



CAN  
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God?

ANSWERING TEN  
CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES  
TO CHRISTIANITY

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**BrazosPress**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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# INTRODUCTION

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**B**logs, tweets, podcasts, YouTube videos—these and other high-tech forms of communication allow people to express their commitments and convictions to a huge audience as quickly as ever in the history of the world. Because of self-publishing, books take a backseat in some people’s minds to peer-reviewed articles, when it used to be the other way around. In any event, this means we must exercise even more critical care in separating fact from fiction, event from interpretation, and scholarship from rant. Nowhere is this discernment more crucial than in assessing the reasons why people choose not to believe in God.

In the middle of 2015, I scoured the internet for reasons people gave for being atheists. I tallied responses on websites that purported to give the primary reasons unbelievers in general rejected a God like that of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, who is both transcendent and immanent, who discloses himself to human beings, and who longs for them to follow and pledge allegiance to him. I grouped a few of the reasons together when it seemed they were clearly related in some key respect. The table of contents of this book was the result, as it itemizes ten key questions (or clusters of two or three related questions) that appeared most commonly as reasons people gave for rejecting the God of the Bible.

Of course, trying to respond to skepticism at times resembles trying to nail Jell-O to the wall. It slips and slides all over the place. You answer one question, and immediately the conversation shifts to a related one, and then again and again. Or perhaps the better analogy is that of trying to keep the heads in a whack-a-mole game from constantly popping up. At some point in certain kinds of conversations, one realizes that one’s conversation partners are not looking for answers to puzzling questions but simply seeing how many more puzzling questions they can pose each time they encounter an apparent answer

to one of them. Thus not every topic that this book treats appears on every list I consulted in 2015, just as the top ten reasons for debunking God or Christianity today don't always match earlier lists. But the issues briefly addressed here are perennial questions that refuse to die and deserve thoughtful responses.

This book is hardly the first to undertake this kind of task. What makes it a bit distinctive is that it is written by someone whose academic training is primarily in New Testament studies. Most of the literature that addresses the kinds of questions tackled here is penned by theologians, philosophers, ethicists, and even Old Testament scholars. The New Testament, nevertheless, contains significant teaching on every topic considered herein, so that it is past time for a specialist in that discipline to author a comparatively short work like this one. Of course, the natural question quickly becomes, "If knowledge about the God whom I am commending comes first of all from the Bible, and especially the New Testament, then am I not arguing in a circle by using the New Testament, complete with all its worldviews and presuppositions, to explain the hardest features about the God disclosed therein?" I could be guilty of that if I were presupposing that whatever the New Testament said was inspired and therefore inerrant and authoritative. I personally believe that to be true but, for purposes of this exercise, I am bracketing those preunderstandings and suggesting we look at what the New Testament has to say about each of these topics whether or not we think it to be completely accurate or God-breathed. If, even when treated as a collection of books that narrate commonsense human wisdom only, the New Testament still proves to help us solve any or all of our problems, then how much more will it not function in that fashion if it is divinely given?

In 2014, the Brazos imprint of Baker Publishing Group published my book *Can We Still Believe the Bible? An Evangelical Engagement with Contemporary Questions*. There I chose six key topics that tended to be discussion stoppers rather than starters in various circles or, where discussions did begin and continue, often generated more heat than light. Brazos Press wanted a title for this work that would call to mind that earlier title—hence, *Can We Still Believe in God?* By definition we are speaking of the God of the Christian Scriptures, so that the title might have been *Can We Still Believe in the Christian God?*, but this too quickly excludes parallel questions in other theistic religions. The answers to our ten questions, then, are not comprehensive, nor are they intended to be. Only those portions of an answer that are clearly taught in the New Testament are offered for detailed scrutiny. But each of these questions finds enough New Testament responses, some of them not very well known, to make the endeavor worthwhile. I hope that readers will come to agree with this conviction too. I also hope that they will find those responses helpful in addressing the key issues.

# If There Is a God, Why Does He Allow So Much Suffering and Evil?

As I begin to write this book in the summer of 2018, a seemingly endless civil war, exacerbated by the presence of foreign powers, continues to decimate Syria, with millions already killed or displaced, many of them outside of their homeland. In the United States, school and church shootings occur with record frequency, transforming what were once refuges of safety into danger zones. Cancer claims the lives of countless people annually, many of whom suffer horribly in their final days, weeks, and months. Volcanoes erupt and cover everything in their wake with lava, earthquakes swallow people and buildings whole, and forest fires ravage homes and property, while hurricanes and tornadoes kill and destroy even more. Corrupt governments and other authorities line their pockets with scarce resources while the poorest in our world die of disease and drought that could have been prevented or ameliorated. CEOs of multinational corporations become billionaires, while nearly 800 million of the world's inhabitants live in extreme poverty.<sup>1</sup> Somewhere around 133 million Americans alone have some kind of chronic illness or injury that causes varying degrees of suffering.<sup>2</sup>

The philosopher's age-old conundrum remains as acute as ever. If there is a God, it seems that he is either omnipotent but not omnibenevolent (all-powerful but not all-loving) or the reverse (all-caring but unable to prevent most of the world's evil). He apparently cannot be endowed both with complete power and with complete love; otherwise, he would do something, lots

of things, to diminish the amount of suffering, even gratuitous suffering, that occurs in the universe. And all this canvasses solely the human realm. If we add in the suffering of animals and the rape of the environment, the amount of evil only grows exponentially. Little wonder that this is the biggest reason some people reject the idea of anything like the Judeo-Christian God.<sup>3</sup>

Most *philosophers* who defend the existence of God focus on the issue of human freedom. They argue that God so valued a freely offered love relationship with beings created in his image that he needed to allow them to have sufficient liberty to reject him as well as to accept him.<sup>4</sup> These philosophers then divide into those who believe in libertarian free will and those who opt for compatibilist free will. Libertarian freedom affirms that people have the ability to choose the contrary of what they most deeply desire, while compatibilist freedom insists that people necessarily have only the ability to choose what they do most deeply desire.<sup>5</sup> Either way, though, there must be the possibility for people to rebel against God, reject all of his loving overtures toward them, go their separate ways, and experience the consequences of their choices.

*Ethicists* rightly point out that if a person rejects the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving being, they still have no satisfactory explanation for evil in the universe. Of course, a Darwinian naturalism can postulate the survival of the fittest and acknowledge that the fittest often get that way by inflicting great harm on others. But where do the concept of evil and the idea that it is something to be alleviated come from in the first place? If neither revealed religion nor natural theology (ultimate truths that can be inferred from what exists) points to a transcendent God who concerns himself with the affairs of humanity, from where do the ideas of good and evil originate?<sup>6</sup> Put another way, if humanity is not qualitatively distinct from the rest of the animal kingdom, why has there never been a hint of evidence that suggests that other life forms reflect on the problem of evil? When a carnivore attacks another animal to kill it and eat its meat, it does so instinctively and not after pondering the morality of its attack. The very concepts of good and evil, of moral and immoral, require a source, which atheistic evolution does not provide.

*Theologians* often address our problem by focusing on the idea of sin and how it has shaped the human race. The amount of what people, theists and atheists alike, usually call evil that is produced by the callousness, selfishness, and cruelty of other human beings is staggering. Theologians may debate the extent to which God's image in humanity is marred by sin, the specifics of how sin originated and is transmitted throughout the whole human race, and the extent to which people (if at all) are *born* sinful.<sup>7</sup> But there is little debate that warfare, genocide, terrorism, rape, and violence of many other kinds

are precipitated primarily by individuals and groups of people who defy the standards of decency taught in most world religions.

*Old Testament scholars*, finally, turn to the first three chapters of Genesis and observe how sinless humanity, given the power of choice, rebelled against the only prohibition God gave them in a world of seemingly endless delight, and the entire universe was affected in the process. The distinction between human evil and natural evil thus collapses; the former is seen as the ultimate cause of the latter. Human sin led to the ground being cursed as part of the man's punishment, making work that much harder for him. The woman experienced great anguish in childbirth, and the animal kingdom, through which Satan had seduced the first human couple, discovered that its existence became considerably more difficult as well (Gen. 3:14–19). And it is important to note that these are the abiding teachings of Genesis 1–3, no matter if one sees them as factual history, as archetypal myths, or as something in between those two literary forms.<sup>8</sup>

Yet none of these emphases captures the heart of *New Testament* teaching on our topic. To be sure, human freedom appears almost everywhere, but it is usually more presupposed than explicitly articulated. It is regularly balanced, moreover, with an emphasis on divine sovereignty.<sup>9</sup> This sovereignty can in turn be interpreted variously across a spectrum, from stressing God's acting on the basis of his knowing ahead of time everything that could or would happen, to an emphasis on God's own choices independent of anything about the nature or activity of humanity. In any event, God cannot be "let off the hook" for some responsibility in the matter of suffering and evil merely by emphasizing that he gave humans freedom to rebel against him, however important that is as a *partial* answer. Observing that atheism has no answer to evil should lead merely to agnosticism about embracing either theism or atheism, unless one can find more to say on the topic. Finally, as helpful as it is not to have to provide separate explanations for personal and natural evil, the sum total of the two remains astonishing and still requires an explanation.

### **What God Has Done, Is Doing, and Will Do**

The New Testament's focus lies not nearly so much on the origins of evil and the suffering it produces as on what God is doing in the midst of these horrors. The distinctively Christian part of the Bible, in other words, often assumes that behind the question of why God allows suffering and evil is the follow-up add-on: "that is, without doing something about it." A simple but helpful way of categorizing much of the New Testament's teaching in reply



to this complaint considers what it has to say about past, present, and future. Put another way, the New Testament insists that (a) God *has* done something about evil, decisively in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, (b) God *is* doing something about it in all kinds of ways in the present, and (c) God *will* provide its final eradication at some point in the future in conjunction with the return of Christ and the ushering in of judgment day.

### *Past Action*

Christians often highlight the substitutionary theory of Christ's atonement in reflecting on what God did about evil in the crucifixion of Christ. They view Jesus's death as the necessary substitute for the punishment that sinful human beings should have experienced instead (e.g., Mark 10:45; Rom. 3:25). Central as this is to the Christian message, it is the so-called classic theory of the atonement that interests us here.<sup>10</sup> Jesus's death on the cross provided the decisive impetus for the conquest of Satan, suffering, and evil altogether (Heb. 2:14; 1 Pet. 3:22). Like the arrival of the kingdom of God, however, the demise of evil is "already but not yet." The decisive battle has been won, but there are major mopping-up operations still to undertake. It is intriguing but also very encouraging to see how consistently the New Testament refers to the fulfillment of Old Testament promises, even though some still await fulfillment at the end of history.<sup>11</sup> The biblical writers refer to the era from the ministry of Jesus onward as the "last day(s)" (2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2) precisely because everything has occurred that is necessary for God to usher in final judgment except for the final clusters of events inherently bound up with judgment day.

To the extent that the suffering and evil we long to have eradicated involve the persecution of believers, we should not be surprised that such persecution still exists. Jesus stresses in John 15:18–25 that the same hatred that he experienced in his day would be what his followers would have to endure. We are too intimately tied to our Lord to expect any less. Later Paul would state matter-of-factly that "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). That persecution will vary in nature and in severity, but all who live a significant length of time will experience hostility for their faith sooner or later. But while faith in Jesus does not exempt us from suffering and could even lead to martyrdom, the book of Revelation repeatedly depicts believers as protected from *God's* wrath (e.g., Rev. 7:3; 9:4).<sup>12</sup> While those who spurn his grace can expect only judgment (Heb. 10:29–31), Jesus's followers need never experience eternal punishment nor fear physical death.

Christ's agony on the cross was acute enough in the physical realm. Descriptions of ancient Roman crucifixions make it clear that it was one of the cruelest forms of prolonged human torture ever invented.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the English word "excruciating" comes from the Latin *crux*, "cross." But the physical suffering undoubtedly paled in comparison to the spiritual agony of recognizing that the unbroken communion with his heavenly Father that he had experienced throughout his life was suddenly and completely ruptured while he hung from the cross. Thus he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34 par.). Little wonder that in the garden of Gethsemane he prayed fervently that if there were any conceivable way in all creation that he would not have to suffer this kind of death, God would give him that alternative. Nevertheless, he committed to following God's will, even if that should turn out to be completely different from his desire to avoid the horrors of crucifixion (14:36).

Because Jesus was fully human, his sacrifice provided an adequate substitute for us in a way that the Jewish system of animal sacrifices could never accomplish (Heb. 10:4). Because he was fully God, his atonement could be infinite and therefore never needed to be repeated (cf. 9:12). That God would become human in order to provide all that was needed to reconcile people to himself (2 Cor. 5:19), if they would but commit their lives to him, demonstrates his amazing love and dramatically refutes the claim that he doesn't care or hasn't acted to initiate the process of doing away with all evil. But just as a snake with its head cut off continues to writhe uncontrollably for a surprising period of time before rigor mortis sets in, so too the devil is wreaking as much havoc in the world as he can in the short time he has left (cf. Rev. 12:12). Those who argue that two thousand years scarcely qualifies as a short time are almost always among those who also believe that *Homo sapiens* first roamed the earth as far back as one hundred thousand and even perhaps two hundred thousand years ago,<sup>14</sup> so in comparison two thousand is a short period. Moreover, Psalm 90:4, quoted in 2 Peter 3:8, reminds us that, as an infinite being, God calculates time differently than we do. From the vantage point of his infinitude, a thousand years are as a day, a mere drop in the bucket of eternity.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Present Action***

If Christ's death triggered the series of events that would begin to eradicate the world of evil, have things on earth improved? It is far too easy to bash Christianity for the blemishes that mar what is otherwise a remarkable record. It is astonishing to realize how much better Christians and their undertakings

have made this world over the past twenty centuries and how it has been atheism that has spawned most of the massive and hugely cruel pogroms against entire people groups throughout recent history.<sup>16</sup> Events like the Crusades are the exception, not the rule, and, even then, are often misunderstood and misrepresented.<sup>17</sup> What is the norm is the amount of good that Christians have done, including laying the foundations for modern science, medicine, law, government, economics, education, relief work, humanitarian aid, and helping the poor and outcast in widely disproportionate amounts compared to other religions and worldviews.<sup>18</sup>

God continues to address evil in the present. For the most part, he does so through his people, who continue to gravitate toward the healing and caring professions in large numbers. On occasion, he intervenes more miraculously to cure someone of a physical malady or help them avoid imminent danger, displaying his glory thereby (cf. John 9:3; Acts 12:7).<sup>19</sup> Spiritual conversions lead to improved lives in numerous respects and to more productive individuals who become better citizens and incite less evil, though there always are unfortunate exceptions. But explicit New Testament teaching addresses how God works in believers' lives in the midst of pain and suffering far more often than it describes God as exempting them from evil circumstances (cf. 1 Cor. 10:13).

It is not just a random fact for a game of Bible trivia that Romans 5:3–5 juxtaposes Paul's first reference to suffering in this letter with his first reference to love. Here we read that "we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." Precisely because he loves us, God allows his people to go through a certain amount of suffering because of the endurance and resilience, the maturity, and the hope for the future that it engenders when we respond rightly and draw closer to God rather than becoming embittered and running away from him.<sup>20</sup>

Several key New Testament texts repeat this concept. First Peter 1:6–7 reads, "In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." Without the crucible of suffering, a person's alleged faith may never be shown to be genuine or may never mature. It is probably not coincidental that the book of the New Testament that most warns against apostasy is Hebrews, most likely written at about the same time as 1 Peter,

when believers in the first-century Roman Empire were experiencing greater and greater persecution. It was all still local and informal, but Nero's first state-sponsored pogrom against Christians was perhaps only a year or two away.<sup>21</sup>

James 1:2–3 presents one of the Bible's most challenging commands in this area: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance." Lest we think this means we must put on a happy face, deny our true feelings, and disguise ourselves while we are in public, it is important to notice the two verbs of thinking. We are to *consider* or regard trials as joy-inducing, and we can do so because we *know* the maturity that we can obtain by responding rightly to them. Feelings cannot be commanded, as if one could shout at someone else loudly and long enough to "be happy" and it would work! But individuals can choose to change their attitudes or ways of thinking about difficult circumstances in their lives.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to growth in maturity, various other blessings come with suffering in a godly way. Second Corinthians is the New Testament book that is most punctuated by this theme. Right in his opening thanksgiving (2 Cor. 1:3–7), Paul explains that God comforts us in all our troubles and therefore gives us the ability to comfort others in similar situations. It is amazing, for example, when people who have contracted and survived a rare disease of some kind discover how many others suddenly come out of the woodwork who have something similar going on and can benefit from what those individuals have gained from the experience. Helping others also helps hurting people avoid focusing just on themselves. C. S. Lewis speaks of pain as God's megaphone to get people's attention that something is wrong that they need to address, and this can include spiritual as well as physical issues.<sup>23</sup> However, unless those who suffer can find some comfort and solace, their attention can just as easily be directed at something unhealthy or escapist.

In 2 Corinthians 4:7–9, Paul explains that "we have this treasure [i.e., the light of the knowledge of God's glory] in jars of clay [our fragile, decaying bodies] to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." These important truths remind us that when God seems to dangle us over the edge of a cliff, so to speak, he will never let go. But why even dangle us? Paul continues: "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body" (vv. 10–11).<sup>24</sup> No one pays much attention

to people who maintain their faith during good times, but people are more likely to notice those who cling tenaciously to trust in Jesus even when their world is falling apart. I had a friend my mother's age, who has long since gone to be with the Lord, who was restricted for years to a wheelchair because of multiple sclerosis but was one of the most joyous people I knew. Hardly anyone who met her came away without asking why she could be so happy. Uniformly they would be told it was her Christian faith that made it possible. This may be exactly what Paul means in 2 Corinthians 12:8–9, where he declares that he rejoices in his weaknesses, for when he is weak (physically) then he is strong (spiritually), because Christ can use him more effectively.<sup>25</sup> Returning to 2 Corinthians 4, then, we see that Paul is able to conclude in verse 12 that even though “death is at work in us” (apostles), “life is at work in you” (Corinthian Christians). He has given all he has for the sake of others so that they might become believers and then grow in their faith.

Second Corinthians 6:4–10 contains another amazing catalogue of sufferings that Paul and his travel companions have had to endure. Some involve direct persecution for their faith, like beatings and imprisonments, but many reflect just the inevitable difficulties of itinerant ministry in the first-century Roman world—for example, sleepless nights and hunger. The same is true of another detailed catalogue in 11:23b–28. That list climaxes with Paul asserting, “Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches” (v. 28). At first, that comment seems to pale in comparison to being flogged, pelted with stones, or exposed to death or to other items mentioned earlier in the passage. But concern for the churches is the one that never went away. A person could heal physically, but a caring pastor remains constantly concerned for his or her flock.<sup>26</sup>

The catalogue in 6:4–10 is preceded by Paul's insistence that he puts no unnecessary obstacle in the path of his audience, so that his ministry will not be discredited (v. 3). Instead, he submits to the list of hardships in a way that no one could ever legitimately claim that he was doing what he was doing for money, power, fame, or privilege. There may be no better personal disproof besides Jesus himself that the gospel is not about gaining health or wealth in this life. Indeed, when he was younger, Paul had a bright future as a Pharisaic leader, training to be a rabbi and “advancing in Judaism,” as he puts it, “beyond many of [his] own age among [his] people” (Gal. 1:14). In Philippians 3:4–6 he expands on some of these credentials but then quickly stresses, “But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things” (vv. 7–8a). Bible versions usually balk at translating the next clause

too literally because of its crude language. What is it that Paul considers all his previous privilege to be? Options for the Greek word (*skybala*) that he uses include “garbage,” “refuse,” “filth,” “dirt,” and “rubbish.” The King James Version perhaps came closest when it used “dung,” though the word, while including human and animal excrement, was not limited to defecation. In today’s vernacular, the Common English Bible maybe says it best with “sewer trash,” but a four-letter word beginning with “sh” and ending in “t” may more closely approximate the vulgarity.<sup>27</sup> How ironic, then, when contemporary Christians think of the ministry or even faith itself as a means to prosperity.<sup>28</sup>

Still, Paul believes that the Spirit of Christ powerfully sustains him and even compels him to continue his new life as it has come to be characterized. He breaks from Jewish tradition and urges churches to pay those who spread the gospel full-time so that they can be completely devoted to that work (1 Cor. 9:1–14). Nevertheless, he refuses to be bound to anyone’s purse strings himself, lest he feel limited in how he can preach and what he can say, and lest anyone suspect he is fulfilling his calling as a missionary for the wrong motives (vv. 15–18).<sup>29</sup> His reward is not material; he rejoices to see people come to share the faith that has transformed his own life and can renew theirs as well.

Indeed, in one of his most enigmatic passages, Paul declares that he is filling up what is lacking in Christ’s sufferings (Col. 1:24). This has been taken as missional: Christ did not traverse nearly as much terrain as Paul would and so did not experience as widespread or extensive persecution. The verse has also been tied to the Jewish concept of messianic woes: a fixed amount of tribulation in the end times before the Messiah comes (now revised to apply to the time before the Messiah returns). Elements of both interpretations may well be present.<sup>30</sup> In both instances, Paul’s union with Christ shines through clearly, just as elsewhere Paul generalizes to link our union with Christ to sharing in his sufferings (Rom. 8:17).<sup>31</sup>

The New Testament, then, sees God as having definitively overthrown the powers of evil in Christ’s atoning death on the cross and working through his people throughout church history, despite enormous obstacles of many kinds, for the betterment of individuals and of society. Paul can even declare that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).<sup>32</sup> But if there were not a future hope as well—of a resurrected body and a re-created universe—Christians would be of all people most miserable (1 Cor. 15:19). That brings us to the third prong of the answer to what God is doing to minimize suffering and evil: he has promised one day to eradicate them altogether.

### *Future Action*

One of the most remarkable statements in all of Scripture appears in Romans 8:18. Here Paul declares that “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” Is this the same person who penned the long lists of injuries, illnesses, and injustices that afflicted him, which we read in 2 Corinthians? It is indeed, and his encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus road has left him confident of a glorious, eternal, embodied future life to come. In the same vein, 2 Corinthians 4:17 maintains that “our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” It is amazing that Paul can think of his experiences in this life as “light and momentary troubles” from any vantage point. But when one considers the life span of any human with its finite amount of suffering, however severe, in the perspective of eternity, such evil approaches the vanishing point compared with the unending good and glory available to those who accept God’s free gift of salvation in Christ, based on his atoning death on the cross and bodily resurrection from the grave.<sup>33</sup>

Revelation 21–22 depicts this eternal glory in more detail than any other part of the Bible. Appropriately, these are its last two chapters as well. Of course, Revelation is a book of prophetic visions—an apocalypse. Words prove entirely inadequate as John tries to describe what he has seen. Symbolism abounds, so that we are never quite sure which parts are intended to be literal, which parts metaphorical, and which parts both. But it is hard to miss the thrust of 21:3–4, where the seer rejoices because he has “heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’” Complete happiness, joy, and fulfillment will characterize believers’ eternal experience, and they will understand what God’s purposes were in all the enigmas of this life.<sup>34</sup>

What we have surveyed thus far confirms what other observers have noted as well. The New Testament, just like the Old Testament, does not attempt to explain God’s purposes in permitting every evil act of human beings (or any other part of creation, for that matter). It insists that God has legitimate purposes, so that there is no reason to call any evil gratuitous.<sup>35</sup> As to the allegation that God isn’t doing anything to ameliorate the problem, the New Testament affirms that he did the most important thing of all *in the past* through Christ’s crucifixion, making it possible for believers in Christ *in the future* to live forever without any suffering or evil. But he will not force

salvation on anyone who does not want it; humans are free to reject all of his loving provisions. Meanwhile, even now, *in the present*, he uses pain and suffering to help bring believers to maturity and to wake up the spiritually asleep so that they might turn to him. But again, these things happen only when people respond rightly to tough times; nothing requires them to move closer to God (cf. the two responses in John 1:9–13).

### Additional Passages

A second collection of New Testament texts bears on our topic, even if not as directly. Some evil occurs because certain people seem to recoil and exhibit hostility when they encounter Christian claims, in ways that do not match their responses to any other religion, ideology, or worldview. Is this a back-handed compliment or tacit acknowledgment of the genuineness of the gospel that is not exhibited elsewhere in our world? When Jesus, for example, unrolls the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth and claims that the prophecy about the Servant of the Lord who will heal the sick, free the oppressed, and bring good news to the poor (Isa. 61:1) is being fulfilled in him, some are ready to throw him off a cliff and kill him (Luke 4:16–30). What makes otherwise ordinary people turn potentially murderous when an individual promises to do nothing but good? It is when they believe he has arrogated to himself exclusive claims and powers of divinity, which, if true, would require them to abandon their self-directed lives and surrender control to his leadership. Little wonder that the Beatitudes bless everything that is the opposite of what this world considers “macho” (Matt. 5:3–12 par.)!<sup>36</sup>

When Jesus declares the paralyzed man’s sins forgiven (Mark 2:5 pars.), one can easily imagine the man thinking, “That’s not why my friends brought me here. I know how to have animal sacrifices offered in the temple precincts for the forgiveness of my sins. I came for physical healing!” Of course, Jesus gives him both, but in a way that makes it clear that forgiveness of sins is the more important of the two kinds of healing and that he has the authority to bestow it completely apart from the sacrificial system of the Jewish law.<sup>37</sup> Ironically, even while some of the onlookers praise God, a number of the religious authorities believe that Jesus is blaspheming by asserting God’s unique prerogatives (vv. 6–12). It is remarkable even in today’s world how much evil is caused by those who unjustifiably take out their anger against Christians (cf. Mark 8:34–36 pars.; 13:9–13 pars.), sometimes just for “showing them up” because they live better lives. Jesus’s interchange with the authorities also implies what he will say more directly to his disciples when he sends



them out to replicate his mission: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). In other words, there is an even more important question than, Why does God allow suffering and evil in this world? That question is, How can I be sure to avoid suffering and evil throughout eternity?<sup>38</sup>

The Bible never teaches, in so many words, that we will appreciate sinless perfection in eternity far more after having to endure a world filled with horrible evil, but theologians and philosophers have often speculated that this may well be true. Many people have had to work strenuously to overcome great obstacles in order to receive something they value highly, and few would deny that achieving the goal becomes far more precious after all the hard work they expended. Jesus seems to point in that direction with his metaphor about a woman in labor experiencing so much joy that she forgets all the anguish she previously had (John 16:21).<sup>39</sup> Would the disciples rejoice as greatly when Christ returns to usher in the eternal state if this life had not been filled with as much sorrow as it has? It seems unlikely.

The relationship between the evil that befalls an individual and one’s personal sin is often misrepresented. The New Testament betrays no awareness of a direct tit-for-tat relationship between one’s sinfulness and the amount of suffering one experiences. Most of the time the responsible answer to why God allowed a certain evil thing to happen is that we live in a deeply flawed and fallen world, and the vast majority of the time God does not overrule the natural laws of cause and effect. Yet, after healing the crippled man sitting by the pool of Bethesda, Jesus does say to him, “Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you” (John 5:14). The implication is that his malady has been due, at least in part, to his sin, and that such a punishment could recur.<sup>40</sup> But when people honestly examine their lives to see if there is serious, unconfessed sin and don’t find any, they should not beat themselves up trying to figure out what *they* did wrong to cause something evil to come upon them. And others should refrain from making such a connection all the more, since they can’t enter into the afflicted person’s mind to know what they have or haven’t thought or done.

A powerful example of this lesson appears in Luke 13:1–5. Jesus raises the issue of two recent disasters: Pilate calling for the execution of some worshippers in the temple precincts, and the collapse of a tower in Siloam that killed eighteen people. In each case, he asks if the people who died were worse sinners than those around them who were spared. In each case, he maintains they were not, but he does see each as an occasion for taking stock and repenting of whatever may be wrong in our lives.<sup>41</sup> For those who are not his

followers, lack of repentance will lead to their perishing (vv. 3, 5). So often people ask, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Strictly speaking, from a biblical perspective, there are no good people. At least from God’s perspective, everyone falls so far short of his perfect, infinitely holy standard that the question we ought to be asking is, Why do good things ever happen to bad people—that is, to all of us? If the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23), and we are all sinners, then no one ever deserves that which is good. God’s good gifts to human beings are always entirely by his grace or unmerited favor.<sup>42</sup>

A classic example of this appears in Acts 5:1–11, in which God strikes down Ananias and Sapphira for lying about the amount of money they gave to the apostles to help the poor in their midst. Not only does on-the-spot physical death seem like an amazingly harsh punishment, but also the crime seems comparatively trivial. There are numerous ways to partially offset these perceptions: the couple was free to give any or no percent of the proceeds of their sale; they were actually engaging in embezzlement; they lied not just to humans but to God; nothing suggests they lost their salvation; intermediate natural agency like a heart attack may have been involved; and the church was particularly fragile in this early period of its history and might have been seriously compromised by such duplicity. At the end of the day, however, the entire story seems anomalous precisely because God doesn’t react like this in the vast majority of cases of grievous sins against him.<sup>43</sup> The same is true of the Corinthian Christians who had died because they had profaned the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:30).<sup>44</sup> It is a tribute to God’s overwhelming grace that these episodes seem so out of character for him; if we were honest, we would acknowledge that we deserved such judgment for every one of our sins.

Many other passages repeat the themes we have already uncovered. There may have been some tit-for-tat retribution in God’s selection of Saul of Tarsus to suffer as much as he did for his ministry, because of all the persecution he had previously unleashed on believers (Acts 9:13–16). In light of all Christ has done for us, our priority must be to follow him no matter what the cost (Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:21–25). He nevertheless always makes the endurance of hardship possible (Phil. 4:11–13). First Corinthians 10:13 has often been misinterpreted as if it taught, “God never gives you more than you can handle.” What it actually says is that “no temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.” In our fallen and finite humanity, there are many things that we can’t handle, even if God gives them to us, but with his empowerment we can bear them. It is also easy to read “He will also provide a way out” without its sequel, “so that you can endure it.” God does not promise to take

away the suffering, but he does promise to help us cope in its midst.<sup>45</sup> Jesus can nevertheless relate to whatever we are going through because of what he experienced in his own life and death (Heb. 2:14–18; 4:15).<sup>46</sup> So we need to fear spiritual death far more than physical death or pain (Rev. 2:8–11).

### More Opportunities for Repentance

There is one distinctive contribution of the New Testament that I have not yet addressed. In fact, it only rarely comes up in discussions about the problem of evil. It is the question of what it would take to do away with most or all of the causes of suffering and evil in our world. Precisely because humans themselves are the cause of so much of the problem, it would mean dramatically diminishing or doing away with the freedom we have to harm others or the rest of the universe. In short, it would mean bringing an end to this age of human history as we know it and proceeding directly to either the millennium, in which sin is drastically reduced, or the eternal state—the new heaven and new earth—in which it is altogether absent. It would mean the end of human opportunities to rebel against God and therefore the end of their opportunities to accept his gift of salvation.<sup>47</sup> Because freedom allows for both, a significant diminution in freedom of choice would affect both options. The objection that God surely could have created us all perfectly good and happy and yet without freedom to rebel claims to know what in fact we cannot. No human being has ever been in that situation, and not even Scripture describes beings of any kind who have ever been in that situation. It is true that God can establish the faithful angels in a happy, sinless state and promise to re-create believers in a happy state in which sin is no longer possible. Yet that by no means makes it self-evident that without the option to sin in the first place we would still have experienced the same kind of bliss or been able to have the same kind of freely chosen love relationship with God.<sup>48</sup> I may choose to board an airplane with the promise that I will not be able to choose to jump out of it as it is flying without my freedom being compromised, but if I am forced onto the plane in the first place, then that freedom most certainly has been overruled.

What does all this philosophizing have to do with the New Testament? It is precisely the logic that is implicit in 2 Peter 3. Not only is God not slow in bringing about the end of this age and the return of Christ, because a day with the Lord is like a thousand years and vice versa (v. 8 [recall the discussion above of God’s past action]), but also “the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not

wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (v. 9). When the end comes, there will no longer be any chance for repentance, salvation, and becoming a follower of Jesus. There will be only judgment for those who have rejected him (vv. 10–12).<sup>49</sup> Hebrews 11:39–40 puts it more positively. None of the great people or heroes of pre-Christian times saw the fulfillment in their days of everything God had predicted. “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.” In other words, God cared enough about you and me that he allowed history to continue long enough so that we would be born and have the chance to be part of his eternal family!<sup>50</sup>

Christians who reflect deeply on these claims should come to a number of conclusions. First, we should be very grateful simply to have been given both physical life and the opportunity for spiritual life. Second, God could have done away with suffering long ago, but then we never would have been born. Third, God could free us from all our suffering, but in doing so he would be excluding anyone else’s chance to be saved. God did not end everything sooner but allowed us to be saved, so how could we possibly begrudge him allowing more time for others to come to him? Fourth, whatever else we do with our lives, we need to be actively a part of commending Christianity to others in the most winsome ways possible so that by as many means as possible the greatest number of people might come to salvation and the fewest scared off (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19–23). Fifth, and pursuing this last point further, we should take pains to avoid anything that would lead to our faith being legitimately criticized, mocked, and rejected—whether that be due to our tactlessness, our hypocrisy, or any other sin that brings God’s people into disrepute.<sup>51</sup> Above all, we can be thankful for a God who can and does redeem even the worst of circumstances, and that our relationship with God can be profoundly deepened as we witness his provision in our times of need and his healing of our wounds.

All this, of course, presupposes that the New Testament is telling the truth when it repeatedly insists that not all people will be saved. In other words, some are lost for all eternity. That leads to the second common question we must address: What about all those people throughout history who never heard the gospel? Surely it is the height of injustice for God to damn all of them when they never had a chance. Indeed it is, and that is not the message of the New Testament! But the unpacking of that assertion must await the next chapter.