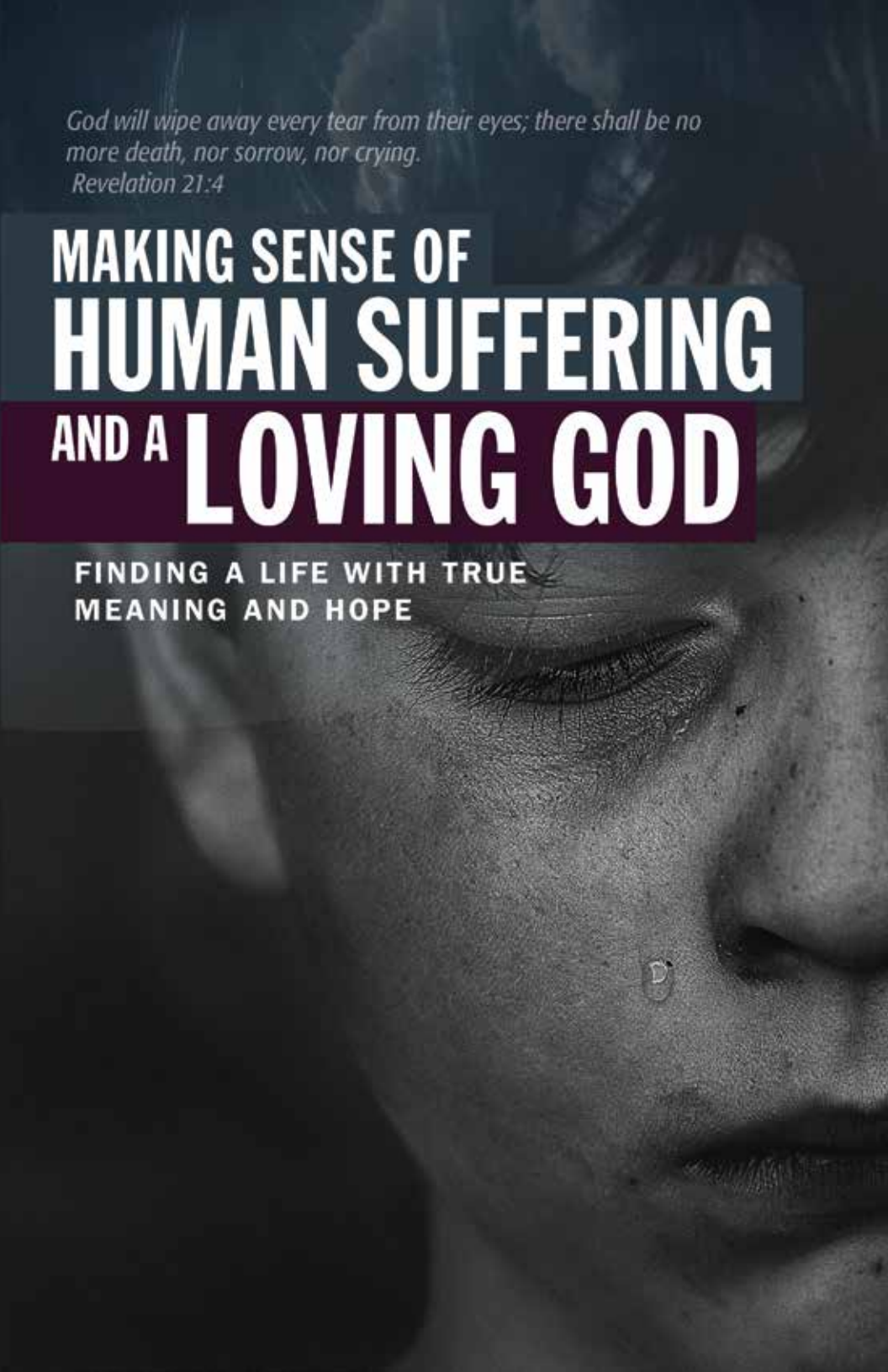


God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying.

Revelation 21:4

MAKING SENSE OF HUMAN SUFFERING AND A **LOVING GOD**

FINDING A LIFE WITH TRUE
MEANING AND HOPE



Man who is born of woman
Is of few days and full of trouble.
He comes forth like a flower and fades away;
He flees like a shadow and does not continue.
~ Job 14:1-2

Making Sense of Human Suffering and a Loving God

Finding a life with true meaning and hope

Affliction, suffering, trouble, pain of every sort. Whatever you choose to call it, the human experience includes quite a lot of it. Very bad things happen to people, and very bad things are done by people. These facts can be a barrier to believing in God, even when other evidence strongly suggests a Creator. Our thinking tends to be, “If there is a God, why is there suffering all around us?” When it is personal: “Why am I suffering?” or, “Why are people I love suffering?”

There are no simple answers to such major life questions, but the Bible does provide answers. God doesn’t ask us to believe and accept without reason. He helps us gain genuine understanding when we take the time to listen.

Let’s Get Started

The Bible’s answer to these difficult questions — “Why am I here?” “Why is there suffering?” — starts in Genesis, which means, appropriately, “beginnings”. The first chapters of the Bible describe God’s creation of the universe, and life, followed by how it all went wrong. God seems to know the questions we’ll have because He starts to answer them immediately.

The very first words of the Bible tell us God has unimaginable power: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). This is followed by a series of creative acts accomplished by speaking the word and making it so.

Much later, God explained why He created:

*For thus says the Lord, Who created the heavens, Who is God, Who formed the earth and made it, Who has established it, Who did not create it in vain, Who formed it to be inhabited: I am the Lord, and there is no other.
(Isaiah 45:18)*

God made this world to be inhabited, especially by men and women. This is evident in the creation account itself. The final creative act is this:

God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over...every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:27-28)

God gave man and woman life, all the resources of the earth, and "dominion," or authority, over it. The concept of "dominion" meant they would have the unfettered power to choose. Put another way, they were given free will. It was an incredibly loving and generous gift, but a potentially dangerous one too.

Choices & Consequences

We don't question the right of benefactors who merely give money to place conditions on their gifts. How much more the gift of life! God's condition is stated in very clear language:

Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 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 2:15-17)

Only one restriction! They were learning what was good in God's eyes, but in disobedience, they would also learn evil. Worse, they would also forfeit God's gift of life. Their power to choose was their own. However, if they exercised it in disobeying, there would be consequences. "Sin" is the Bible term for disobeying God. In the New Testament, the consequence is described this way: "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Adam and Eve were learning what was good in God's eyes, but in disobedience, they would also learn evil...

You may have heard what happened next. They *did* disobey. God confronted them and they admitted what they had done. At this point we meet for the first time an important Bible concept, *grace*. God could quite justly have caused them to die at that moment, but instead He showed mercy. He let them live. He still wanted His

earth to be inhabited, and He was going to provide a way for it to happen in spite of the failure of the first man and woman.

We see this when God begins to lay out the consequences of their sin: God starts with a promise! A "seed" would be born to the woman who would destroy sin. Since sin is the cause of death, eliminating the cause removes the effect. Thus, before anything else is said, hope is given (Genesis 3:15).

Following His promise, God details what their life will now be: They would have pain and hardship, and ultimately, they would die.

Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3:17-19)

Despite the suffering this would bring Adam and Eve, there is a remarkable gift of grace in these consequences: They would now have a lifetime in which to live, love, and work in hope of reconciliation with their Creator.

Our Heritage

Sin is the Bible's explanation why there is suffering in the world.

Unfortunately, the choice made by Adam and Eve didn't just affect them, it also affected their descendants.

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)

It is a vicious cycle of sin and death, with all the pain and suffering these twin evils bring into our world.

The Bible is a record of how God continues to work with us to save us from this cycle of sin and death. The hope hinted at earlier in Genesis 3:15 is revealed in increasing detail in the rest of the Bible. God *still* intends to have His earth inhabited.

We have seen that “the wages of sin is death,” but that’s not the final word. It’s followed by, “but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23).



Right after we are told how we earn death by our disobedience, we learn that God wants to give us a gift. Not just any gift, but the gift, the gift of life, forever. It's a gift for men and women with faith in Christ that is built on evidence God provides.¹ So, although life involves suffering now, the Bible says life is not hopeless or pointless. There is hope of life without sin, suffering, and death, and there is evidence to believe it is real.²

The Big Picture

While it is hard to be objective when we, or people we love, suffer, stepping back to look at the big picture can help us understand why it occurs.

One piece of the picture is that God put in place **physical laws of nature**. These forces are reliable and their reliability allows us to function. If the laws of physics were unreliable, life would not be possible. Think for a moment what the universe would be like without the law of gravity!

However, these same forces sometimes lead to tragedies such as earthquakes or floods, or mutations that result in congenital diseases or cancer. Sometimes people disregard the powerful forces of nature rather than respecting them. How else can we explain why we build homes in earthquake or flood zones? Why do we engage in behaviors that make cancer more likely?



Another important part of the picture is the **suffering that comes directly from the choices people make**. Quite a bit of the trouble in our lives is self-inflicted. We still have free will and “dominion” in life, but we can be short-sighted, make unwise choices and do things that harm ourselves or others.

¹ See *Is There Really a Living God? Why it makes sense to believe* in this series for more on this topic.

² Another booklet in this series, *Dying to Live—Is there an answer to our mortality?* explores this hope more.

We bear responsibility for the planet God gave us. We can't blame God for the evil people do, though we might be inclined to do so. As wise Solomon said, "When a man's folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the LORD" (Proverbs 19:3 ESV).

People commit murder, assault and theft. *They* fight wars, inflict cruelties, and are negligent and indifferent to others. *Humans* act out of greed, self-interest, and hate. We're capable of far better behavior, but these evil things come from our very nature. The term "human nature" is seldom used in a good sense.

In light of this, can we really argue with Jesus' assessment of us?

What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. 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 7:20-23)

Why Does God Allow Suffering?

The Bible is clear: trouble and suffering exist because God made them part of the human experience. It also says God is loving and kind. Some might see a contradiction here that can't be reconciled and look no further.³ Stay with me, and let's look at this problem.

First, many who are angry with God for suffering in this world, would probably object to having their free will taken away. Yet stop and consider this: **free will must include the ability to use the forces of nature for evil as well as for good.**

Free will requires that we be just as capable of designing and using weapons to kill as we are of designing and using vaccines to save lives. If God were to intervene to prevent every unkind, violent or immoral act, we wouldn't have free will in any sense. God made us independent, thinking beings, with genuine dominion. Creating us was an act of love on His part. In return, He is looking for our love by choice.

Second, consider the practical value of pain. Congenital analgesia, the inability to feel pain, can cause people, especially babies and children, to seriously harm themselves without knowing it. It can also cause a variety of secondary conditions which can lead to death. Pain is valuable.

³ For those wishing a more in-depth consideration of this problem, see another booklet in this series: *Can God Exist in a World Full of Evil?*

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It warns us and causes us to do, or stop doing, something and get treatment. It teaches us to avoid repeating harmful behaviors.

We don't like pain and we want to avoid it. In fact, that's the whole point. The existence of pain in our lives is actually a blessing. It is a loving God, not a heartless or vindictive God, who gave us pain.

Let me expand on this idea.

Suppose there were no consequences for any choice we made. Imagine a child who never experiences any form of disapproval and who has no concept of right or wrong. Would this child be happy? Would this child grow into a functioning adult?

Now extend this to a society. What would a society be like if it had no laws or standards, and therefore, had no consequences? We don't have to imagine it. Lawless societies have existed, and they were filled with violence and doomed to collapse.⁴

Now, let's make this more personal. If we never had any hardship, difficulty, or sickness, would we be happy and fulfilled? Satisfaction in this life often comes from facing adversity or difficulty and overcoming it. We admire people who have done so and seek to be like them. More to the point, if life was always smooth sailing, would we ever seek a relationship with God? Probably not. I think we would just ignore Him. That's not the outcome God wants!

If life was always smooth sailing, would we ever seek a relationship with God?
Probably not.

An Unexpected Benefit

Here are some Bible passages that are baffling on the surface:

*It is **good** for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes. (Psalm 119:71)*

*Indeed **it was for my own peace** that I had great bitterness; but You have lovingly delivered my soul from the pit of corruption, for You have cast all my sins behind Your back. (Isaiah 38:17)*

*My brethren, **count it all joy** when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking*

⁴ Far from wishing there were no consequences, several Bible writers express great frustration that there aren't more, or at least more immediate, consequences for wrongdoing. For example: Job 21:7-21, Psalm 37, Psalm 73, Ecclesiastes 8:11-14, Jeremiah 12:1-4, Habakkuk 1:13-17. The words of these writers resonate with us – we too long for real justice, that people who do evil things won't just get away with it forever.

nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. (James 1:2-5)

*(We) rejoice in hope of the **glory** of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Romans 5:2-4)*

If verses like these didn't appear so often in the Bible we might dismiss them, thinking they can't mean what they say. Nevertheless, they are really no different than the popular saying, "What doesn't kill us, makes us stronger."

The point is this: we learn and grow from experiencing adversity. God wants us to grow toward Him, so much so that He is willing to let us go through very tough situations to achieve this growth.

The writers of the Bible passages above didn't claim it was easy, but they understood the point. The Psalmist said that affliction made him learn. The prophet Isaiah said his bitterness resulted in peace, a better perspective. The apostle James said trials produced patience, and he told us where we could get help in understanding our trials. Finally, the apostle Paul wrote that there is a process initiated by suffering which builds character, and the finished result of this character-building is a strong confidence, both in God's work in us now, and in the certainty of His promises for the future. This is real hope.

How Can Affliction Lead to Hope

How indeed! It seems like affliction would do the very opposite, producing discouragement. God says He loves us, and is actively working with mankind, just as any loving parent would. He is working to draw us to Himself.

The process, **as intended by God**, looks like this

From **our point of view**, it looks like this

#1 God made us with the power to choose, desiring that we would choose to love Him and honor Him by heeding His instruction. The gift of life was made conditional; God's righteousness could not permit sin to result in immortality.

We highly value our free will, but we recognize that when free will is exercised in harmful ways in our societies and families, there must be consequences.

#2 Our first parents choose to sin. God had made clear the consequences, therefore death had to come into effect.

We are painfully aware that we aren't perfect, which is just another way of saying we sin. We can see the world is full of wrongdoing, some of it utterly heinous.

continued >

The process, as intended by God , looks like this <i>(cont'd)</i>	From our point of view , it looks like this <i>(cont'd)</i>
#3 In His love, instead of destroying mankind, God provided a way out. He provided hope, in the form of a promise that sin and death would be crushed by a promised offspring of the woman.	If we have a conscience, and if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit mankind desperately needs a way out. We ourselves personally need it. I need it, but not everyone is willing to be so honest, and this is where they stop.
#4 However, there had to be consequences, and these included trouble and suffering, leading to death.	Being all too familiar with pain and suffering, so very aware of our mortality, we who choose to go on look for an explanation. There are plenty of reasons available, most of them simplistic, and ultimately unsatisfying. This is another place many people stop because they become satisfied with something that doesn't demand much in the way of thinking...or self-examination.
#5 God's intention was that the trouble and the inevitable end of every life would lead us to seek Him, and His solution to sin and death. It still had to be by choice. He knew that without the difficulties, without the time limit on life, our human nature wouldn't respond to Him.	Those who choose to go on find that the hope presented in the Bible is actually satisfying. It makes sense of what we see in ourselves and all around us and it is going somewhere: it is a way to the end of sin, the end of death, and a hope of eternal life. Trouble reminds us, every day, that this life is not the one that really matters, or the one that really lasts.
#6 For those who do respond, who choose to align themselves with God, He offers eternal life. He wants to spend eternity with such people, it's why He created us, but it will only be those who want to spend eternity with Him.	This perspective draws us to God – which, because He loves us, is the point!

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

James 1:12

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews sums up the purpose of suffering for those who recognize it as God’s preparation for eternal life:

“For whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.” If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? ... Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:6-11)

Job

We prefaced this booklet with a lament from Job (inside front cover). I think it’s significant that one of the earliest books of the Bible is about this “blameless and upright” man (Job 1:8) who endured tremendous suffering and grief. God knows we really struggle with this. Why *do* bad things happen to good people?

A quick summary of Job’s experience:

God says Job is an exceptionally upright, indeed blameless, man. When Job is accused of being good only because he has a prosperous, easy life, God demonstrates this isn’t so by taking away everything, including his children and his health. Job’s “so-called” friends accuse him of being a horrible sinner—why else would God bring such disaster on him? Job knows this isn’t so, and he remains faithful, but he does question why he has to endure such terrible suffering. Exactly the question we have.



Ilya Repin, “Job and His Friends” (1869)

In the middle of Job’s suffering, God poses questions to Job that require real introspection.

To Job's credit, his bitterness, coupled with God's questioning, helps him move closer to God.

In the ending of the book, Job's "friends" are told they are the ones who didn't have it right, and their incorrect assumptions about why people suffer are shown to be false.

Job's spiritual growth shows the effectiveness of the process we've been talking about. His first reaction to his suffering is acceptance—a very mature attitude! As his trials increase, he questions more and complains more, but ultimately, he confesses he hadn't really known what he was talking about.

"I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." (Job 42:3)

In the end, God blesses Job and restores him. Job's experience of suffering is actually a spiritual journey from which he draws insight and grows in his relationship with God.

What can we learn from Job's experiences? First, suffering in our lives can help us grow spiritually and draw us closer to God. Second, jumping to conclusions about why someone else is suffering is completely out of place. Further, the trials we go through might end up helping others, as was true for Job's friends. Perhaps most important, instead of being angry at God when we are hurting, we can imitate Job's humble attitude. Then, we will understand that while our perspective is limited, God can see the beneficial, long-term outcome of trials in our lives.

Here is one New Testament writer's reflection: "Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful." (James 5:11)

Jesus

The suffering of Jesus presents even more of a challenge to our thinking. Jesus is the one man who never sinned. How can it be just for him to endure an excruciating execution, or any suffering at all, for that matter?

To answer this question, it helps to know who Jesus was and is.⁵ He was born Son of God. He was also (as he often said) the Son of Man. He inherited from his mother the same nature we all have with its weaknesses and temptations, ending in death:

In all things he [Jesus] had to be made like his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful High Priest... For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 2:17, 4:15)

To do his job, Jesus had to have the same nature we have and the same experience with temptation and suffering. Notice too that he experienced all this without ever sinning. This is his great victory!

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. (Hebrews 5:7-9)

What is this saying? First, Jesus really knew and fully felt the weakness of his flesh. And second, he needed to be saved out of death. The experience of suffering shaped the Son of God. By his experiences he learned to obey God: he never gave in to sin. Through his trust and obedience God was able to perfect him forever. God raised him from the dead and gave him the victory over sin and death permanently. This work of Christ finally broke the hold of sin and death over mankind.

Consequently, the victory was not only for himself, but it was also for us if we belong to him:

(We) see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that he, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for him, for whom are all things and by whom

The work of Christ
finally broke the hold
of sin and death over
mankind...

*are all things, in bringing **many sons to glory**, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. (Hebrews 2:9-10)*

⁵ The reader might find helpful a booklet about God and His Son: "Who is the Living God?" See contact information at the end of this booklet.



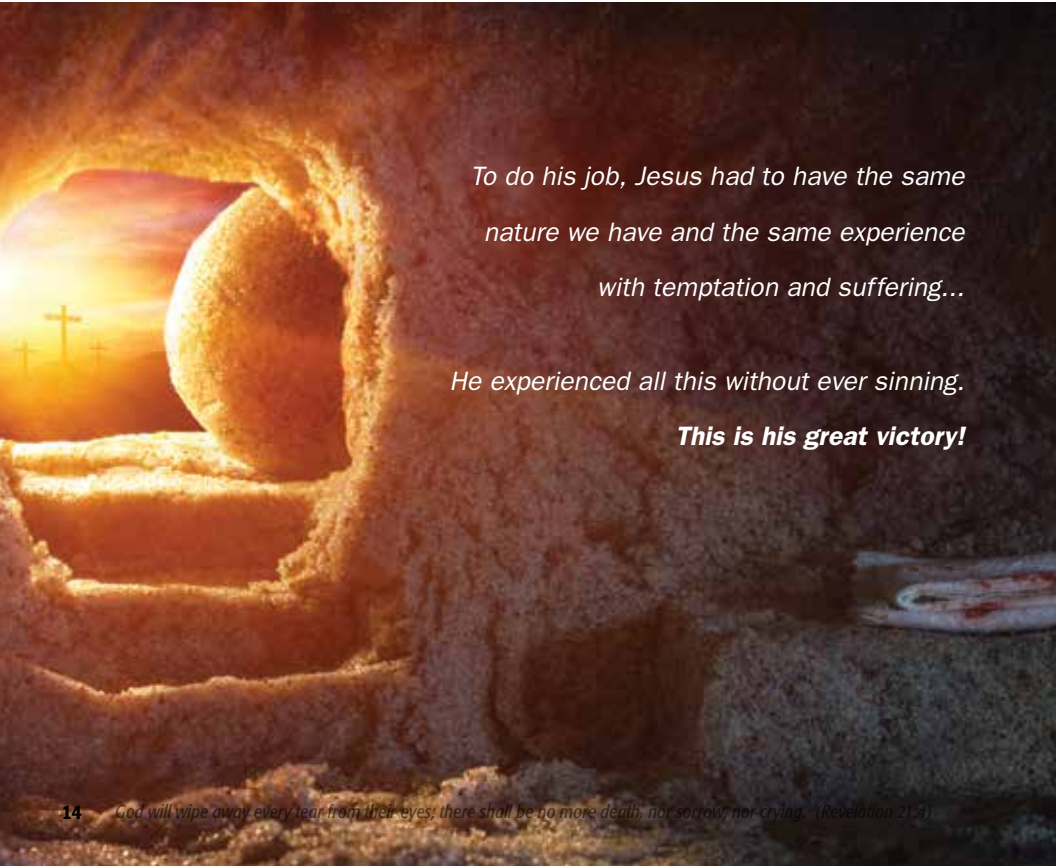
*...while our
perspective is limited,
God can see the
beneficial, long-term
outcome of trials in
our lives.*

The immediate point for our consideration here is this: even in the case of the perfect man, suffering had a crucial place, both in his own personal development, and in saving the lives of countless others.

We are counseled to take the example of Jesus to heart as we face our own difficulties or even mistreatment:

But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously. (1 Peter 2:20-23)

If we learn obedience through the things we suffer, following Jesus' example, the same outcome—resurrection and eternal life—can be ours too.



To do his job, Jesus had to have the same nature we have and the same experience with temptation and suffering...

He experienced all this without ever sinning.

This is his great victory!

Final Thoughts

This is a big subject. I've tried to share some key Bible principles that have helped me understand why we have trouble and affliction in our lives. I hope these principles will help you.

- We've seen that the root cause of suffering is human rebellion against God—sin. He gave us life, this planet, and the power to choose. Sadly, our first parents chose to go their own way, to turn away from God.
- The consequences God imposed were just. These included all the troubles we have, and ultimately death. God could have righteously swept us away, but instead He held out the hope of a solution. This is a reflection of His love and grace.
- Much that distresses us is caused by human beings, including the one we see in the mirror.
- There is value in trouble. Pain can teach us. Reminders of our failures and our mortality are instructive. If we let them, these things can bring us nearer to God, which is His intent in putting them in our lives.
- Jesus did not “deserve” to suffer because he never sinned. But suffering can benefit others, and in the case of Jesus, it is the ultimate benefit because of what was accomplished: the defeat of sin and death.
- God is the righteous Judge. He has occasionally in the past, and will again in the future, execute His judgment on those who refuse Him. They have exercised their power to choose.
- The most important point of all is that an end of all suffering has been promised. This is the hope held out to us, and frankly, without it there would be nothing left but despair. With this hope, we can endure.

*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.
(Revelation 21:4)*

A word from the author

You may be wondering, “Who is he and does he have any idea what real suffering is like?” This is a fair question. Here is where I am coming from: I have watched helplessly while people I loved have gone through terrible anguish. People I loved, young and old, have died. All my life I have had my eyes open to the horrors of war, of terrible injustice, of disease, of grinding poverty, of heartless evil.

On a personal level, I am a cancer survivor. I have been face to face with near-certain death at least twice. I have not experienced every form of trouble and suffering, but what I have experienced has, I think, given me empathy. I have also experienced the love and care of the God of the Bible in my personal life; a love and care that affirms my convictions that He does have a purpose with this world.



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MAKING SENSE OF HUMAN SUFFERING AND A LOVING GOD

Human suffering.

We struggle with the existence of suffering, especially when it comes close to us. “If God is so loving, why did He let this happen to me?”

Is there an explanation for human suffering? One that makes sense, and, one that helps us understand the role of a loving God in such suffering?

That is the purpose of this booklet.

This is not an abstract, esoteric explanation; it is written by someone who has had to confront these questions in his own life.

The best part: At the end, one is left with an understanding of suffering that can lead to a life with real meaning and genuine hope.