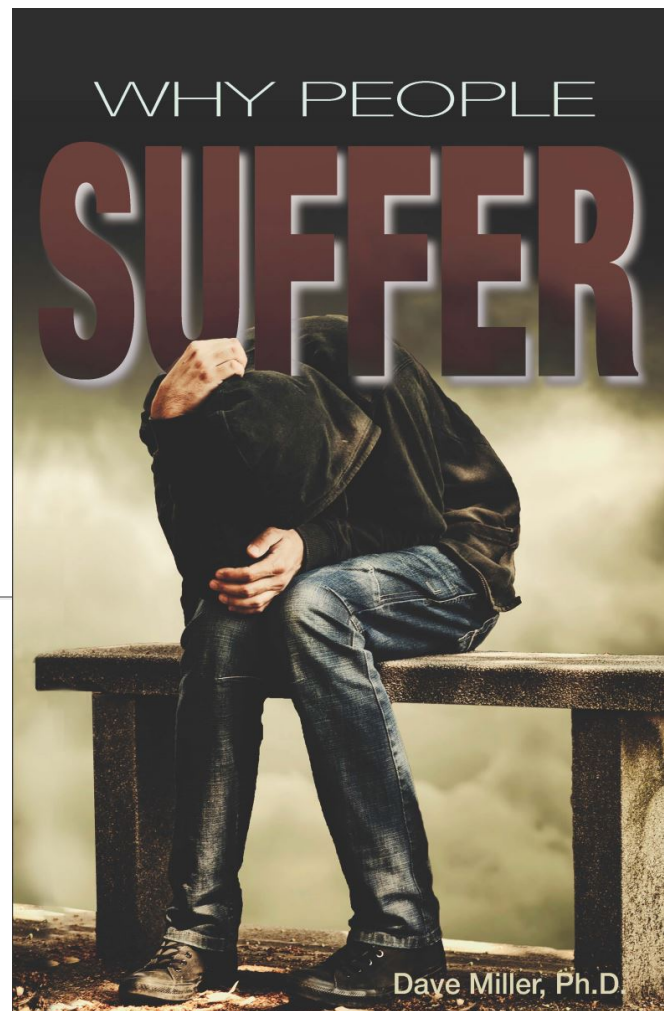
[NOTE: For additional information on this vital subject, see Dr. Miller's book *Why People Suffer* and other materials available from Apologetics Press.]

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