

"Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter of soul?" Job 3:20

CAN GOD EXIST

IN A WORLD FULL OF EVIL?

AN APPEAL TO THOSE WHO HAVE
REJECTED GOD



Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?
Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing?
Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing?
Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing?
Then why call him God?

Can God Exist in a World Full of Evil?

An appeal to those who have rejected God

Pain, death, cancer, stroke, accident, tragedy, natural disaster, sorrow, workplace killings—the catalog of human troubles has no end. How can the prevalence of these distressing features of human life be consistent with the existence of a loving, all-powerful God? A God who could easily prevent any tragedy, heal any sickness, redirect any tornado into open space, and make a planet free of earthquakes and tsunamis? This apparent contradiction is constantly present and so obvious, is it any mystery why the problem of evil is at or near the top of the reasons given for rejecting God and religion?

It will help the reader to understand that “evil” in this booklet is used to encompass two categories, suffering caused by humans (moral evil), and suffering caused by nature (natural evil). In other words, it is meant to encompass all manner of bad things that can happen to us.

An Ancient Problem

Many see this as a modern problem, perhaps the result of our massively over-populated world where natural forces such as hurricanes and tsunamis impact huge numbers of people. Climate woes, epidemics, and wars affect far more people than at any time in history. The volcanic explosion of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. killed an estimated 16,000 people; the death toll from the same eruption today (without enough advance warning for evacuation) would run about 600,000.

Mass tragedies may be more prevalent and larger today, but in history there has always been a surplus of human pain, turmoil, and grief for people to view their suffering as a reason to doubt or reject the existence of God.

A formal statement of the problem of evil exists at least as far back as three centuries before Christ.



An argument attributed to the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-271 B.C), but is possibly even older, reads:

*Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?
Then he is not omnipotent.*

*Is he able, but not willing?
Then he is malevolent.*

*Is he both able and willing?
Then whence cometh evil?*

*Is he neither able nor willing?
Then why call him God?¹*

People have always held God responsible for the prevalence of evil and suffering: If a loving, all-powerful God existed, the world wouldn't be this horrible!

Since we do live in a world of constant tragedy, this is more than convincing in the minds of many that the existence of God must be a fable. Atheists use the presence of evil to prove that God doesn't exist, or if there is a God, that God is just a cosmic force that has no personal interaction with humans.

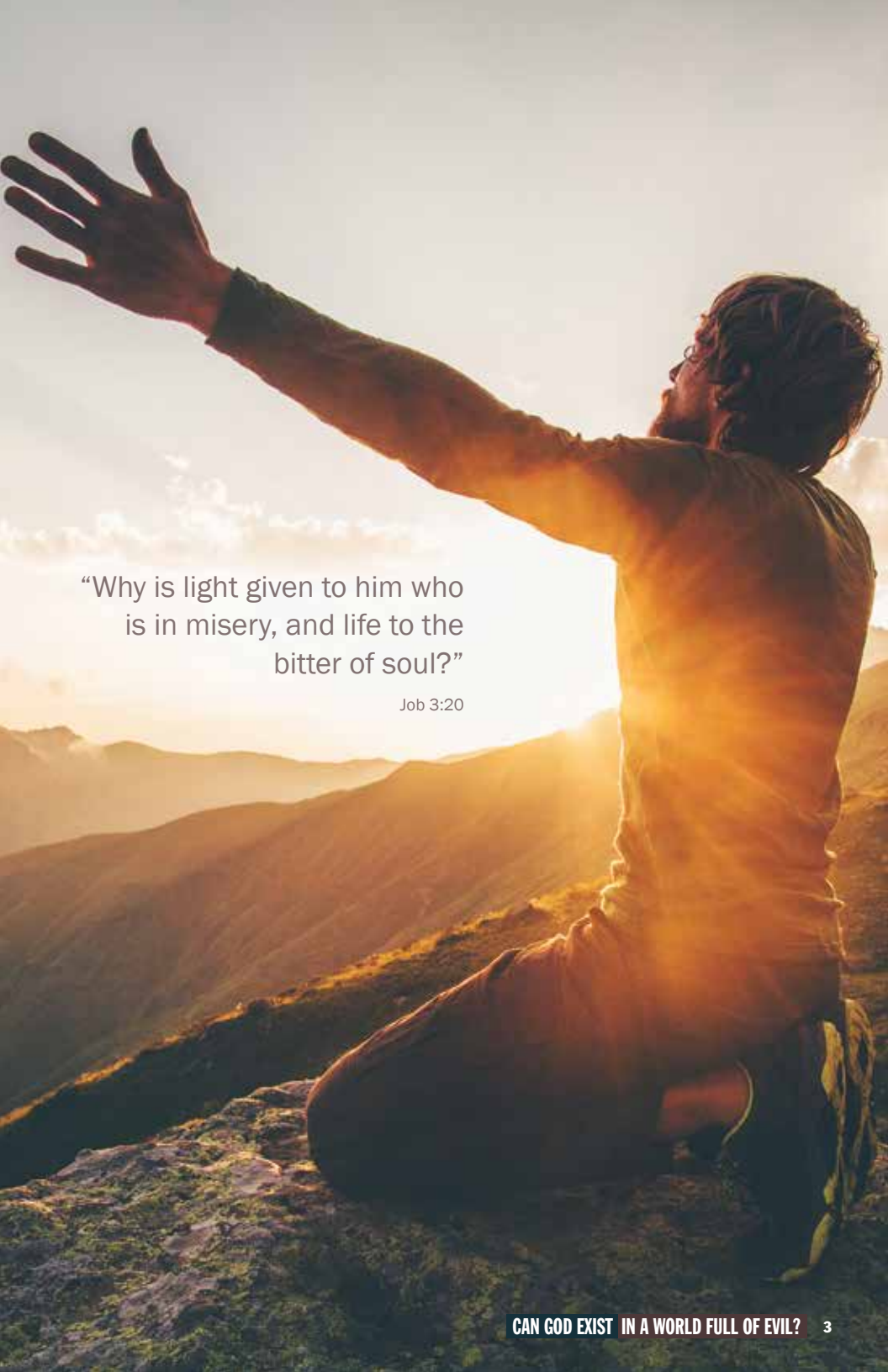
Maybe you are one these people, and maybe you have been touched by a tragedy that led you to doubt or even reject your faith. If so, I invite you to temporarily suspend your disbelief while you read this booklet. Please do not close the door on God based on your perception or experience of tragedy and suffering. As you will see, despite the sometimes overwhelming physical and emotional pain that life brings to us, these are not helpful factors in a discussion about the existence of God.

The arguments we will consider require a measure of concentrated thought and reflection. It will not always be easy, but the effort will be worth it.

A believer in God wants to explain how both evil and God can coexist.

The theological and philosophical pursuit to justify belief in God (theism) in the face of an evil world is called theodicy. Theodicy means "God justification."

¹ The Scottish philosopher David Hume reworked this slightly in his essay, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (published posthumously in 1779), but did not cite an original source.



“Why is light given to him who
is in misery, and life to the
bitter of soul?”

Job 3:20

Theodicy can refer in general to the practice of justifying God in a world of evil, and it can also refer to a specific argument. It helps to have a basic understanding of this term as it is found in some of the quotations.

How then does a believer in God justify his or her faith in God? What can a believer say or think that could somehow reconcile a daily newspaper's worth of evil with belief in the reality and presence of God?

Satisfying justifications of God (theodicies) are available. One way to appreciate them is to first examine the standard anti-god arguments to see if they actually deliver the knockout punch that those who use them claim, or, if following their logic would inevitably lead to a world that makes no sense.

We will look at the two most common types of anti-god arguments (3 & 4 below), and also a few other related topics as outlined here. It is my hope that our consideration of these arguments for rejecting God will at last lead us to a different perspective on God and the existence of evil.

#1 Evil as reality and theory: the use of the emotional impact of evil and suffering in a logical argument.

#2 Can evil really be defined?

#3 Arguments based on the amount and severity of evil.

#4 Arguments based on specific instances of evil.

#5 Mortality itself, the real problem.

1. Evil as Reality and Theory

Before we look at the arguments involved in the problem of evil, we must first step aside to acknowledge a vital feature about moral and natural evil (that is, all the bad things that happen in our world).

The problem of evil has two faces, one personal and real, the other impersonal and theoretical. The human face of evil is the reality of experience: if you have had a personal encounter with violence or severe trauma or illness, for example, you know how little comfort philosophical and theological explanations of suffering provide.

The human face of evil asks perpetually, “Why?” The answer, even if available, wouldn’t alleviate the suffering or anguish, but the universal question does reveal our striving to live in a world that makes sense. Pain is compounded when it has no explanation or reason, but to use personal pain as an argument against the existence of God is another matter.



For example, people often question God’s existence after major catastrophes and personal tragedies: “Where was God?” they ask. But there is no logical reason to question God at these times more than any other time. God does not cease to exist at times of tragedy, only to reappear when that one is no longer news. A tsunami does not take God out of existence, yet how many people questioned the existence of God after the massive tsunami in Southeast Asia of December 2004? A cleric on TV, responding to assertions that God could have prevented the massive destruction, noted that the tsunami was “a geological event, not a theological event.”

The existence of God is a question for serious, logical thought, but when it is raised and approached in the despair of pain and emotional shock, it complicates such thought. All the reactions we have when our world turns

bad generate tremendous emotional turmoil, and this colors our ability to rationally consider the question of evil.

However, if your life has been rent by the death of a loved one on the highway, you know the pain is just as real, as is the doubting of God. Whatever is true of the 9/11 experiences of our life is just as true of an auto fatality. Scale and proximity are emotional factors, not rational arguments.

The same argument could be used of many diseases that have enormous annual death tolls, such as cancer or heart disease, but they occur at a regular level throughout the year, and thus don't leap into our consciousness like a natural disaster or genocide.

Beware of the outcries against God that surface at each occurrence of a new horrifying episode in the drama of human existence.

2. Is Evil Even Definable?

Philosophical proofs and theological evidence must rely on some kind of rational argument, one that has real substance; one that is true at any time, not just for the latest headlines of woe. However, even given this perspective, the use of evil as an argument against God has another severe limitation—it is very difficult to actually define evil. Often the definition is based on our emotional response, rather than on specific, definable attributes.

To see how this limitation works, look at the other face of evil, the one that is abstract and arbitrary, highly relative, contextual, and subjective: What, exactly, is “evil”? What is “pain”? What is “suffering”?

All three of these concepts are highly subjective, like beauty. What one person calls “evil” another might call “heroism.” One ethnic or political group bombs another, and finds no evil in that at all. It's just patriotism. A person who might be called a terrorist by one group is a hero and martyr in the eyes of others.

Most of us in North America, at least of a certain age, learned about the great achievements of the explorers and pioneers, the industrialists and inventors who built our great societies. Did these people advance society or destroy what was already there? Some of both, perhaps, but again we are left with a great difficulty in how to make “evil” a real thing; it just depends on whom

you ask to define it. European explorers brought smallpox to the New World and took tobacco back home. Were they great men of accomplishment or agents of evil?

If we turn to physical pain, we find the same subjective nature. Some cultures have rituals that involve what others find unthinkable—body slashing, stabbing, burning. Pain can disappear when distracted or in a hypnotic trance. Athletes routinely subject themselves to severe pain, discomfort, and deprivation for the sake of accomplishing their goals, and wouldn't trade that experience for anything. Ultimately, they know enduring pain and hardship makes them better competitors. Many people have not chosen a way of pain, but when life's troubles visit them, they endure and later find that they are much better for the experience.

Look again at the statement from Epicurus. It is an attempt at a formal logical statement. It relies on "evil" to dislodge God. If evil exists, then God doesn't. However, "evil" as we have seen is difficult to define, much less to have a definition to which all would agree.

Can we hold God responsible for something we can't even define or agree on?

For those who suffer from evil circumstances or events, pain is real. For arguments about God, pain and suffering are only abstract notions based on some human experience. Pain and suffering are excruciatingly real for those engulfed by it, but without universal, easily identified definitions they just cannot be used in a formal argument. Without recognizing this dual perspective of evil—that it can be treated as either personal or impersonal, some later arguments might sound crass and insensitive. Let's acknowledge the reality of suffering now as a subjective human experience, but not let the accompanying emotionality of that suffering become an argument against God.

Can we hold God responsible for something we can't even define or agree on?

3. The "Amount of Evil" Argument

Setting aside the personal face of evil for now, we will look at how critics argue that the world we see and live in is too horrible a place to have been created or

ruled over by a wise and loving God. These arguments usually cite examples of extreme evil, such as massive earthquakes or other natural disasters, or the incredible destructiveness of war and other political atrocities. The Nazi mass extermination program during World War II claimed the lives of some six million Jews and millions more of other groups deemed unsuitable by the Nazis. It has become the iconic example of evil in the Western world—so far.

Writers who refer to instances of massive suffering, such as the Holocaust, make the obvious point that “an all-powerful God could have prevented this.” Therefore, either God does not exist or God is not all-powerful, or, God is just a force that created nature, but has nothing to do with people and their suffering.

The Holocaust has enormously influenced discussions about God and the problem of evil, but for reasons that do not seem to carry much weight. I do not mean to minimize what the Holocaust did, or what its memory means today. (I speak as one of Jewish ancestry.)

I’m only referring to the inappropriate use of the Holocaust as an instance of evil. Let’s look at two examples:

One interesting fact to emerge from recent discussion of the problem of evil is that the paradigm evil event to which virtually all theodicians now refer—including all the contributors of this book—is the Holocaust. . . . Let me pose this question for the authors and readers of this book: are there any theodicies [justifications of



God], represented here or elsewhere, which are credible when they try to account for the Holocaust?²

If he [God] could bring Jesus back from total lifelessness to life, I believe that God could have changed the minds of the Nazi leaders, thereby preventing Auschwitz.³

The first statement, a rhetorical question, implies that no attempt to justify God can account for the Holocaust.

The second blames God for failing to prevent the Nazi leaders from carrying out the Holocaust, represented by Auschwitz, one of the major Nazi death camps.

Some six million Jewish lives were lost. Does this mean that if only one million perished the writer would not find that troubling his belief? A million is still a huge number, so let’s take it down to 100,000. Suppose only 100,000 Jews perished before Allied forces stopped the Nazi regime. That’s still a big number, though. How about 10,000? One thousand? At some point, according to this line of reasoning, there’s a threshold. Above that number, God doesn’t exist. Below, we can still have faith.

Does this make sense to the reader? Do numbers really matter? Tragedy is tragedy. Regardless of how many people are killed, even a single death is enough to cause doubt in God. One survivor, who witnessed a young child held by her niece grabbed away by a fellow prisoner so her niece would not be sent to the gas chambers, said this in a PBS interview:

I cannot see a God who will allow a little baby to be killed for no reason at all. And I really lost my belief then, right there and then.

2 Stephen T. Davis, ed., *Encountering Evil* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), p.6.

3 John K Roth, *A Theodicy of Protest in Encountering Evil: Live Options In Theodicy* (John Knox Press, 1981), p.33.

Photo courtesy of: Everett Historical / Shutterstock.com

I had one sister and two brothers. I was the oldest and the only survivor of my family. Why? What did they do so terrible that they had to perish? I think if God is so great and so powerful, he could have struck Hitler down before he killed so many Jews. That’s my feeling.⁴

“Why would I believe in a God who would allow such tragedy to happen?” can be said whether the numbers are many or few.

Human tragedies are horrible for the victims, and for generations beyond, but they are not rational arguments against God. They are expressions of emotion and cries for understanding and change in a badly corrupted world.

There is, though, no line, amount, number, or gradation of any disaster above which it becomes an argument against God, or below which God’s existence or power is not questioned. Even though this argument is always tied to the presence of so much evil in the world, it is really asking for no evil at all. Even if there’s one, that’s still evil in a world that God made. We’ll get back to that “one” tragedy in the last section.

4. Arguments from Specific Evils that “God Could Have Prevented”

Arguments based on the amount of evil are based on the assumption that God could prevent genocides and tsunamis, and any other instances of mass destruction. This form of argument plays on the amount and hideousness of evil to dispel the idea that a kind, loving, powerful God is in control. These events overwhelm our sensibilities; when they occur they inevitably cause some people to question the existence of God.

It does not take an event of mass evil, however, to generate doubts about the existence of God (as we discussed earlier). Just one incident that seems highly unjust, untimely, or exceptionally cruel will have some people shaking their heads and thinking, “Certainly a God could have prevented *that* from happening.”

The mother of five young children killed by a drunk driver. Parents who think they cannot have a child, then have one in their old age, only to have the child die of cancer at age six. An about-to-be bride and her sister, the maid

⁴ <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2001/08/03/august-3-2001-holocaust-survivors-the-search-for-faith/13853/>

of honor, both killed on the way to the wedding. Incidents such as these can truly leave us wondering if there is any justice or fairness in the world at all.

The good do die young, parents lose children, young children lose parents, people die doing mission work, Beethoven became deaf, and all sorts of cruel fates seem to befall the wrong people at the wrong time. Does God not care? Couldn't the slightest bit of divine intervention save overwhelming human heartache and despair? Does God not care if masses of people become unbelievers because He didn't intervene when they thought that He should have?

Of course, there is no way of knowing how much evil God does relieve.⁵ We do see plenty of suffering, but we don't know if God pushed away some asteroid far out in space that would have devastated our planet. We don't know how many Hitlers or Pol Pots have not been born, or how many tornadoes have been diverted from major metropolitan areas, how many people have not developed cancer, or how many drunk drivers never got behind the wheel because of God's intervention. It is impossible to say that God doesn't prevent evil; we just don't know.

This is not a valid way to approach this subject.

An incident needn't be exceptionally horrible if it happens to you. Anyone can feel abandoned by God during hardship.

People often lose their faith, or never develop one, because of some experience they endure that they believe God would or should or could have prevented—if there really was a God.

“God wouldn't have let my husband die at such a young age,” might be one example of this. Or, “I prayed for deliverance from this disease, but nothing happened. Where was God when I needed him? I will suffer the rest of my life.”

If God did work this way—to alleviate all suffering—could it yield a possible world?

Imagine a world where God would never permit the death of an only child. What would you think about having a second child or more? Or suppose that God would never allow the

5 Again, we are using “evil” here to mean the stuff we don't like happening in our world.



parent of a young child to die, that’s unfair, right? In this case, as soon as you got married you would want to have children, and keep them coming, for as long as you had a young child in the house, you were protected from an untimely death. Or suppose this: sometimes parents died, but never innocent children, even if you had several. In this case, if you went on an airplane trip, you would always take one child with you, to prevent the plane from going down.

Can you see the kind of world this creates? Yet, these are the logical outcomes if we accept the “God could have prevented this” thinking. (Please remember, I am only discussing the hard, cold logic of the argument, and in no way wish to diminish the overwhelming grief of those who have lost a child.)

What if only believers in God had such protection, what would that say about the foundation of their faith? If God ran the world this way, it would not produce a world where selflessness and care and love would prevail. Would you really want to live in such a world?

The same problem we found when reasoning about mass evil events happens in this world too. If a child were divinely protected until he or she was grown, what age would that be? How young is young? If someone can’t die at 30, can they die at 31? 43? Is there some age where we draw and line and say, “If someone below this age dies, I can’t believe in God, but above that age, I can be a believer?”

Similar reasoning holds true with any other dimension we choose. How tragic does tragic have to be to say, “God could have prevented this; ergo, there is no God”?

In reality, God can’t protect certain people or populations whom we deem worthy of greater protection. We don’t live in a world where believers never get sick, their children never have accidents, where everyone is healthy and happy every day until they reach the age of 100 or more and then die with a smile on their face.

The problem with all these worlds is that they don’t produce people who are truly compassionate, kind, or loving, but it is the logical outcome if you follow out the “If God existed, this wouldn’t have happened” argument.



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5. The Problem of Mortality

This is the real problem: mortality. As long as you have real people who run their own lives based on their own choices, you will have a world of woe, and in the end, everyone dies.

People who argue against God because of some instance of extreme evil, or some mass tragedy, will never have the world they think they want as long as people are mortal. Mortality means death, and there can be no possible world where death does not vary when and how it takes us away. As long as there is mortality, there will be suffering perceived as evil, and people blaming God or dismissing God from existence because of the evil. It doesn't make any difference if one person dies of old age or a million people die by genocide.

What are we left with? We are left with a world without God where death is just a tool of nature to produce newer and fitter species, and life is ultimately meaningless and without purpose. As one writer put it:

We are not here for any purpose. Of course, we all have our own little purposes in life that we choose and that make our lives meaningful in the emotional sense. But if we're interested in the question of whether life is ultimately meaningful, rather than whether it's potentially emotionally meaningful, well after Darwin, there is no reason at all to suppose that it is - there is no reason to assume that life has any ultimate meaning or purpose.⁶

If, though, mortality is the answer of a just, wise, and merciful God putting a limit on the ability of people with free will to act according to their own selfish thoughts and behaviors, then, a different perspective emerges, a perspective full of meaning, purpose, and hope.

A Different Perspective

The purpose of this booklet has been to show the failure of human arguments that would dismiss God because evil events and experiences fill our world and lives. Is there, then, an explanation for evil, both moral and physical, in a God-governed world that does make sense?

The answer is yes. Lack of space does not allow a consideration here, but

⁶ Steve Stewart-Williams, "The Meaning of Life Revealed! Evolution and the ultimate purpose of life". 08 Jan 2011 blog based on excerpts from his book "Darwin, God and the Meaning of Life." www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-nature-nurture-nietzsche-blog/201101/the-meaning-life-revealed

this answer is addressed in another booklet in this series, and you are invited to consider it.⁷

What I wish to leave with the reader is just a brief summary, a preview, of what can be found in the Bible about the issue of human mortality.

We learn first that death was imposed on the original human pair, but not just because they ate a forbidden fruit. In that act they declared their desire to be the masters of their own destiny, without the need for God. The promise held out by the forbidden fruit was the one thing they thought that separated them from their Creator—knowledge of good and evil.

How was this knowledge used by the human race? It produced the first murderer driven by human envy (Cain) and a world that rapidly descended to the point that “the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” (Genesis 6:5)

Jesus clearly identified the reason for all this “evil” in our world:

For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man. (Mark 7:21-23)

Mortality came into the world of human experience to put a limit on this behavior until a promised day when all these things would be reversed.⁸

What makes it possible for an inquiring person to even consider this possibility?

The most striking evidence is an empty tomb nearly two thousand years ago. This is the tomb that held the body of Jesus for three days. The claim made at that time as the only possible answer to its emptiness was that the man it held was raised from the dead on the third day. That man was Jesus who became the very first human to overcome mortality forever.

Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death,

⁷ Making Sense of Human Suffering and a Loving God

⁸ See, for example, Isaiah 2:2-4; 35:5-10; Acts 3:18-21; Revelation 21:3-5.

because it was not possible that He should be held by it. (Acts 2:23-24)

This first resurrection to life became the promise of a similar resurrection to life for those who faithfully follow this man. It is this that accounts for the possibility of a new perspective on life: Life that can now be filled with hope and meaning.

But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. (1 Corinthians 15:20-23)

Those with this new perspective look forward to a renewed earth, free from present corruption; a place of healing, peace, love, and joy—a condition only possible because death itself, called “the last enemy,” is finally be done away with forever (1 Corinthians 15:26).

To ask God for a better world is a fair proposition. We readily recognize the evils and failings of our current existence. However, to ask God to remove evil without removing death is not a realistic solution because the two are so closely intertwined.

God made a perfect world in the beginning, and people corrupted it. People cannot make it right again, but God can, and will. We invite the reader to see other booklets in this series if you would like to learn more about the Bible and the hope it provides.

~ David Levin



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- Explore an answer to this troubling question.
- Discover why all arguments ultimately fail that seek to dismiss God based on the existence of evil.
- Consider the problems that arise with the alternative worlds we sometimes think would be better than what we see now.
- Discover a different perspective that makes sense and offers a better hope than a meaningless world devoid of God.