

Perspective Digest

Volume 11
Issue 4 *Fall*

Article 1

2006

One of Christianity's Biggest Questions

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Recommended Citation

Caesar, Lael (2006) "One of Christianity's Biggest Questions," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol11/iss4/1>

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ONE OF CHRISTIANITY'S BIGGEST QUESTIONS

The issue of suffering has been a subject of human thought from the beginning of time, and all religions and philosophies have had to come to terms with it.

On the question of suffering, atheism shares certain common ground with most world religions. Holocaustic misery being prerequisite to evolution, directed or otherwise, pain is evidently not a problem to the authentic evolutionist.

C. S. Lewis shares this cynical view of life, reflective of his pre-Christian mindset: "What is [life] like while it lasts? It is so arranged that all the forms of it can live only by preying upon one another. In the lower forms this process entails only death, but in the higher there appears a new quality

called consciousness which enables it to be attended with pain. The creatures cause pain by being born, and live by inflicting pain, and in pain they mostly die."¹

Other world religions respond hardly any differently to the inescapability of pain. Dukka, the first of the four noble truths that undergird the non-theistic religion of Buddhism, posits "that life inevitably involves suffering."² Similarly,

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pain is close to the heart of Hinduism's vedic worship. Vedic sacrifices are calculated to keep the world in "proper order" by mirroring "the original personal sacrifice by which the universe was created, namely the dismemberment of the Purusha, the primal Being, by the gods."³

In a context that holds pain to be so normal, there exists only limited justification for describing it as evil or problematic. How could that be wrong or evil which is deemed so essential to life's processes? Indeed, James Stewart observes that "there is no real problem of evil for the man who has never accepted the Christian revelation."⁴ Stewart may be referring here to the biblical position that God is nothing if not love (1 John 4:8). Outside of such faith, moral and ethical perplexity remain essentially alien notions, given the presupposed chaos and accident of the naturalistic view of existence, the irrelevant God of deism, and the brutal deity of theistic evolution.

Thus, it is ironic that unbelief should contribute any arguments on the problem of suffering. Yet, humanity's collective inadequacy before great tragedy has expressed itself, upon occasion, as conviction against Deity. If God exists, then He must be in some sense incompetent. More probably, He is neither competent nor incompetent. He simply is not. Stewart radically disagrees: "I, as a believer in God, have to face—as the

unbeliever does not—the mystery of the existence of evil. I admit that. But here is the other side of it: the unbeliever has to face—as I, who believe in God, do not—the mystery of the existence of good. And his problem is definitely more insoluble than mine."⁵

Stewart is one of more than half a dozen Christian apologists whose responses to the issue of suffering provide a focus for reflection and discussion.

Eight Other Christian Answers

Stewart's treatment of the issue of suffering appears in a series of four sermons entitled "God and the Fact of Suffering," which address several popular explanations of suffering. He begins by offering three negations. He denies: (1) that all suffering is traceable to God; (2) that all suffering is traceable to sin; and (3) that all suffering is explainable as an illusion.

At the same time he affirms: (1) that suffering derives from the beneficence of inexorable law—we could not reasonably play any game if the rules kept changing or if the boundary line kept shifting; (2) that suffering is a function of our mutual dependence—we miss one another when separated only because we belong to each other; (3) that it is the evidence of the impartiality of God—all sense of morality would disappear if certain behaviors were consistently rewarded; (4) that it arises from the need for the awaken-

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ing of humanity's conscience, upon which depends the development of character—suffering contributes to the moral development of its victim; (5) that [because of the Cross] God shares the sufferer's pain; and (6) that by the same token, "you are in it with God, sharing His redemptive activity and His victory."⁶

Stewart's views on character development attract further comment: He holds, in common with most, that the greater a given misery, the more meaningful the Christian's service in the midst of that need, and the clearer the revelation of Christ's character. It is but a restatement of the claim that suffering betters personal morality. Stewart also finds it true, however, that multiplied problems provide better satisfaction for the human hunger for danger. As he states, "It takes a world with trouble in it to satisfy man's demand for a dangerous universe."⁷ In his thinking, any question of the logic of suffering must be answered in context of a dangerous universe as a given. For him, the ethical dilemma of an inherently perilous universe finds no resolution. On the contrary, the problem is simply aggravated. Stewart seems to overlook the fact that a universe divinely designed as fundamentally dangerous offers less than comfort to minds in search of a satisfactory answer to the question of suffering, whether it be of trilobites, of dinosaurs, or of human beings. The Christian obligation must

then be to believe in a God whose purpose cannot exclude pain.

Often enough, Christians must discharge this obligation even as they struggle to relate to a context of pervasive pain. In the words of Nathan A. Scott: "Of the myriad issues of life which the Christian pulpit is required to handle there is none so pressing, so inescapable, and so burdensome for the preacher as the problem of suffering, the mystery of iniquity, the strange and brutal haphazardness with which, as seems at times, acute misfortune is distributed amongst men."⁸

Scott's sense of the burdensomeness and prominence of this issue nevertheless allows him to warn the Christian preacher: "The great mistake, of course, that is made by the pulpit when it risks any sort of rational account of evil is that of permitting itself a view of things *sub specie aeternitatis*. For this is precisely where the preacher never stands, under the aspect of eternity: his view of the world, like that of everybody else, is always *sub specie temporalitatis*. And thus what is perhaps always the wisest course for him is that of carefully forswearing any and all attempts at explaining why tribulation and suffering overtake us, or how they are ultimately to be fitted into the total economy of an 'engodded' world. For the gospel is found to be good news not because it explains how we come to be in what popular existentialism

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used to call ‘the human predicament’ but rather because it proves itself to be an effective way of practically coping with that predicament.”⁹

So whereas for Stewart, peril is a universal given, even a satisfaction for excitement-hungry humanity, for Scott, the question “why” is better not raised. Scott’s gospel constitutes not a cosmic clarification of the mystery of iniquity and an absolute deliverance from all its consequences, but a coping mechanism for those inescapably damned to be part of the predicament of existence: “So a great reticence needs to be practiced about the issues of ‘cosmology,’ about how the fact of evil requires to be reconciled with a faith in the sovereignty over the world of a gracious and providential Presence.”¹⁰

The concept of a gracious and providential Presence proves particularly troublesome to Christian thinkers who desire to absolve the Deity while being unable to dispense with the eternity of pain. George W. Truett, a Christian theologian consid-

ered one of the greatest preachers of his time, suggests a biblical answer for those who would lay the guilt of sin upon the Christian sufferer:

“The Word of God is not that cruel. The Word of God does not teach that doctrine. That doctrine is as false as it is cruel, and as cruel as it is false. When you turn to the Word of God, it is perfectly clear.”¹¹ Whereupon, he quotes Hebrews 12:6–9 and the words of Jesus in Revelation 3:19. The difficulty is that both these passages describe God as “chastening” and “scourging.” Truett thus succeeds in reiterating the refrain about pain as the producer of betterment, but his effort to deliver the Deity from blame cannot be considered very successful.

George Morrison’s affirmation of the profit of pain goes even further than those already considered when he places pain at the root of life and growth. This optimistic statement of pain’s virtue potentially credits it with the production of all progress and includes at least three remarkable submissions:

The spiritual alternatives of brute and arbitrary fate or the callous caprice of gods who need give no account, condemn humanity to the curse of senseless existence. Should Christianity's consolations offer no more than a continued sense of earnest trust and mysterious ignorance in a universe of immortal pain, then its optimistic rhetoric upon the hope of heaven still competes with the escapist's dream.

1. The human capacity for pain is deeper than that for joy. "We are so fashioned by the infinite, that the undertone of life is one of sorrow."

2. Self-flagellation and self-abuse give evidence that pain is either pleasing, or at least acceptable, to God, offering "some hope of fellowship with heaven. You may despise the hermit, and you may flout the saint when the weals are red upon his back but an instinct which is universal [practiced by Romans, Indians, Christians, and savages] is something you do well not to despise."¹²

3. "Though the fact of death troubled [Jesus'] soul, there is no trace that the dark fact of pain did so—and yet was there ever one on earth so sensitive to pain as Jesus Christ? Here was a man who saw pain at its bitterest, yet not for an instant did he doubt His Father."¹³

It is not altogether surprising that, absent a perception of any divine capacity to banish pain, Jesus Christ Himself should be character-

ized as accepting it by faith. Indeed, the Christian answer harmonizes with that of Habakkuk: "The just shall live by his faith" (2:4, NKJV).¹⁴

A Comparison With Heathen Responses

A review of the proposals considered thus far yields the following Christian responses to the issue of suffering, all encompassed by Cecil Wayne Cone's invocation of the refrain of Habakkuk, "the just shall live by his faith."¹⁵ Despite the satisfaction that these positions might provide, a single objection exposes their unacceptability: Their disturbing similarity to that ancient heathen thinking from which Christianity is generally expected to deliver the believer.

In the first instance, they impose severe limitations on Christianity's moral authority. If the Bible offers no explanation for the mystery of misery, then Christianity is hard pressed to prove itself a better religion, and

indeed owns small right, if any, to existence as a distinct religion.

In the second instance, the answers thus far considered offer no advance over the concepts of Israel's neighbors of the second and first millennia before Christ. W. C. Gwaltney's analysis of ancient Babylonian laments exposes a popular or cultic mindset of equivalent despair. Human tragedy was accompanied by an overall helplessness before the power of the gods. Again, in terms of causality, "ultimate causation lies in the largely unseen world of the gods . . . The emphasis of the laments is upon the power of the divine, not upon the rightness of the decision."¹⁶ The spiritual alternatives of brute and arbitrary fate or the callous caprice of gods who need give no account, condemn humanity to the curse of senseless existence. Should Christianity's consolations offer no more than a continued sense of earnest trust and mysterious ignorance in a universe of immortal pain, then its optimistic rhetoric upon the hope of heaven still competes with the escapist's dream. Finally, Morrison's note on the virtue of self-flagellation recalls the action of desperate ninth century B.C. prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. In an effort to establish contact with their divinity, they found it necessary to slice themselves with knives and spears until the blood flowed (1 Kings 18:28).

Looking Elsewhere for Answers

William M. Clow's attempts at an answer to the question of suffering focus directly on Jesus. Like Morrison, he believes that though keenly wounded by the world's agony, Christ accepted pain: "To see Jesus moving in the midst of a world of pain, keenly conscious of it and yet forbearing to heal, is, at first sight, both a marvel and a mystery. There were many widows in Israel who mourned for their children, but the Son of man did not regard Himself as sent to them. There were many lepers who prayed for cleansing, but Christ did not heal them. There were more sisters than Martha and Mary who wept beside their brother's grave, but Christ had no word for them. There were lame and crippled and blind in every village through which Jesus passed, but they were lame and crippled and blind to the last chapter of their lives."¹⁷

Clow's is an astonishing, eloquent, and quite awkward conviction, as is Morrison's. It is difficult to know how these interpreters read Christ's personal mission statement as outlined in Luke 4:16–19, 21. In this passage, Christ expresses His own self-understanding through the deliberate selection of a clearly messianic passage as His manifesto and *raison d'être*. According to Luke's report, Christ receives the scroll from the hands of the chazzan, unrolls it almost completely, and

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proceeds to read a portion near the end of it which, in all likelihood, He has Himself selected. The passage lists tasks which His messianic ministry will accomplish:

1. Preach good news to the poor (Isa. 61:1), those who crouch and cringe, like beggars.

2. Proclaim deliverance to captives (vs. 1), liberation from captivity.

3. Liberate the oppressed (58:6), freeing those who are shattered and crushed by cruel oppression.

4. Proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (61:2), announcement of the year of the Lord, the jubilee.

Closing the scroll, Christ announces to His synagogue audience: "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21, NKJV). Through the sermon that follows, He proceeds to represent Himself as the healing, liberating power predicted in Isaiah. Though Luke does not report the full text of this sermon, it is apparent, from Christ's use of Isaiah 61:1, 2, that He considers the unmodified categories of the jubilee year an apt metaphor of the liberation He has brought to Earth: "As the maladies under which humanity groans are here set forth under the names of poverty, broken-heartedness, bondage, blindness, bruisedness, (or crushedness), so Christ announces Himself, in the act of reading it, as the glorious Healer of all these maladies."¹⁸

The views of Morrison and Clow

cannot easily be reconciled with this pronouncement on the part of Christ, for Morrison contends that pain did not trouble Jesus, and Clow, that He had no word for most sufferers of His day. But Christ does appear to speak, by word as well as service, to all sufferers. His manifesto as it is expressed in Isaiah shows Him to be both aware of their pain and concerned for their well-being. Moreover, He explicitly offers Himself to all life's victims as the agent and source of liberation from all exploitation, whether spiritual victimization, physical oppression, or social injustice, to which they may be subject.

Nor does His ministry fail to confirm the truthfulness of this claim. Physically, He touches and heals lepers, Jewish and Samaritan (Matt. 8:1-3; Luke 17:12-19), and raises little children and grown men from the dead (Matt. 9:18-25; Luke 7:11-15; John 11:1-44); socially He calls on and feasts with publicans (Matt. 9:9-11; Luke 15:1, 2; 19:2-7), gives to and receives affection from those known as sinners (Luke 7:37-50), recognizes and elevates local and foreign women (John 4; Mark 7:25-30); spiritually, He crushes the head of the serpent whose venom of sin once brought us death (Gen. 3:15). At the cost of His own life, He purchases authority over death and hell (Rev. 1:18) and gives those who believe in Him new right to more abundant life

(John 10:10, NKJV) in a land where all things will be new (John 3:16; Rev. 21:1–5). Christ's ministry exhibits neither unconcern with pain nor acceptance of suffering. His life opposed all manifestations of sin, of which pain is surely a conspicuous consequence.

If pain is fundamental to growth and progress, and death troubled Christ while pain did not, then though Christ's death would disarm the devil, the master of death (Heb. 2:15), it would, equally, guarantee for those redeemed from death a life of perpetual pain, the fruit of continuous growth and development of our moral personality. Such reasoning would link the human life to pain more permanently than does Hinduism's karma-run wheel of reincarnations. For while Hinduism's upward-striving incarnations may result in *moksha*, or liberation from life's miseries, human progress, barring some concept of imperfectible perfection, rests upon the dubious foundation of unending pain.

Fortunately, the Christian interpretation need not immortalize pain. The observation that Jesus forbore to heal every single individual need not be explained on the basis of His acceptance of suffering. He is described as going through "all the cities and villages, . . . healing every sickness and every disease among the people" (Matt. 9:35, NKJV) as He proclaimed the gospel of the

kingdom. Given His crusade against pain, some further reason must be proposed for the existence of suffering. The notion of God's original sympathy to pain is unacceptable.

An option that hews more consistently to the Bible's foundational thesis that God is love appears in Matthew's account of Jesus' parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24–30). When conscientious servants discover that in the midst of their good seed a crop of tares is emerging, the master explains, "an enemy has done this" (vs. 28, NKJV). Later, in private clarification, Jesus tells the disciples, "the enemy . . . is the devil" (vs. 39, NKJV). Jesus' answer and explanation appear to suggest that the devil may be properly identified as the architect of contradiction not simply of Christ's gospel preaching, but generally of programs of good such as God has set in place in the universe.

The Devil [Satan] as an Answer

Taken together, 1 Peter 5:8 and Revelation 12:9 indicate that the devil, the adversary, the ancient serpent, Satan, and the dragon are all names that may be applied to the same being who, defeated by Michael and His angels, "was thrown down to the earth" (Rev. 12:9, NKJV), where he is now said to get the whole world in trouble. This view is not necessarily uncontested. Elaine Pagels considers Satan to be a fairly recent invention. Pagels asserts that "Satan, along

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with diabolical colleagues like Belial and Mastema (whose Hebrew name means 'hatred'), did not materialize out of the air. Instead, . . . such figures emerged from the turmoil of first-century Palestine, the setting in which the Christian movement began to grow.¹⁹

Pagels explores a variety of Jewish apocryphal stories that propose demons as being produced when angels mate with women, or Satan as becoming the adversary after spurning divine orders to bow to the newly created Adam, then continues: "At first glance these stories of Satan may seem to have little in common. Yet they all agree on one thing: that this greatest and most dangerous enemy did not originate, as one might expect, as an outsider, an alien, or a stranger. Satan is not the distant enemy but the intimate enemy—one's trusted colleague, close associate, brother. He is the kind of person on whose loyalty and goodwill the well-being of family and society depend—but one who turns unex-

pectedly jealous and hostile . . . Those who asked, 'How could God's own angel become his enemy?' were thus asking, in effect, 'How could one of us become one of them?'"²⁰

Pagels' admirable insights into the nature of Satan contrast with her explanation as to his origins. He is, as she detects, the intimate who becomes the enemy, the one next to God, who becomes His archrival. As to origins, however, he surely antedates Jewish first-century apocalyptic. The 27 Old Testament usages of the term *Satan* display at least four nuances of meaning:

1. Agent of justice—prosecutor, raised up against Balaam (Num. 22:22, 32) and Solomon (1 Kings 11:14, 23, 25) as these men determinedly contravene God's will.

2. Lover of cruelty—sadist. In this definition, the adversary stands against God's people—individuals whom God approves of (Job 1; 2) or wishes to protect (Joshua, in Zechariah 3:1–5). In both of these passages, the role appears to include

a slanderous dimension, as those whom God declares good are accused of moral inadequacy.

3. Agent of crime—murderer. The Philistines speak in this sense when they fear for their lives at the hands of David, as Achish takes him out to war against Saul (1 Sam. 29:4).

4. Evil inspiration. In 1 Chronicles 21:1, a post-exilic rendering of the story of 2 Samuel 24:1, Satan works on David's pride and ambition and incites him to number Israel, an event of disastrous consequence to both king and nation.

These cases show both a titular (a/the satan) and a nominal (Satan) usage of the name. In the majority of instances, the Old Testament entity identified as Satan works against God and His people. In all other cases, as in all four functions listed above, the term stands for disruption of order, or for threat to life and limb. In Numbers 22:22, 32, where the angel of the lord opposes Balaam, *adversary* is used only as simile, "I have come out as an adversary" (vs. 32, NASB). The simile concedes that while God's judgment upon the wicked may resemble the work of the adversary, it is to be distinguished from the latter's. The psalmist's request in 109:6 is perhaps a further corroboration of this consciousness that destruction and havoc are actually the work of the adversary, for it is a wicked man whom he expects will repay his

enemy evil for evil.

The Book of Job, perhaps the best-known Old Testament case of satanic activity, offers effective testimony to the mystery of his operations. The devastation of Job's herds and flocks, donkeys, servants, camels, and children, may be blamed on Sabeans or Chaldeans, desert wind, or fire from God, but never on Satan (Job 1: 13–19). Interpretation of the book's message has frequently been made to depend upon cooperation rather than hostility between God and Satan.

The latter is held to be in God's employ, as the prosecuting attorney functions in the service of the state. Divine acceptance of ultimate responsibility (Isa. 45:5–7) and the adversary's skill in preserving his hiddenness combine to promote the categorical position that "The OT does not see the satanic aspect as forming part of its theodicy. A 'satan' is not portrayed as the origin or cause of evil."²¹ Rather, he is held to emerge as a negative personal force only as a result of Israel's sixth-century contact with the Persians, under the influence of Zoroastrian dualism. The towering monotheism of Isaiah 45:5–7 allegedly contravenes any possibility of a prevailing challenge to divine sovereignty during most of the Old Testament pre-exilic period. As D. E. Hiebert acknowledges, "It is a remarkable feature of the theology of the OT that so little mention is made of Satan as

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the great Adversary of God and His people.”²² The argument for a sixth-century satanic materialization is principally supported by reference to 1 Chronicles 21:1, as compared with its parallel account in 2 Samuel 24:1. The first of these, a post-exilic passage, describes an action that the pre-exilic book of 2 Samuel attributes to God. In Chronicles, Satan tempts David to do that which, in Samuel, God moves him to do. The comparison is intended to show that before the exile, Israel knows of no conflict between Yahweh and a personal archenemy called Satan. The divine monopoly over both good and evil (2 Sam. 24:1; Isa. 45:5–7) betrays this unawareness of distinctly evil agencies. Once Persian influence has contributed the notion of essentially separate and malevolent powers, so it is argued, this comes to be reflected in the Hebrew Scriptures in such a passage as 1 Chronicles 21:1.

Nevertheless, the theory falters upon the ground that those Old Testament books most expected to reflect such Persian religion do not do so. Apart from 1 Chronicles 21:1, post-exilic works of history (Nehemiah, Ezra, Esther), as of prophecy (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi), are equally devoid of dualistic sentiment. Further, the intertestamental Qumran texts, famous for their depictions of a confrontation between sons of light and darkness,

between the Prince of Light and the Angel of Darkness, refer only three times to any kind of satan, and never as a personal name.

Beyond this, the post-exilic location of Satan's personal emergence disregards the antiquity of the Zoroastrian texts, which may date as early as the end of the 13th century B.C. In addition, a study of this being's actions, when he is specifically exposed, permits sufficient character identification. He is sometimes explicitly identified as “the Adversary.” Such is the case in the Book of Job where he personally contributes at least three explanatory points on the issue of suffering in the world. Finally, the rarity of similar mention among ancient Semitic languages underlines in yet another way the distinction between the Hebrew Bible and other religious documents of its time. Satan may be more explicitly delineated in the New Testament, but it would be misleading to speak of him as unknown in or absent from either pre- or post-exilic Old Testament Scriptures.

Lewis' reflection on the doctrine of Satan is instructive: “The doctrine of Satan's existence and fall is not among the things we know to be untrue: it contradicts not the facts discovered by scientists but the mere, vague ‘climate of opinion’ that we happen to be living in. . . . It seems to me, therefore, a reasonable supposition, that some

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mighty created power had already been at work for ill on the material universe, or the solar system, or, at least, the planet Earth, before ever man came on the scene: and that when man fell, someone had, indeed, tempted him.”²³

Scripture teaches that all Earth’s material and spiritual decay is a consequence of human failure (Gen. 3:14–21). Lewis’ subscription to theistic evolutionary cosmology, however, allows for the working of decay before the fall of humankind. Notwithstanding, he is accurate in his insight into the presence of some mighty power for evil as influencing humanity’s rebellion against God (vss. 1–6).

The origins of that mighty power and the story of his own initial rebellion are recounted in Isaiah 14:12–14 and Ezekiel 28:12–19. The first of these, with its reference to the light bearer, son of the morning, has often been linked to a Ugaritic epic that relates the birth of twins to the supreme Canaanite deity. An exami-

nation of Isaiah 14:12–21 shows it to be much more significant than is the epic, encompassing far more than the birth of a child to a Canaanite god, or an ancient accounting for the existence of the morning star. As John Oswalt states, “Despite . . . vigorous investigation there is no single mythical story which can be said to be the prototype for Isa 14:12–15.”²⁴

Isaiah’s subject matter is readily recognizable as being significantly more awesome and terrible. The breadth of the prophet’s narrative encompasses the unbridgeable chasm between native creatureliness and the heights of autodeification. His subject is a being of such splendor and exaltation that its predicted destruction will rivet both the gaze and the mind of those who behold (Isa. 14:16). And the prophet’s subject matter is a scheme, hidden within the heart of this great one (vs. 13), to seize the very throne of God. This is the astonishing rebellion by one next

to the throne whose intrigue evokes Pagels' remarks on the intimate who becomes the enemy. It is small wonder that this passage has long been recognized as a cryptic description of the ambition and fall of the originator of evil. New Testament passages such as 1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 12:9; 20:2 leave little doubt as to either this creature's identity or his current and future activity. He is the devil and Satan, both author and prime agent of all earth's misery.

Unlike the escapism that denies the existence of pain and the pagan acceptance that seeks God through human sacrifice, the Bible admits the reality of suffering and rejects it as incompatible with the character of God. Pain, in proper biblical understanding, is not eternal. It originated with the adversary. Danger and adversarial relationships are not inherent to the universe. They originated when one created perfect, designed for the flawlessness of God-ordered eternity, undertook to dispute known concepts of perfection. When this day star, son of the morning, the anointed covering cherub, elected to dispute the supremacy of his Creator, aspiring to transcend Him in position and glory, his attempt at betterment produced chaos instead. Humanity's choice to follow him cursed the race, the ground, and all nature. The deceptions by which he wrested

authority from Adam over this Earth now entitle him to such titles as "prince of this world" (John 12:31, KJV)—Jesus' own attribution—or "prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2, KJV).

The misery of natural disasters and nature's cruelty against itself testify to his incompetence to improve on God's way of doing things or carry out the boast of making himself like the Most High. The pain and suffering that pervade the animate creation result from the contamination of sin, the biblical name for Satan's rebellion and the state of things it produces. Sin's current impact is capricious, uncontrollable, and global, except by specific divine interruption, and its ultimate consequence is death. As God is eternal, as God is life and truth, and the source of life and all good, so His adversary is death and the cause of death and all evil.

Briefly: God's Answer to Suffering

Far from being the cause of suffering in the world, God has undertaken to guarantee that its presence will not be permanent. The horror of the means He has devised gives insight into the offense that sin and suffering are to Him and also the value He places upon the safety and happiness of His creation. Jesus Christ, who at His first advent considered himself the Healer of all human maladies, has, by His own awful sacrifice, ex-

changed humanity's doom for heaven's original bliss. Those who believe in Him are neither doomed to a blighted and abbreviated existence of pain, nor to suffering in perpetuity for the sake of or in the name of self-improvement. Instead, they may participate in an eternity of joy in a land where there shall be no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain, because, through Christ, the former state has passed away. By bearing, in Christ His Son, all the misery He Himself so abhors, God has restored the universe to the bliss in which He created all. In Christ's suffering is our healing. The suffering of the perfect One has neutralized sin's sting, destroyed the destroyer, and swallowed up death in victory. God has done this for the sake of His creation, because sin cannot stop God from being love. □

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¹⁹ *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Random House, 1996), p. xviii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²¹ Bruce Baloiian, *New International Dictionary of OT Theology & Exegesis*, Willem A. Van Gemeren, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), vol. 3, p. 1231.

²² "Satan," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), vol. 5, p. 282.

²³ Lewis, *op cit.*, pp. 122, 123.

²⁴ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1–39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 321

