

## Why is there so much suffering in the world?

Bryan Dahms with Jim McGregor and Darren Cacy

It was not originally like this.

It will not be like this someday.

People who serve churches as lead pastors often go to seminary—graduate schools of theology. My degree is from Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California though I also studied at the Nazarene Seminary here in Kansas City and North Park Seminary in Chicago. One day when I was at Fuller, a school about the size of Baylor University, a buzz was building on campus. John Stott was going to be speaking on campus that day. That probably does not mean a lot to you, you may not every have heard of him, but to many church leaders, John Stott is the greatest theologian of our time. Time Magazine calls John Stott one of the most influential 100 people to ever walk this earth. The New York Times said, “If Protestants ever elected a pope, John Stott would be the first one.” While serving as the senior pastor of All Souls Church in Langham Place, London, Stott has written numerous works, many are the seminal work on their topic. When Protestant Christians disagree, they often go back to the question, “What does John Stott say on this topic.” That day in seminary, John Stott said this:

### John Stott

- The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has in every generation. Its distribution and degree appear to entirely random and therefore unfair.

It was originally like this.

It will not be like this someday.

Noted author and philosopher, Bertrand Russell, wrote what many say is the clearest argument for atheism. It is called “Why I am not a Christian.” The fact of suffering is the repeated basis of his argument that God does not exist.

I believe, as do others, that this is actually circular reasoning. To argue that the injustice of suffering demonstrates that God does not exist is actually to argue for an absolute standard of justice. For instance, “murder is wrong” is nearly universally accepted by all mankind and EVERY government in the world has a law against it. But if there is no Almighty Creator—that is to say, if humans evolved from primeval ooze through random acts of chance mutations, natural selection and survival of the fittest—then murder is just fine. Indeed, the ability to take another’s life would actually be a desired trait. If I killed another man and took his wife or girlfriend as my own, then I was naturally selected and survived as the fittest. The offspring created via this act would, in theory, be more fitted to survive. This is in fact how most mammals behave in the wild—our “natural” state. But it is not our natural state. Deep inside every human being seems to be an understanding that murder is wrong and unjust. That deep understanding—that absolute morals do exist—actually argues FOR God and a perfect rule of law.

So if God exists as evidenced by a deeply held “natural,” or actually, “God-given” moral code, then only two logical arguments can continue: God is either too weak to overcome the suffering in the world or God is indifferent to the suffering in the world.

It was not originally like this.  
It will not be like this someday.

But there is a third possibility that is outside of the natural human logic patterns. I find that often the case when trying to understand God. For instance, Jesus was challenged several times by leading scholars and politicians in his day with very difficult questions—on taxes, on the afterlife. No surprise there—“death and taxes” seemed to be of first importance to the ancients and realities then just as today. But each time he was questioned, Jesus came up with an answer that was completely out of the realm of possibility or logic at the time. On taxes, Jesus said that money was created and belongs to governments anyway, so pay them. Then he went on to say that human hearts—the part that makes us “us” belong to God so give those to him. On death, Jesus said that earthly death—that is to say, “heart stops beating death.” is actually the beginning of new and amazing life. I love the way the scriptures say it: “and nobody dared ask him any more questions.”

The third possibility for the reason or first cause of human suffering is just as surprising and outside the natural realm of human thinking.

It was not originally like this.  
It will not be like this someday.

Human suffering is the result of human choice.

In the beginning, there was no suffering. God placed humans in a perfect, non-suffering world. But because humans are so loved by God, and because love can never be forced, God gave us a power in life that is the power most like the power God himself has. The bible tells us that humans were created in the image of God. We are most in his image because we have this amazing power.

Humans, because God loves us so much, have the power of free will. We can chose to follow that absolute moral code or we can stray from it or we can violate it entirely. I am completely capable of taking another man’s life and taking his wife or girlfriend as my own. Human history is replete with just such stories—men stealing wives and girlfriends (and women stealing husbands and boyfriends). God will not stop me. I have the free will, the free choice to act outside of the absolute moral code. And when I do, suffering and injustice are the results.

It was not originally like this.  
It will not be like this someday.

Do you realize that if every human being who ever walked this earth perfectly followed the basic moral code, suffering would not have come into the world? The basic moral code, that we call in our bible “The 10 Commandments,” (this is the same code that appears three times in the architecture of the our own Supreme Court Building), says (among other things) that we should not steal, murder, lie, or want what others have. But from almost day one of human existence, humans cannot follow this simple code. According the Bible, the first two humans, Adam and Eve, stole an apple. Through the next set of humans, brothers named Cain and Abel, murder came into the world as one killed the other.

When humans enact their free will, suffering comes into our world.

It was not originally like this.

It will not be like this someday.

But please hear this—though suffering came into the world through human choice, the suffering of an individual is not necessary, nor perhaps even usually, the result of that person's choices. In fact, it is often the case that one person suffers as a result of another's choices. If a man commits adultery, his wife and kids suffer through no choice of their own.

Please also hear this-- that humans choosing to live outside the absolute and perfect moral code is the portal through which suffering entered but that not all suffering today is the result or is caused by an individual's choice. Sometimes it is through the destructive acts of an evil presence God allows to wonder the earth. And sometimes suffering happens through direct action by the Almighty God.

Let's explore this further and restate this.

In the beginning, God created a perfect world with a perfect rule of law and placed humans with free will within it. Humans—all of us—have used our free will to act in ways that are contrary to the perfect rule of law. As a result, suffering entered the world.

The suffering we now experience is either the result of the fallen world we created through our choices, is the result of the anti-God forces God allows to act on this fallen world, or is an act of God himself.

I spoke of human choice above—that if I steal, kill, lie, or want what others have then others would suffer.

It was not originally like this.

It will not be like this someday.

But what about this anti-God force?

God has allowed a spiritual presence of evil—a non-human spiritual evil force—to roam this earth. This evil personified, called in the Bible the Devil or Satan, hates God, abhors the absolute moral code, and is jealous of God. Therefore, this evil force attempts to corrupt humans against God. Prior to humans acting outside of God's will, evil was contained. As humans enact their free will by making choices outside the perfect will of God (the absolute moral code), God allows evil to roam this earth—so evil is no longer contained.

However, Christians are not dualists. Dualism is the belief of two basically equal opposing forces. This concept appears throughout many ancient religions. Dualism also appears as a “first cause” in a great deal of literature, both ancient and modern. Evil overcoming Good or Good overcoming Evil is the perhaps the most common plot line in our books and movies—Spiderman, Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, lots of Shakespeare and ancient Greek literature.

Christians are not dualists in the sense that the Bible is absolutely clear—God is Almighty and can overcome ALL evil. Indeed, God WILL overcome all evil and suffering. In fact, according to the Bible, even humans in their natural created state are more powerful than the force of evil brought on this world through Satan or the Devil. After all, Satan is a bodiless spiritual being, which we usually call “angels.” Whereas most angels are good and work on behalf of humans at the pleasure of God, Satan or the devil is

a fallen angel working against the pleasure of God to the destruction, or separation, of creation (and thus humans) and God.

It is amazing to me how many people who have committed horrendous and horrific acts against humanity say they had a voice or a presence drawing them to commit evil acts.

Thankfully, according to the bible, we can know when the devil is attempting to sway us from the perfect moral code of God.

*<sup>19</sup>Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup>envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

When you want to do one of the things on the list above (or if you are actively engaged in one of them), then you can be sure the forces of evil are at work in your life and suffering, by you or by others, will result.

One book of the bible is particularly helpful on this subject—the book of Job. It is perhaps the oldest work of the Bible. The narrative of Job illuminates three concepts. I will give you a two-minute synopsis of the plot line.

*<sup>1</sup>There was a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz. He was blameless, a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil. <sup>2</sup>He had seven sons and three daughters. <sup>3</sup>He owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred teams of oxen, and five hundred female donkeys, and he employed many servants. He was, in fact, the richest person in that entire area.*

*<sup>4</sup>Every year when Job's sons had birthdays, they invited their brothers and sisters to join them for a celebration. On these occasions they would get together to eat and drink. <sup>5</sup>When these celebrations ended—and sometimes they lasted several days—Job would purify his children. He would get up early in the morning and offer a burnt offering for each of them. For Job said to himself, "Perhaps my children have sinned and have cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular practice.*

*<sup>6</sup>One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan the Accuser came with them. <sup>7</sup>"Where have you come from?" the LORD asked Satan.*

*And Satan answered the LORD, "I have been going back and forth across the earth, watching everything that's going on."*

*<sup>8</sup>Then the LORD asked Satan, "Have you noticed my servant Job? He is the finest man in all the earth—a man of complete integrity. He fears God and will have nothing to do with evil."*

*<sup>9</sup>Satan replied to the LORD, "Yes, Job fears God, but not without good reason! <sup>10</sup>You have always protected him and his home and his property from harm. You have made him prosperous in everything he does. Look how rich he is! <sup>11</sup>But take away everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face!"*

*<sup>12</sup>"All right, you may test him," the LORD said to Satan. "Do whatever you want with everything he possesses, but don't harm him physically." So Satan left the LORD'S presence.*

<sup>13</sup>One day when Job's sons and daughters were dining at the oldest brother's house, <sup>14</sup>a messenger arrived at Job's home with this news: "Your oxen were plowing, with the donkeys feeding beside them, <sup>15</sup>when the Sabeans raided us. They stole all the animals and killed all the farmhands. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

<sup>16</sup>While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "The fire of God has fallen from heaven and burned up your sheep and all the shepherds. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

<sup>17</sup>While he was still speaking, a third messenger arrived with this news: "Three bands of Chaldean raiders have stolen your camels and killed your servants. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

<sup>18</sup>While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "Your sons and daughters were feasting in their oldest brother's home. <sup>19</sup>Suddenly, a powerful wind swept in from the desert and hit the house on all sides. The house collapsed, and all your children are dead. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

<sup>20</sup>Job stood up and tore his robe in grief. Then he shaved his head and fell to the ground before God. <sup>21</sup>He said,

*"I came naked from my mother's womb,  
and I will be stripped of everything when I die.  
The LORD gave me everything I had,  
and the LORD has taken it away.  
Praise the name of the LORD!"*

<sup>22</sup>In all of this, Job did not sin by blaming God.

Under the permission of God, Satan or the Devil roams the earth looking for a human to corrupt. God is proud of one extremely wealthy and blessed man on earth, Job, and says that he is incorruptible. Satan is given permission to attempt to corrupt Job and tries to do this by taking away all that Job has—his kids, his business, and his home. So pathetic is the state of Job at end of Satan's dealings that Job's own wife says to him, "just curse God and die." Then 3 "friends" followed by a 4<sup>th</sup> "friend" show up to explain to Job why this has happened. For 37 chapters of the book the 4 friends say this: "Job, it is because of your own sinful behavior that this has happened." Then God shows up in a whirlwind.

<sup>1</sup>Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind:

<sup>2</sup>"Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? <sup>3</sup>Brace yourself, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.

<sup>4</sup>"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much. <sup>5</sup>Do you know how its dimensions were determined and who did the surveying? <sup>6</sup>What supports its foundations, and who laid its cornerstone <sup>7</sup>as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?

<sup>8</sup>"Who defined the boundaries of the sea as it burst from the womb, <sup>9</sup>and as I clothed it with clouds and thick darkness? <sup>10</sup>For I locked it behind barred gates, limiting its shores. <sup>11</sup>I said, 'thus far and no farther will you come. Here your proud waves must stop!'

Now in the Bible, God shows up in lots of ways—a dove, a cute baby, rainbows, fire, refreshing rain clouds, etc. So you can guess when he shows up in a whirlwind, he is not happy. Indeed, he is not happy when he shows up in Job's life. He states clearly these things:

1. He is the Lord Almighty and does what he does when he wants to do it and as he likes it—answering to no one and explaining only when he feels like it. In other words, we are God’s creation and wholly belong to him. He can do with us or any other part of creation exactly how he wishes.
2. Suffering is not necessary the result of the one who is suffering’s personal wrong choices.
3. People who return to the absolute moral code are made right with God and will be blessed. (Keep in mind that “blessed” may not mean “always happy with never any trouble, live to a ripe old age, and die peacefully in your sleep”.)

Which brings us to the third source of suffering in this word—God himself. This is the hardest to understand and hardest to accept.

It was not originally like this.  
It will not be like this someday.

Sometimes, after the fall and before the second coming of Christ, God brings suffering on this earth. The bible tells us this is usually as a result of judgment by God of humans. This is the justice part we all get—humans do something wrong and God acts. Often this is done on a communal level. For instance, all throughout the old testament of the Bible, the people (Israel) as a nation separate themselves from the absolute moral code of God. In order to bring them back, God judges them and allows suffering to happen. Cities get ransacked, people get exiled, destruction comes via natural disaster. Again, however, this suffering is often felt by individuals who did little or nothing of themselves to bring it on. For example, if a king or leader leads a nation astray, God may judge the nation these people live in and allow suffering to happen on a communal scale. We need, however, to be careful in our application of this concept. For instance, after 9-11, several noted Christian Fundamentalists said that the events of 9-11 were the result of America’s sin by our having legalized abortion rights and thus God’s judgment upon us. A much safer view might be that 9-11 was a result of the personal choices of 15 Saudi Arabians and 4 Egyptians who hated others.

Lastly, there is the reality of disease and of premature death. This is very hard to accept from an earthly perspective. We see the cute little girl in Children’s Mercy’s Leukemia ward dying and we get angry with God. We learn of the tragic deaths of teenagers or innocent victims in Darfur. But in many ways this is a misunderstanding of what is “life” and for whom is it to be lived. Our natural human state makes us believe that “our” life is for “us.” That our kids are “ours.” That our next breath is “ours.” Actually, all life, including ours and the girl suffering from Leukemia and the victims in Darfur, is God’s and is to be lived for *his* benefit. In the years I have attended deaths as a pastor and a chaplain, I have observed this: that we consider 71 to be the break-even point. If a person dies at age 69, we say of them, “he or she was still young.” If they die at 72, we say, “they have lived a complete life.” So if a child dies at age 7, we say that is tragic because they did not get the years they were supposed to get (they were shorted by 65 years). But actually, a person who dies potentially gets an upgrade. Make no mistake, if one of my children dies, I will be heartbroken and miss them. On this earth, I will probably never recover from my broken heart. However, since my children all tell me they believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, I will soon see them again in the New Earth—the term the Bible uses to describes “heaven.” So the young girl with Leukemia, when she dies young, she gets the benefit of NOT having to live in this fallen world any longer. She can return to God, her maker, who could place her directly in his perfect, new world. Imagine--she has no junior high experiences, no disappointing husbands, no varicose veins and no hair dye.

It was not originally like this.

It will not be like this someday.

And we can share now the Good News. As I have stated above, suffering on this earth happens as a result of human choices to live outside the perfect rule of law of God. When we make such choices, evil and decay are allowed to act on this world and create suffering. Some suffering comes as a direct result of our choices, some as a direct result of the choices of others, some as a direct result of the force of evil, the Devil, being allowed to act on this earth, and some as a result of the judgment of God. But the Good News is that God will overcome suffering, both on this earth and for us personally. When human beings admit to God that have made wrong choices and ask for his forgiveness through Christ, God redeems us through Christ and allows us to return to his perfect rule of law. As a result, though we will remain on this suffering earth until we die, when we die we be transported to a New Earth, (again, this is how the bible describes “heaven”), a place of perfect creation and no suffering. Moreover, there will be a day when Jesus, the perfect adherent to God’s absolute moral code, will return to earth and eliminate all suffering.

It was not originally like this.

It will not be like this someday.

What should we do then, on this earth?

1. We should talk to God (pray), and thank him for the loving free will he has given us.
2. We should confess to God ways that we know we have violated his perfect rule of law, his perfect moral code.
3. We should ask God that he not judge us fairly under his perfect rule of law but rather to grant us the faith to believe that we were purchased and purified by the shed blood of Jesus when the consequences of our wrong choices—suffering and death were inflicted on Jesus.
4. We should ask for his forgiveness of our wrong choices, say that we will return to him and his ways, and ask him to return to us.
5. We should ask God to give us the power by his spirit living within us to work to serve the suffering victims in this world so that we can show our love of God by loving our neighbors.

That is as close to the perfect garden we can get on this earth—grateful, loving people returning to God and loving others.

As the Psalmist says, The Earth is the Lord’s and all that is within it.