

# How Much Does God Control?

Our answer to this question will tell us a lot about our ability to trust God. It will show how ready we are to answer the objection of skeptics that the kind of all-powerful, good God described in the Bible is a logical impossibility. Such people argue that the amount of pain and suffering in the world proves that if God is good He's not all-powerful, and that if He's all-powerful He isn't good.

While the argument sounds philosophical, it's as real as the pain and fear that touches each of our lives and families. Herb Vander Lugt, RBC senior research editor, understands some of these questions. In addition to more than 50 years of pastoral experience, he and his wife Ginny have raised a dearly loved daughter who was brain injured at birth. I pray that you will find his conclusions, as reflected in the following pages, both comforting and challenging.

*Martin R. De Haan II*

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Managing Editor: David Sper

Cover Photo: Liason International

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Printed in USA

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# How Much Does God Control?

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A man who grew up in North Africa as the son of missionary parents tells of the time he saw a pregnant woman killed when a team of horses pulling a buggy galloped through a crowd of people. The driver stopped, saw that the woman was dead, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "It was the will of Allah," and continued on his way.

A 39-year-old woman has lost her desire to live because her husband left her for a younger lover. She has been a devout believer and wonders why God is doing this to her.

The grandfather of a teenage girl killed by a drunk driver has stopped going to church and becomes angry when people try to comfort him. He says that a good and all-powerful God would not let such things happen.

Indeed, sometimes it's hard to reconcile belief in God's goodness and power with what we see. I remember the thoughts and feelings I had as a young man when I visited a hospital's pediatric ward. I was a surgical technician during World War II, so I had seen severely wounded men. But the sight of deformed and dying children was almost too much for me. I couldn't think of any reason for what I saw. They had done nothing to bring these conditions on themselves. They couldn't learn anything through their pain. I found myself wondering about God, even doubting some of the beliefs I had cherished for most of my lifetime.

People who experience or observe debilitating

disease or heartbreaking circumstances have a number of options. They can deny the existence of a personal God and struggle with unexplainable issues of origin and meaning. They can accept the existence of a God who is a mixture of good and evil. Or they can conclude that God is good, but that some things are beyond His control—the conclusion expressed by Rabbi Kushner in his book *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*.

Another option is to become fatalistic. Many Muslims and Christians have adopted a “whatever will be will be” attitude toward life. No matter what happens, it’s God’s will. Such a God may be feared, but how can He be loved? And if He cannot be loved, how can He be trusted? The implications are profound. Oswald Chambers made the astute observation that “the root of all sin is in the suspicion that God is not good.”

The Bible does give us another choice, however. It presents God as both all-powerful and good. The God of the Bible is pleased with those who do good, and slowly but surely becomes angry with those who stubbornly resist Him (Ps. 7:11; Nah. 1:1-7). He feels grief toward those who reject Him (Gen. 6:6; Ps. 95:10). He hurts when He finds it necessary to correct and punish (Isa. 63:9). He finds no pleasure in judging the wicked, and longs for their change of heart (Ezek. 18:23,32; 33:11). He delights in kindness, justice, and righteousness (Jer. 9:24). And He loved the world so much that in the person of Jesus Christ He became a member of the human family and took our punishment by dying like a sinner (Jn. 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:21).

People who have placed their trust in Jesus

Christ and live in obedience to God's Word experience the reality of His love, and love Him in return. They can go through overwhelming sorrows, distressing physical afflictions, and dire circumstances with amazing resiliency. The heartbroken father of a 20-year-old girl who died because the heater in the motel was not vented said to me, "I'm not angry with God. How can I doubt the goodness of the One who has shown so much love toward me and been so patient with me through all my years?" I talked with parents who had a teenage son and daughter both killed in separate accidents. They grieved deeply, but neither ever spoke bitterly or railed at anyone. They told me they anticipate heaven with a new eagerness and that they sense God's presence in their lives as never before.

The fact remains, however, that the world is full of grief, pain, sorrow, cruelty, and injustice. And while some believers are able to triumph over it, many are deeply shaken. They often wonder where God is or why He lets them down. I have tried to help many such people and have suffered with them. I am therefore writing this booklet from my heart as well as my mind. I want to draw on the Bible and human experience to provide an understandable and practical answer to the question, "How Much Does God Control?" I will do so under the headings: (1) paradoxical truths, (2) conflicting kingdoms, (3) perplexing problems, and (4) practical implications.

I pray that the thoughts expressed in the following pages will be used by God to strengthen His people and lead doubters to faith in the One who has faced the problem of evil for us.



# PARADOXICAL TRUTHS

The Bible doesn't tell us exactly how, when, or why evil came into God's world. What it does tell us, however, is everything we need to know to live hopefully and responsibly in this troubled world. It assures us that God is sovereign, that He is in control, and that He will carry out His loving plans and purposes for us. On the other hand, the Bible tells us that we are moral beings with the power of choice, and that God holds us responsible to make good moral and spiritual decisions. How can both of these statements be true? It seems that they can't be unless we modify either God's sovereignty or human freedom. But the Bible doesn't allow us to take one path over the other.

**GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY.** God is all-powerful and so involved with what happens that not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from His will (Mt. 10:29). He is in control of history. Paul declared that "He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings" (Acts 17:26). He also declared that the rulers of nations, bad as well as good, receive their authority from God (Dan. 4:17; Rom. 13:1). He decides to whom He will show mercy instead of wrath (Ex. 33:19; 34:5-7; Rom. 9:14-24). He has chosen those who will be the redeemed in heaven (Jn. 6:37; Rom. 8:28-29; Eph. 1:4). He was involved when Pharaoh refused to listen to Moses and determined not to release

the Israelites from slavery in his land (Ex. 5–14). He was even involved in the treachery of Judas Iscariot in that He provided the circumstances that made it possible for Judas to fulfill his preordained role (Acts 1:15-20).

God is active in history, even when He doesn't seem to be. This theme runs through the whole Bible. The Old Testament story of Joseph is a striking example. Joseph was indulged by his father, hated and abused by his brothers, falsely accused of sexually assaulting his employer's wife, and forgotten in prison. Yet through those dark years, God was quietly moving Joseph into a position to save the founding fathers of Israel from starvation. God gave Joseph the ability to interpret dreams, which put him in favor with the king of Egypt. And because of his God-given administrative ability, Joseph soon became the prime minister of Egypt. In this role, he was able to protect the nation of Egypt as well as his own family from famine.

More than 30 years after being the victim of his brothers' hatred, Joseph quieted their fear of retaliation by saying:

*Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God?  
But as for you, you meant evil against me; but  
God meant it for good, in order to bring it  
about as it is this day, to save many people  
alive (Gen. 50:19-20).*

God prospered the descendants of Jacob in Egypt. They multiplied and became a nation of about 2.5 million people. He then allowed their circumstances to change when a new dynasty came into power. He brought Moses into the world, kept him alive, and through a succession of events

trained and equipped him for the task of leading the Israelites. He supernaturally delivered them from their bondage from Egypt by sending 10 plagues and destroying Pharaoh's army. He then preserved them miraculously until they entered the Promised Land 40 years later.

God's part in what happens is not always detectable. His actions are often so interwoven with earthly and human factors that we do not know exactly what we can attribute directly to Him. We know that as a holy God who hates sin He never leads anyone to do evil. James declared as an absolute principle that "God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone" (1:13). Yet He works in and through human sin to accomplish His purposes.

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**“ God cannot be tempted by evil,  
nor does He Himself tempt  
anyone. ”**

—James 1:13

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He told the Israelites that if they disobeyed Him He would bring a nation against them and that the invaders would be unspeakably cruel (Dt. 28:49-52). The Bible writers repeatedly tell us that God sent the Assyrians and Babylonians against the Israelites. Moses also told the Israelites that God would bring them terrible plagues and sicknesses (vv.58-62).

A number of earthly and human factors were involved in the fulfillment of these threats. The leaders of the nations that attacked the Israelites freely chose to do it. The foreign invaders freely chose to be cruel and insensitive.

Perhaps some of the famines and plagues could

be explained as natural events, but the Bible doesn't make these distinctions. God said they would take place in judgment, and He saw to it that they did. Maybe Satan and the kingdom of evil is so malignant that they quickly bring about pestilence and plagues as soon as God removes His restraining hand. Satan was eager to afflict Job and did so with vengeance as soon as God gave him permission. Job, not knowing the full story, attributed his suffering to God. Ultimately, of course, it had God's approval. He could have prevented it if He had chosen to do so.

Perhaps the relationship between Judas Iscariot and Jesus throws some light on the relationship between God and the evil ones He uses to carry out His plans. Knowing what Judas intended to do, Jesus hid this fact from His other disciples, told Judas to do quickly what he intended to do, and then went to the Garden where the betrayer could sell out for 30 pieces of silver.

The human heart needs no divine assistance to think about and carry out evil. All that is required is opportunity and a lack of restraint. An evil plan doesn't originate from God, but He may allow or even intervene to bring about circumstances favorable to the execution of the plan—as long as it accomplishes His purposes.

We can be certain that nothing can happen to us without passing through God's permissive will, and that He can bring about good through it (Rom. 8:28). With that assurance, we can live trustingly and hopefully, no matter what our circumstances.

When doubts come, we can, like Job, talk to God about them with candor and honesty. As we grow to know Him better, we will see more and



more clearly how great and good He is. We will also see how small and sinful we are. Finally, we will end all our complaining and say with Job, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore, I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6).

God is sovereign. He is completely in control at all times. And those who know Him look forward to the day when they will join all the inhabitants of the universe to sing, "Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!" (Rev. 5:13).

**HUMAN FREEDOM.** Under God's sovereign oversight, we are also free moral agents. We can and do choose between right and wrong, between good and evil. The Bible says that man was created in God's image and therefore possesses abilities and responsibilities not shared by any other earthly creatures.

- We have a unique level of understanding.
- We have a unique ability to make moral choices.
- We have a unique capacity to consciously place the interests of others ahead of our own; to love with the kind of love God has.

Our uniqueness can be seen clearly when we consider our ability to respond to our Lord's summary of the Law and Prophets: to love God above all and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mt. 22:37-40).

As human beings we can first of all understand what these commands mean. We can evaluate their implications for our daily lives. We do not need much education or intelligence to do this.

Second, as human beings we can choose whether or not we will take these commands seriously. If we make the right choice and find that we cannot do so perfectly, we can choose to seek God's forgiveness and enablement.

Third, we can, with God's help, place the interests of others above our own. People sometimes go to great lengths and personal sacrifice to help those for whom they have no natural affection. Some have even given their lives for enemies. This is not true of the animal world, which has not been made in the likeness of God.

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**“Most human suffering is the result of wrong choices by people who could have done better.”**

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Since human beings are able to understand God's commands, we can choose whether or not to take them seriously. And since we have been given the ability to deliberately place the desires of others before our own, we are responsible when we do things that are ungodly, cruel, immoral, and selfish. Therefore, we have no right to blame God for our sins. Nor can we blame Him when someone wrongs us or perpetrates a terrible crime. Most human suffering is caused by people wronging other people. It is the result of wrong choices by people who could have done better.

Even though God is not surprised by our misuse of freedom, He enters emotionally into our failure. When He confronted Adam and Eve after they had sinned, He reflected disappointment as He called

out to them, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). Later He pled with Cain to resist his evil desire to kill Abel (4:6-7), but it was to no avail. A few chapters later, God observed that people had become so terribly wicked that He was "sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart" (6:6).

We ask, "God was sorry? Didn't He know what would happen?" But Moses felt no need to explain. A few thousand years later, about 1500 BC, God was repeatedly grieved and disappointed by the Israelites, a nation of people He had miraculously delivered out of slavery in Egypt. He had great plans for this nation. He told them He wanted to make them a "special treasure," "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5-6). He promised them that if they would obey Him they would be "blessed above all peoples," and said He would "take away from (them) all sickness" (Dt. 7:12-16). Through the Israelites, God desired to make Himself known to the surrounding pagan nations. But they would not comply with the terms of obedience that would have made them "a light to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:47).

How did God feel when His people disobeyed Him and brought all kinds of trouble on themselves? He was angry (Ps. 95:8-11). He suffered with them and felt sorrow: "In all their affliction He was afflicted . . . But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit" (Isa. 63:9-10). He felt like a loving husband does when his wife becomes unfaithful and refuses to change her ways until he has no choice but to divorce her: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? . . . My heart churns within Me" (Hos. 11:8). He felt like a kind father does when his children are disrespectful and un-

grateful: "A son honors his father . . . . If then I am the Father, where is My honor?" (Mal. 1:6).

The New Testament also portrayed God as disappointed, grieved, and frustrated. Jesus "came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (Jn. 1:11). He repeatedly announced to the Israelites that He was the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. He performed miracles as evidence of the truthfulness of His claims, but He was hated, maligned, rejected, and finally crucified as a blasphemer. Matthew showed us how much this disappointed Jesus Christ, and how grieved He was as He contemplated the judgment that would fall on the generation that rejected Him:

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . ! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate (Mt. 23:37-38).*

Luke portrayed Jesus approaching the city near the close of His earthly ministry, weeping over it, and saying:

*If you had known . . . the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will . . . surround you . . . and level you, and your children within you, to the ground . . . because you did not know the time of your visitation (Lk. 19:42-44).*

Remember, when you see and hear Jesus in the Gospels you are looking at and listening to God. He said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). Think of what this means! Are you heart-sick and distressed by the wickedness, injustice,

pain, and sorrow around you? So is God! Are you heartbroken because you are being wronged? Do you wonder why God is allowing this grief? If so, be assured that an evil person or evil people are doing this to you. God isn't leading them to do these wrongs. He hates to see you wronged. He feels your grief. He holds the person or people wronging you responsible for what they are doing. And He is able to bring eternal good for you out of this bad experience (Ps. 42). Therefore, quit blaming God. Pray to Him. Trust Him. Take whatever appropriate action is open to you. Then wait for God to prove Himself faithful.

As we confront life with its pleasures and its pains, its beauty and its ugliness, its goodness and its evil, we hold to two truths: (1) our good God is absolutely in control, and (2) we are free moral agents who can choose to accept or reject God's assistance in dealing with right and wrong. All too often we make the wrong choices. When we do, we grieve and disappoint God. But He is never surprised or worried. He is firmly in charge. He can and He does use even the sin of those who rebel against Him to chasten His people when they are disobedient, to punish the wicked, and to accomplish His purposes.

Sometimes God doesn't intervene as we might wish He would. He lets wicked people prosper while allowing godly men and women to suffer. A poet in Israel had this problem, and expressed it in the opening verses of Psalm 73. But he changed his attitude after going to the temple to worship God. There he saw life from the perspective of eternity. Thinking of the prospering wicked, he under-

stood their end. He saw them “in slippery places,” confessed his shortsightedness, and affirmed his confidence in God’s goodness and power. “You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory” (v.24).

The prophet Habakkuk was also troubled by God’s failure to punish the wicked in Israel. He called the Lord’s attention to their wickedness. God told His servant that judgment was coming. The Babylonian armies would soon invade the land. This puzzled the prophet. Why help the Babylonians, a wicked and cruel people more godless and cruel than the Israelites? God then assured the prophet that He would also punish them in His own time. The prophet finally felt so confident about God’s goodness and power that he closed his book with a hymn of praise and trust (Hab. 3:17-19).

The prophet Ezekiel, who was among the exiles after Babylon defeated the kingdom of Judah, was God’s mouthpiece to tell the Lord’s people that though they had “defiled” the land with their sin and “profaned” God’s name wherever they went, they would one day repent, be cleansed, receive a new heart, and fulfill their destiny (Ezek. 36:16-38). He assured them that God is completely in charge.

When God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ and presented Himself as Israel’s promised Messiah, He was rejected and crucified. But God was not dismayed. He, of course, had known this would happen. He made Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection the means of salvation and eternal glory for all who would believe. A little more than 7 weeks after our Lord’s death and resurrection the apostle Peter summed up this amazing truth:

*Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—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, because it was not possible that He should be held by it (Acts 2:22-24).*

Although people acted freely when they rejected and crucified the Son of God, they were not in charge of the universe. God was, and He used their rebellion to accomplish His goal.

The classic picture of God's sovereignty over man's rebellion is found in Psalm 2. It opens with a confederacy of nations in rebellion against God. They rage against Him and declare that they will break loose from His chains. But the Supreme Ruler does not feel threatened. He laughs in derision at the puny little kings. His laughter quickly turns to anger as He tells these rebels that He has already installed His Son as King. Then, warning these earthly rulers against continued rebellion, He urges them to serve Him with fear and surrender to His Son.

Human beings are free to oppose or to accept God. But God is completely in control. Nothing can happen unless He permits it. And in the end He will abolish all evil, right every wrong, and give those who trust Him an eternity of unmixed joy. That's comforting!



## CONFLICTING KINGDOMS

While the Bible clearly depicts God as sovereign, it also portrays Him in conflict with a hostile power. His enemy is Satan, whose power is so great that he is called the “ruler of this world” (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and the “god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4). Paul used the word *exousia* three times to denote his authority over the realm of “darkness” and “the air” (Acts 26:18; Eph. 2:1-2; Col. 1:13). The “whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 Jn. 5:19).

Since Satan has authority over a vast realm, he heads a kingdom of evil that battles the kingdom of God. The evidence that these two kingdoms are in conflict is all around us—to some extent in nature, but far more pervasively in the moral and spiritual attitudes and actions of mankind.

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**“ The kingdom of darkness wields great power. This accounts for a large share of the sin and suffering that mars our planet. ”**

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The people who have chosen the kingdom of darkness reflect the spirit of their leader, the devil. Jesus said of him, “He was a murderer from the beginning . . . . When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it” (Jn. 8:44).

Those who choose God as their King reflect the



spirit of their Leader—the One who is the Author of life, the One in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), and the One “who cannot lie” (Ti. 1:2). The fact that the kingdom of darkness wields great power accounts for a large share of the sin and suffering that mars our planet.

**THE KINGDOM OF GOD.** The Bible often speaks of the “kingdom of God.” Sometimes it’s depicted as an entity that always has and always will exist. The psalmist declared, “The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all” (103:19) and “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and Your dominion endures throughout all generations” (145:13). Nothing in heaven, on earth, or in the underworld is outside the scope of God’s rule. Even the devil can do only what God permits (Job 1:12; 2:6). Moreover, it is God who provides rain and fruitful season (Lev. 26:4-5; Dt. 28:12; Isa. 30:23; Acts 14:17). He is the ultimate source of all that is good, pleasant, just, and fair (Ps. 34). And while He normally exercises His control through natural processes, He intervenes with obvious miracles whenever He chooses. He sent the 10 plagues on Egypt, dried up the Red Sea, and fed 2.5 million Israelites with manna for 40 years. Whether by supernatural intervention or natural means, it makes little difference.

*Whatever the LORD pleases He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places. He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain; He brings the wind out of His treasures. He destroyed the firstborn of Egypt, both of man and beast. He sent signs and wonders into the*

*midst of you, O Egypt, upon Pharaoh and all his servants (Ps. 135:6-9).*

Isaiah declared that the king of Assyria was God's "rod," "staff," "ax," and "saw" to punish the citizens of the two tribes for their disobedience and rebellion (Isa. 10:5-15). The king did so by free and self-centered choice, not with any desire to fulfill God's will.

Jeremiah declared that Jehovah had "raised up the spirit of the kings of the Medes" to destroy Babylon (Jer. 51:11,28-37). Whether God did so directly or simply allowed their desire for power to take hold of them is not stated in the Bible. Therefore, all speculation is useless.

It's also useless to argue about the chronological order of God's foreknowledge and determined will. Theologians have debated this matter but haven't settled the issue. Since God sees everything—past, present, and future—with equal clarity, we finite, time-bound creatures are not capable of placing a chronological order to God's ways. Whether God exercises control through natural means or through His supernatural power is not always evident to us. But that doesn't matter. Either way, "His kingdom rules over all" (Ps. 103:19).

The phrase "kingdom of God" sometimes denotes a spiritual realm that exists now. We enter this "rule of God" when we believe on Jesus Christ. Paul declared that believers have been delivered "from the power of darkness and conveyed . . . into the kingdom of the Son of His love" (Col. 1:13). Jesus enunciated the principles of this kingdom in His Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6:20-49. Paul said that the kingdom of

God is “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). Those who enter this rule of God, therefore, are to be marked by their love, honesty, kindness, peaceableness, and readiness to forgive and go the extra mile for others.

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**“ Christ’s coming kingdom will be free from injustice, war, natural disaster, and disease. This shows us the conditions that delight God. ”**

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The “kingdom of God” can also refer to a physical realm that lies in the future. Someday (maybe soon) Jesus Christ is going to return to earth to establish His kingdom of universal justice, righteousness, and peace. The Old Testament prophets often spoke of this coming time. It will be a time of spiritual blessing (Isa. 32:1-2; Jer. 23:6; Ezek. 36:26-38). It will be a time during which perfect justice will be administrated (Isa. 2:1-4; 32:5; Mal. 3:18). Warfare will be abolished (Isa. 9:6-7; Hos. 2:18; Mic. 4:3). Social justice will prevail (Isa. 65:21-22; Amos 9:11,14). The climate will cause waste places to bloom and flourish (Isa. 35:1-2). Diseases and physical handicaps will be taken away (Isa. 35:5-6).

The fact that people who now voluntarily enter God’s kingdom are to be marked by love, purity, kindness, and a forgiving spirit tells us what God is like. The fact that His coming kingdom will be free from injustice, war, natural disaster, and disease shows us the conditions that delight God. War, dis-

ease, injustice, natural disaster, and other evils are therefore present with us only because sin invaded the good world He created.

**THE KINGDOM OF EVIL.** As noted earlier, the Bible often refers to an evil being called Satan or the devil who heads a kingdom of evil. Paul described his kingdom as well-organized when he wrote:

*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12).*

The Bible doesn't tell us when Satan became God's enemy. In fact, it doesn't describe his fall from sinlessness. It only alludes to it in Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:12-19, passages that refer directly to the king of Babylon and the king of Tyre. When Satan rebelled, he apparently drew a great number of angels with him (Rev. 12:4). These fallen angels (called demons) are now his assistants.

Satan afflicted Job (Job 1-2). He moved David to become proud and to number the citizens of his nation (1 Chr. 21:1). An evil spirit, a member of Satan's army, became a "lying spirit" in the mouth of Ahab's prophets to persuade him to fight a battle in which he would be killed (1 Ki. 22:13-28). Powerful evil spirits empower and guide leaders of nations (Dan. 10:13). Evil spirits possessed people at the time of Christ and perhaps still do (Mt. 8:16-17, 28-34). Satan was involved with Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7). The devil and demons exercise real power through human agents who engage in idolatry and sorcery (1 Cor. 10:20). They

empower false teachers (2 Cor. 11:13-14). They are able to work lying wonders (2 Th. 2:9; Rev. 18:23).

This kingdom of evil is pervasive and powerful. Satan and his agents are undoubtedly responsible for much of the evil in the world. They are malignant and hateful. They are undoubtedly involved in the wars, injustices, persecutions, plagues, and other forms of evil that mar our world. Yet they can do only what God permits. Therefore, the Bible writers sometimes ascribed to God the evils that came about through the agency of evil spirits. We see this when we compare 1 Chronicles 21:1 with 2 Samuel 24:1. We also find that Job saw his afflictions as coming from the Lord. But God never said, "Don't blame Me, the devil did it." Ultimately God did permit it.

It's still important, however, to observe the fact that much of the evil in our world comes from the devil and his agents. It enables us to maintain the doctrine that God is absolutely sinless and that He never instigates moral or spiritual evil. God's permission is not the same as His causation. Paul declared that God abandoned rebellious sinners to foolishness (Rom. 1:22), sensualism (vv.24-25), homosexual perversions (vv.26-27), a debased mind (vv.28-29), and total heartlessness (vv.30-32).

God didn't cause these sinners to go ever deeper and deeper into degradation. He permitted them. Is it not possible that as God observes human beings going deeper into sin and rebellion that He gives the devil and his angels permission to bring about natural disasters, destructive crimes, and wars, persecutions, false religions, and plagues?



# PERPLEXING PROBLEMS

C. S. Lewis has given good reasons for his contention that wars, crimes, and injustices—evils that come about through bad choices made by cruel and lawless people—account for at least 80 percent of mankind's suffering. Many believe he was too conservative in his estimate. Furthermore, the Bible shows us that sometimes wars, famines, and diseases are brought on by God as punishment for deliberate sin and unbelief. However, some tough questions remain to be answered.

- Why does God allow evil?
- Why does God allow disaster and disease?
- Why does God permit human history to continue generation after generation, even though most of mankind will die without faith in Christ and go to an eternal hell?

**Why does God allow evil?** Even if it is conceded that we are fallen creatures, we sometimes wonder why the Almighty permits some people to be so desperately wicked and heartless. Slavery, torture, murder, violence, and gross immorality testify to our awful wickedness. Why doesn't God stop people when they are about to do something extremely cruel or immoral? Undoubtedly He does sometimes. But not always. If He blocked all evil, He would take away the solemn fact that the nurturing of hateful or immoral thoughts is likely to produce actual murders and self-destructive acts. He would unmake human beings. He would re-

move our opportunity to trust Him in the best and worst of circumstances.

The human race is what it is today because the people who once “knew God” turned away from Him and began to worship idols and commit immoral deeds (Rom. 1:21-23). God then “gave them up to uncleanness” (v.24), “vile passions” (v.26), and a “debased mind” (v.28). But even while God abandoned them to their evil ways, He gave them a knowledge of “the righteous judgment of God.” But they continued in their wickedness and encouraged others to join them (v.32).

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## “ Why doesn’t God stop people when they’re about to do something cruel or immoral? ”

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God did not in any sense make people as self-centered as they are. He created our first parents good and healthy in heart (Eph. 4:24). But once sin entered the human family, it began to spread like industrial waste in a pure stream. The pollution became so pervasive that mankind would have lost every trace of goodness were it not for God’s restraining presence.

### **Why does God allow disaster and disease?**

While we can grow spiritually through suffering (Heb. 12:6), we sometimes encounter afflictions that seem cruel and useless. Who benefits when a grotesquely deformed baby is born? What good can come from severe retardation? What purpose can be served by an aged person going on month after month in an almost vegetative state? Why does the

stroke victim who cannot speak or use his limbs have to lie in a nursing home year after year? And what about the victims of accidents or disasters?

We must admit that sometimes we can see no reason or purpose in some of the suffering we encounter. But that doesn't mean there is no divine reason or purpose. We just don't see it. Jesus said that a man was born blind, not because of sin on the part of anyone, but "that the works of God should be revealed in him" (Jn. 9:3) Then He went on to heal him supernaturally. Until that moment, no one knew why the man was born blind. But God did. Therefore, we must often rest in the assurance that God knows the answer to the question "Why?"

Then too, these disturbing realities are a call to repentance. They remind us that this life is only a tiny segment of the whole picture. Jesus pointed out that the 18 people who were killed when a tower fell on them were not singled out for this accident because they were worse than average sinners. But He went on to say, "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:5). Whenever we encounter diseases, deformities, disasters, or accident victims, we are to remember that we are no better than they. This is therefore a call to repentance for all of us.

Something else that can help us when we come face-to-face with these disturbing facts of life is the realization that (1) God did not necessarily cause these circumstances, and that (2) God suffers with the hurting. The world as we know it today is under the curse God pronounced at the dawn of human history (Gen. 3:17-19). Paul personified the non-human created world, animate and inanimate, as



waiting eagerly for the day when Christ returns, because it will then be delivered from the frustration and pain it endures because of the presence of evil (Rom. 8:18-25).

Sometime in the past, either in connection with the fall of Satan or Adam, God introduced or permitted an element of disorder to enter the world. An elementary student of geology knows that the crust of the earth is a vast graveyard of species that came into being but did not survive very long. Scientists usually refer to the cause for this as randomness because it appears that way to us. (But not to God.) Maybe this element of disorder is the immediate cause of much of this world's distress—natural disasters, accidents, birth deformities, and debilitating diseases.

It's a fact that known genetic factors make it possible to predict that some families will have members with diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and other maladies. We may perhaps refer to a "naturalistic norm," meaning that God normally permits nature to have its way. He's running that kind of world. But as He allows this, He is personally involved in every situation. And He doesn't enjoy seeing people endure grief and pain.

When Jesus was here as God incarnate, He showed us the heavenly Father's attitude toward diseases and handicaps. He treated them as enemies—healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, enabling the crippled to use their limbs. The apostle John told us that upon seeing the mourners weeping because of Lazarus' death, Jesus "was deeply moved in spirit and troubled" (Jn. 11:33 NIV).

Many scholars point out that the Greek word

translated “was troubled” often denotes anger. Alongside His sorrow (He was “deeply moved”), He felt a sense of indignation and anger. This feeling apparently swept over Him as He thought of all the pain and grief Satan and sin had brought into the world.

It helps us when we realize that much of the pain and sorrow of our sin-invaded world comes about through natural agencies or through God’s enemies. But most of all, it’s comforting to know that God is in control and that He suffers with us. It helps us when we believe that He has good reasons for all that happens, even though we cannot see them.

Moreover, let’s be careful to avoid overstating the harsh, unpleasant, and painful in life. Most people, including those who live in dire poverty or endure daily pain or cope with severe handicaps, enjoy life enough to want to continue living. Laughter rings out from ghetto dwelling places. Smiles adorn the faces of Haitians who don’t know whether or not they will eat tomorrow.

Yes, there is a lot of suffering. But we suffer one-by-one, and we receive grace when we look to God. Yes, we sometimes sorrow deeply. But after a time, the pain diminishes and we can go on.

**Why does God permit human history to continue generation after generation even though most of mankind will die without faith in Christ and go to an eternal hell?** We are in no position to accuse God of being cruel because He lets human history continue. The apostle Peter declared that it is a sign of God’s patient love, because He is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

God gives added time so that all of those He has chosen will be saved.

The glory of heaven is so marvelous we cannot comprehend it. How good of God to be so patient! And just as we cannot conceive of heaven's glory, we cannot comprehend the eternal state of those who die as rebels against God. We do best to simply affirm the biblical teaching that the Almighty will be perfectly just and fair. Some will receive little punishment (Lk. 12:47-48). Paul declared that God will take into consideration all factors like available knowledge and opportunity (Rom. 2:1-16).

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**“It’s comforting to know that God is in control and that He suffers with us.”**

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We would like to believe in universal salvation—that all people will eventually embrace Jesus Christ and accept God’s only way of salvation—but the Bible does not allow us to take this view. We may even like to believe in annihilation for the lost after they are judged and punished, but this idea doesn’t have biblical support either.

Eternal existence, even in hell, is a tribute to human uniqueness. It magnifies the importance of our decisions in this world. Some scholars have speculated that even in hell the inhabitants would choose continued consciousness to extinction of being. Maybe so. Maybe not. We join Abraham in asking the rhetorical question, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). And we can rest with the implied answer, “Yes, He will do right.”



## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Life is difficult. At times it's hard to know what to believe. But God has not left us without light. Even in the darkness of natural disasters, devastating diseases, and heartbreaking injustices, God has placed within our hearts the knowledge of good and evil. Down deep, we sense our responsibility to choose to do right.

In this awareness God now invites us to respond to the light He has given us and to follow through in a life of love, obedience, and trust.

**COMMIT YOURSELF TO THE LIGHT.** The focal point of God's self-revelation came to our planet in the person of Jesus Christ. He shared our pain and felt our disappointments and grief. He lived sinlessly, but He died on the cross as if He were a sinner. He did this to take the punishment for our sins. Paul declared that "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21 NIV). Then, on the third day after His crucifixion, Jesus left the tomb in a glorified human body.

All of this is well-confirmed history. The facts are well-attested. Therefore, acknowledging our sinfulness and believing what the Bible says about Jesus Christ and salvation is not a blind leap into the dark. Rather, it's a step into the light. Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (Jn. 5:24 NIV). The apostle

Paul, whose conversion to faith in Christ is one of history's most significant events, wrote, "The word is near you . . . the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:8-9 NIV). Commitment to Christ is a walk into the light!

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**“ Acknowledging our sinfulness and believing in Jesus Christ is not a blind leap into the dark—it’s a step into the light. ”**

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**COMMIT YOURSELF TO LOVE.** To be the kind of Christians who will experience God's goodness and the reality of His salvation, we must commit ourselves to a life marked by genuine love—love for God and love for others. Jesus summarized the demands of the Old Testament law:

*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mt. 22:37,39).*

This means pleasing God more than pleasing ourselves. It means going out of our way to be kind, giving, and forgiving in all our earthly relationships. It means that by gifts of money and by voluntary service we will do what we can to reach people with the gospel, to feed the hungry, to provide shelter for the homeless, to rescue the fallen. We can do much to alleviate the suffering all around us. It is a life of submission to the challenge of Jesus:

*If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will save it (Lk. 9:23-24 NIV).*

**COMMIT YOURSELF TO OBEDIENCE.** A commitment to obedience is almost automatic for a believer who is committed to love God and others. It means that we will look to the Scriptures for guidance, and that we will strive to obey every command. We will pray because we are commanded to pray (1 Th. 5:17). We will respect and submit to governing authorities because we are commanded to do so (Rom. 13:1-7). We will take seriously our responsibilities as Christian citizens and stand up for truth and righteousness. We will submit to what the Bible says about marriage and divorce. We will respect plant and animal life, doing our best to carry out our responsibility to rule over and protect the earth as God's representatives (Gen. 1:26-28).

People who love and obey the Lord will be led to the joyous certainty: "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (Jn. 14:23).

**COMMIT YOURSELF TO TRUST.** Christians are not exempt from pain and grief. Their loved ones die in car accidents just as others do. They get cancer. When a natural disaster like an earthquake strikes, it hits believers as well as unbelievers. God does not make us His cosmic pets when we believe on Him. If He did, we could become complacent and proud. It would lead people to become Christians for the earthly benefits it brings. Job

suffered and came to know God in a new way through it.

In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul said that he suffered in the service of the Lord with repeated beatings, three shipwrecks, a stoning, hunger and cold, weariness and toil, and imprisonments. He then told of a “thorn in the flesh” and how he prayed three times for its removal, only to have God tell him the thorn would remain with him. But the Lord assured him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Paul was able to accept God’s will joyfully:

*Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:9-10).*

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## “ Christians are not exempt from pain and grief. ”

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The apostle Peter, writing to believers who were beginning to experience persecution, told them to expect and to accept bad treatment as Jesus did, without resentment or a desire to retaliate:

*When He was reviled, (He) did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten (1 Pet. 2:23).*

Both Jesus and the apostle Paul reminded us that suffering is only for a little while, but glory is forever (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:16-18; 1 Pet. 5:10). What did Jesus do when He faced the suffering as

sociated with His trial and crucifixion? Peter said that He “committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:23).

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**“ Both Jesus and the apostle Paul reminded us that suffering is only for a little while, but glory is forever. ”**

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What did Paul do in the midst of all his suffering? We saw that he trusted God and found it true that he was the strongest spiritually when he was the weakest physically. In a dungeon awaiting execution he could write with confidence:

*For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing (2 Tim. 4:6-8).*

Let’s commit ourselves to trust God. If we do, we will find His grace adequate to give us victory over the worst that life can throw our way.

There are no easy answers. But we can commit ourselves to Christ and to a love-filled, obedient, and trusting way of life. And when we do, we can experience the truth of 1 John 5:4, “This is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”



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