

# WHY DOES GOD'S CREATION INCLUDE DEATH AND SUFFERING?

by Dr. Tommy Mitchell

**W**hy do bad things happen? Through the ages, human beings have sought to reconcile their understanding of an all-powerful, loving God with the seemingly endless suffering around them.

One prominent example of this struggle is the media mogul Ted Turner. Having lost his faith after his sister died of a painful disease, Turner claimed, "I was taught that God was love and God was powerful, and I couldn't understand how someone so innocent should be made or allowed to suffer so."<sup>1</sup>



Is God responsible for human suffering? Is God cruel, capricious, and vindictive, or is He too weak to prevent suffering? If God truly is sovereign, how can He let someone He loves suffer?

## **A world of misery and death**

Each day brings new tragedy. A small child is diagnosed with leukemia and undergoes extensive medical treatment only to die in his mother's arms. A newlywed couple is killed by a drunk driver as they leave for their honeymoon. A faithful missionary family is attacked and killed by the very people they were ministering to. Thousands are killed in a



terrorist attack. Hundreds drown in a tsunami, while scores of others are buried in an earthquake.

How are these things possible if God really loves and cares for us? Is He a God of suffering?

Man's usual response to tragedy is to blame God, as Charles Darwin did after the death of his beloved daughter Annie.

"Annie's cruel death destroyed Charles's tatters of belief in a moral, just universe. Later he would say that this period chimed the final death-knell for his Christianity ... Charles now took his stand as an unbeliever."<sup>2</sup>

Is this the proper response? A correct view of history (found in the Bible) provides the answer.

### **Was God's creation really "very good"?**

In the beginning (about 6,000 years ago), God created the universe and everything in it in six actual days. At the end of His creative acts on the sixth day, God "saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good" (Genesis 1:31).

To have been very good, God's creation must have been without blemish, defect, disease, suffering, and death. There was no "survival of the fittest." Animals

did not prey on each other, and the first two humans, Adam and Eve, did not kill any animals for food. The original creation was a beautiful place, full of life and joy in the presence of the Creator.

Both humans and animals were vegetarians at the time of creation. In Genesis 1:29–30 the Lord said, “See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food.”

This passage shows clearly that in God’s very good creation, animals did not eat each other (and thus,



there was no animal death), as God gave Adam, Eve, and the animals only plants to eat. (It was not until after the worldwide Flood of Noah's Day—1,600 years later—that man was allowed to eat meat, according to Genesis 9:3.)

Because eating a plant can kill it, some people claim that death was part of the original creation. The Bible makes a distinction, though, between plants and humans/animals. This distinction is expressed in the Hebrew word, *nephesh*, which describes an aspect of life attributed only to humans and animals. *Nephesh* can be translated “breathing creature,” or “living creature” (see Genesis 1:20–21, 24). Plants do not possess this *nephesh* quality and so cannot die in the scriptural sense.

The original creation was very good. According to Deuteronomy 32:4, “his work is perfect.” Obviously, things are not like this any longer.

## **Why do we die now?**

If there was no animal or human death when God finished His creation and pronounced it very good, why do we die now? We see death all around us today. Something must have happened to change creation, and that something was sin.

God placed Adam and Eve in a perfect paradise. As their Creator, He had authority over them. In His authority, God gave Adam a rule: “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17).

Sometime after God declared His completed creation “very good” at the end of the sixth day, one of God’s angels, Lucifer, led a rebellion against their Creator.<sup>3</sup> Lucifer then took on the form of a serpent and tempted Eve to eat the fruit God had forbidden. Both Adam and Eve ate it. Their actions resulted in the punishment that God had warned them about. God is holy, and cannot tolerate sin in His presence. The just Creator righteously kept His promise that punishment would follow their disobedience. With the rebellious actions of one man, death entered God’s creation.

Ashamed and afraid, Adam





and Eve tried to escape the consequences of their sin, by making coverings of fig leaves. But by themselves, they could not cover what they had done. They needed something else to provide a covering. According to the writer of Hebrews, “without shedding of blood there is no remission [of sin]” (Hebrews 9:22). A blood sacrifice was necessary to

cover their guilt before God.

To illustrate the horrible consequences of sin, God killed an animal and made coats of skin (depicted above) to cover Adam and Eve. We are not told what type of animal was killed, but perhaps it was something like a lamb, to symbolize Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who shed His own blood to take away our sins.

Genesis chapter 3 also reveals that the ground was cursed. Thorns and thistles were now part of the world. Animals were cursed, the serpent more than the rest. The world was no longer perfect but sin-cursed. Suffering and death now abounded in that once-perfect creation.

## **What does all this have to do with me?**

If it was Adam's decision to disobey God that brought sin into the world, why do we ALL have to suffer punishment?

After Adam and Eve sinned and were banished from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:20–24), they began to have children. Each child inherited Adam's sinful nature, and each child rebelled against his or her Creator. Every human is a descendant of Adam and Eve, born with the same problem: a sinful nature.

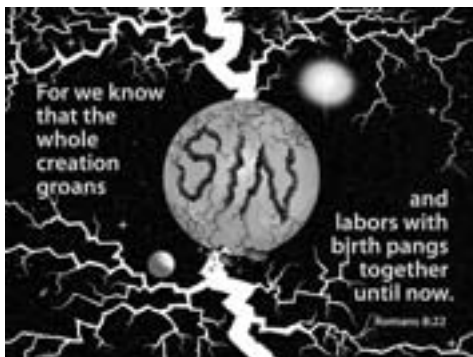
If we are honest with ourselves, we will realize that Adam is a fair representative for all of us. If a perfect person in a perfect place decided to disobey God's rules, none of us would have done better. The Apostle Paul writes, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

As children of Adam, we all inherit Adam's sin nature. We have all, at some point, disobeyed a command from the Creator, so we all deserve to die and suffer eternal punishment in hell. We must understand that not one of us is innocent before God. Romans 3:23 says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Not one of us is worthy

to stand before the Creator of the universe because we would each bring a sinful, rebellious nature into His presence.

In the beginning, God sustained His creation in its perfect state. The account of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness provides a glimpse of how things might have been in the original creation. The garments of the Israelites did not wear out, nor did their feet swell for the forty years they camped in the desert (Deuteronomy 8:4). God is omnipotent and perfectly capable of sustaining and protecting His creation.

When Adam sinned, however, the Lord cursed the universe. In essence there was a change, and along with that change God now upholds the creation in



its cursed state. Suffering and death entered into His creation. The whole universe now suffers from effects of sin (Romans 8:22).

The sad things (e.g., the death of a loved one, tsunamis that kill hundreds, hurricanes that leave many dead or homeless, etc.) that happen around us and to us are reminders that sin has consequences and that the world needs a Savior.

God took pleasure in all of His creation (Revelation 4:11), but He loved people most of all. He uses the deterioration of the created universe to show us the consequences of our sin. If we did not experience the consequences of our rebellion against the Creator, we would never understand that we need salvation from our sin, and we would never receive His offer of mercy for our sin.

Most people easily recognize that there is a problem in the world. We need to realize that there is one who has overcome this problem of death and suffering—Jesus Christ.

### **Is there any hope?**

Sadly, the consequences for our sin are much worse than life in a cursed universe. In addition to living our lives in a sin-filled creation, we must all die

physically and then face a punishment much more horrible than anything we have ever known: the second death. The Apostle John tells of a lake of fire called the “second death” that awaits all those whose names are not written in the book of life (Revelation 20:14–15). This second death is the final punishment for our sin.

Even though we rebelled against Him and brought punishment on ourselves, God loves His children and does not want them to spend eternity in hell. Our merciful Creator has provided a way to be reconciled to Him and to escape the terrible eternal punishment for our sin. This way of escape is through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ, who is God, came to earth as a man, lived a sinless life, and then died to pay the penalty for sin. The Apostle Paul tells us that “as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life” (Romans 5:18).

God is righteous and justly sentenced man to death, so we received the punishment we deserve. However, God exercised grace because of His love for us and took that punishment upon Himself as the payment for our sin.

Take heart! Christ did not remain in the grave. He showed that He has power over death by rising on the third day after He was buried. Because Christ clearly demonstrated His power over death, those who believe in Him can know that they too will live, and death will have no sting. In fact, the Bible says:

So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” (1 Corinthians 15:54–55).

In Christ, those who have received the free gift of eternal life can look forward to spending eternity with Him in a perfect, pain-free place (Revelation 21:4). As Paul wrote:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8).

Some may suggest that if God really loved us, He would put us in a perfect place where nothing painful can touch us. However, He already did that once, and Adam rebelled. Given the same op-

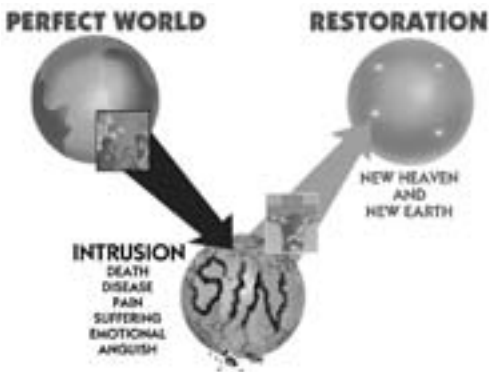
portunity, each one of us would do the same thing. God demonstrated His love by dying for the world and rising again. Anyone receiving the free gift of eternal life will go to heaven.

Compared to eternity, the time we spend here in a cursed world is insignificant. God will complete His demonstration of love by placing those who receive His salvation in a perfect place forever.

## **The restoration of all things**

The Bible describes death as the last enemy that will be destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:26). Revelation 21:4 says that “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” Those who have received salvation look forward to the time when the Lord will revoke the curse and restore the universe to the perfect state it had before man sinned (Revelation 22:3).

The Lord not only loves His children enough to die for their sin, He also promises to fix the world that was ruined because of sin by creating a new heavens and new earth (Revelation 21:1). And just as the first Adam brought death into the world, Christ, as the “last Adam,” brings renewed life into the world.



As Paul said:

And so it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being.” The last Adam became a life-giving spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45).

## **The alternate view of history**

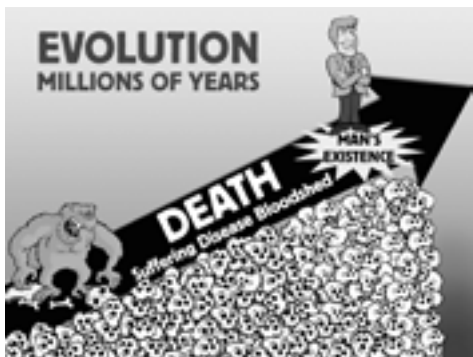
Those who reject the Creator must explain how the world came into existence without God.

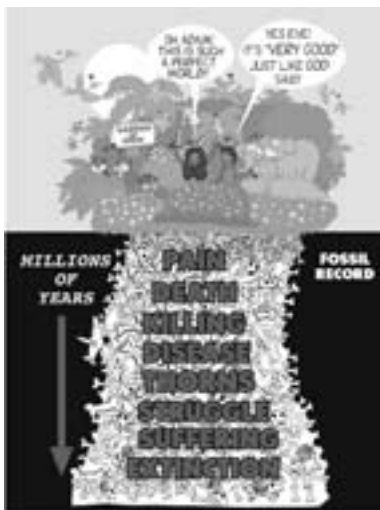
Evolutionists and most other “long agers” believe that 14–15 billion years ago, a big bang caused the universe to begin from nothing. Galaxies, stars, and planets formed as matter—scattered across the universe—cooled and coalesced. About five billion

years ago, the earth itself began to form. The earth, it is claimed, cooled for a billion years or so, water formed on the surface, and in this primordial ocean, molecules somehow arranged themselves together to form the simplest one-celled life forms.

Due to environmental stresses and other forces, directionless mutations, say evolutionists, led to survival advantages for certain organisms. These organisms gradually changed into progressively more complex organisms. The strongest organisms were able to survive and reproduce, and the weaker organisms died off or were killed by the stronger creatures.

This merciless process eventually produced ape-like creatures and man himself. Thus humans are the ultimate product (so far!) of millions of years of death.





This naturalistic view of the universe uses the fossil record as proof for the belief that creatures became more advanced over millions of years. This view teaches that the fossil record is a record of millions of years of disease, struggle, and death. The late famous evolutionist Carl Sagan declared that “the secrets of evolution are time and death.”<sup>4</sup>

Evolution cannot explain its progression without millions of years of weaker organisms being overcome by stronger organisms.

## Does this really matter?

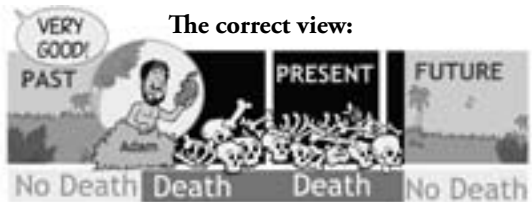
The Bible says that death came as the result of man's sin. Evolution says that death has always been a part of nature. Can both be true? Obviously not.

If the fossil record represents millions of years of earth history, there must have been millions of years of death, struggle, and disease before man appeared, contrary to what Genesis teaches.

“Theistic evolution” is an idea that attempts to merge the Genesis account and the concept of millions of years of evolution. Theistic evolution postulates millions of years of death before God, at some point, stepped into the process and created the Garden of Eden. As illustrated below, theistic evolution



### The correct view:



requires God to call millions of years of death and suffering “very good.”

On the other hand, if the fossil record is the product of a catastrophic global Flood in which vast numbers of organisms were suddenly buried in chemical-rich water and sediment, the need to postulate millions of years of history goes away. God’s account of a perfect world ruined by sin and destroyed by a watery judgment (Genesis chapters 6–9) is consistent with the fossil evidence in the world. We can look forward, though, to the restoration of a perfect world.

God’s promise of future restoration, “the restitution of all things” (Acts 3:12), would be nonsensical if evolution really happened. Only an original creation free from death makes God’s promise of restoration logical.

A perfect creation cannot be the promised future restoration if no perfect creation existed in the past.

### **Where do caring and mercy come from?**

While many evolutionists cry out that a loving God is inconsistent with this world of cruelty we inhabit, they conveniently overlook other things. For example, how does evolution explain mercy,

charity, and caring? If evolution is true, the driving force of nature is “survival of the fittest.” Those less able to compete are destined to die. Any attempt to rescue these “less competitive” people would be to work against the most fundamental force of nature. The existence of doctors, hospitals, charitable organizations, and even a police force is contrary to evolutionary forces.

The evolutionist has no basis for moral judgments. If man is just the result of millions of years of evolution, our behavior is based on random chemical reactions. There is no ultimate moral code. All morality is relative. So if a person needs money, why is it wrong to rob someone? According to evolution, the stronger person should succeed. Might makes right. So in the evolutionary view, suffering and death are a natural part of the world.

Those who have a worldview based on the Bible have a consistent basis for any act of kindness, charity, or caring. We are commanded in Scripture to love our neighbors as ourselves, to perform acts of mercy, and to care for the widows and orphans. If we take evolution to its logical extent, we will conclude that these widows and orphans should die because they are a drain on the resources of nature.

Only Christians ultimately have a basis to make

moral judgments. Those who reject the Bible ultimately have no basis to make moral judgments.

### **What about individual suffering?**

In John chapter 9 Jesus addressed the issue of personal suffering. When His disciples assumed that a man's blindness was the result of the man's sin, Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him" (John 9:3). Jesus did not consider the man's suffering to be wasted or capricious, because God would be glorified in the man's life.

The book of Job tells the story of a righteous man who pleased God but nevertheless suffered the loss of his wealth, his ten children, and his health. His friends were sure his sufferings represented judgment for some secret sins, but God denied this accusation. Many people have taken comfort simply in knowing that their personal tragedies did not necessarily represent personal judgments.

Jesus demonstrated that His love for us is not incompatible with personal suffering when Lazarus was sick and about to die. "When Jesus heard that, He said, 'This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister

and Lazarus” (John 11:4–5).

Jesus clearly loved Lazarus and his grieving family, but He was able to see a purpose to suffering that they could not see. Christ clearly revealed to them that He had power over death (by raising Lazarus from the dead), even prior to His crucifixion.

Jesus commented on the purpose of tragedy after the tower of Siloam collapsed, killing eighteen people. “Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? ‘I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish’” (Luke 13:4–5).

These examples show that it is not necessarily an individual’s sin that leads to suffering, but that sin in general already has. God may use suffering as a reminder that sin has consequences—and perhaps for other purposes we did not fully investigate in this booklet. But the presence of suffering does not mean God does not love us. Quite the opposite—Christ came and suffered with us and took that punishment when He didn’t have to.

In times of suffering, Christians honor the Lord by trusting Him and knowing that He loves them and has a purpose for their lives. The presence of

suffering in the world should remind us all that we are sinners in a sin-cursed world and also prompt us to tell others about the salvation available in Christ—after all, that would be the loving thing to do. We can tell people the truth of how they too can be saved from this sin-cursed world and live eternally with a perfect and good God.

2 Corinthians 4:17–18 says, “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

<sup>1</sup> Associated Press, “Ted Turner was suicidal after breakup,” <[www.nytimes.com/aponline/arts/AP-People-Turner.html](http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/arts/AP-People-Turner.html)>, April 16, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Desmond, A., and Moore, J., *Darwin: The Life of a Tormented Evolutionist*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, p. 387, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> The Bible is not clear when Lucifer rebelled, or when Adam and Eve sinned. However, we can surmise that it was not too long after God put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, as He told them to be fruitful and multiply, and they obviously had not had an opportunity to conceive a child before they rebelled.

<sup>4</sup> Sagan, C., *Cosmos Part 2: One Voice in the Cosmic Fugue*, produced by Public Broadcasting Company in Los Angeles with affiliate station KCET-TV, and first aired in 1980 on PBS stations throughout the US.

## HERE'S THE GOOD NEWS

Answers in Genesis seeks to give glory and honor to God as Creator, and to affirm the truth of the biblical record of the real origin and history of the world and mankind.

Part of this real history is the bad news that the rebellion of the first man, Adam, against God's command brought death, suffering, and separation from God into this world. We see the results all around us. All of Adam's descendants are sinful from conception (Psalm 51:5) and have themselves entered into this rebellion (sin). They therefore cannot live with a holy God, but are condemned to separation from God. The Bible says that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) and that all are therefore subject to "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

But the good news is that God has done something about it. "For God so loved the world, that He gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Jesus Christ the Creator, though totally sinless, suffered, on behalf of mankind, the penalty of

mankind's sin, which is death and separation from God. He did this to satisfy the righteous demands of the holiness and justice of God, His Father. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice; He died on a cross, but on the third day, He rose again, conquering death, so that all who truly believe in Him, repent of their sin, and trust in Him (rather than their own merit), are able to come back to God and live for eternity with their Creator.

Therefore: “He who believes on Him is not condemned, but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God” (John 3:18).

The baby in Bethlehem ... what a wonderful Savior ... and what a wonderful salvation in Christ our Creator!

(If you want to know more of what the Bible says about how *you* can receive eternal life, contact the Answers in Genesis office nearest you—see inside front cover.)