



The mind of the prudent acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge. *Proverbs 18:15*

1f. Why do innocent people suffer?

Also asked as:

How could God allow, or cause, innocent people to suffer?

Is God all-good but not all-powerful ... or all-powerful but not all-good?

Why is suffering unjustly distributed ... good people suffering and bad people prospering?

What about disease, birth defects, cancer, and drug-addicted babies?

What about victims of war, prejudice, totalitarianism, ethnic cleansing, and hate?

What about victims of crime, negligence, abuse, greed, and pollution?

What about the victims of natural disasters ... floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and famine?

Why did God allow (or make) my spouse, children, parents, or me suffer?

General question: Is God fair in letting (or in making) innocent people suffer?

Similar questions answered separately on eSeeker:

Is Jesus the only way to God?

What happens to good people who do not believe in Jesus?

What about the heathen?

A caution: This can be an important philosophical objection or a very personal and painful question. It is one thing to intellectually discuss suffering ... it is quite another to feel the pain of your child being born blind or with a crippling defect. Pain felt is magnitudes more momentous than pain discussed. Painful wounds may cause someone to have gut-wrenching questions about God. To understand this, imagine a teary eyed young child looking up at her father asking, *Why did you let me get hurt?* or asking, *Daddy, why did you hurt me?* That is how some wounded people feel in the midst of deep personal suffering.

The short answer:

God has given to man the ability to make real choices. Suffering is primarily the consequence of man's bad choices. You may suffer because of your own bad choices ... or you may suffer because of the bad choices of others today or in history. Suffering this side of the grave is not some universal distribution of God's just punishment of sin. Suffering will be eliminated in eternity if we choose to believe in Jesus Christ.

The longer answer:

Understand before deciding. The question about innocent people suffering can be asked for many reasons. Some people, or people important to them, may have suffered greatly. In that case, the question may come out of deep personal pain, anguish, or even anger. It is difficult to understand suffering when you are recently wounded. Other people might ask this question as a verbalization of their rejection of the God of the Bible. For the people who ask in that way, it is important for them to keep an open mind to understanding the answer before deciding about the answer. To challenge or reject the God of the Bible because innocent people suffer, without understanding what the Bible states about it is illogical. It is intellectually dishonest to reject an answer before hearing and understanding it. Still some other people are simply intrigued by the philosophical debate. Apparently, the disciples of Jesus fell into that last category when they saw a man blind from birth. They asked Jesus, "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?*" John 9:2. Why didn't they ask Him to heal the man, show some sympathy on their own, or give him some help? Jesus answered in verse 3, "*It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.*" Jesus did heal the man ... right after He made the bold, dramatic, and relevant statement, "*While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world,*" John 9:5. Philosophical discussion and debate is important ... but so is compassion. Any person answering this question should do so with compassion. And anyone asking should ask with openness to understanding the answer before deciding about it.

The problem of evil. A classic anti-God argument often looms behind the philosophical debate about the innocent suffering. The challenge is to His existence, power, and goodness. The classic argument is this: *Since evil exists, God cannot exist. Or God is not both all-good and all-powerful ... and therefore not the God of the Bible. If He is all-good, He must not be all-powerful because He would stop suffering if He were able to do so. Or if He is all-powerful, He must not be all-good because He does not choose to stop all suffering. Since evil exists, the all-good, all-powerful God of the Bible must not exist.* Stated another way: *Choose any three of the following four statements and the non-chosen remaining one is invalid ... God exists, God is all-good, God is all-powerful, and evil exists.* The Bible states that God is all-powerful (omnipotent) and sovereign, Job 42:2, Jeremiah 32:17, Psalm 135:6, 1 Chronicles 29:11. The Bible also states that God is all-good (holy) and just, Deuteronomy 32:4, Psalm 19:9, 36:7, 57:10, 63:3, 99:9, 107:1, 108:4. However, evil things do happen. The responsibility for all those evil things and their consequences is traceable to man's ability to choose good or evil. That authority to choose was given to man by God. However, the responsibility for those choices rests on man rather than on God. Consider the following four statements plus one ... *God exists, God is all-good, God is all-powerful, God gave man the authority to choose good or evil, evil exists. Choose any four and the fifth is valid.*

Did God create evil? The Bible states that God created all things, John 1:3, Colossians 1:16-17. If God created all things, did He create evil? The answer is, *No! Evil is not a thing ... not an entity.* God created all things. Since evil is not a thing, God did not create evil. God created man with the ability to speak ... giving him a brain to process words and vocal cords, lungs, a throat, and mouth to speak them. Man is able to say wonderful words of kindness or praise. However, he can also say evil, hurtful things. "*From the same mouth come both blessing and cursing,*" James 3:10. God gave man the physical ability to speak ... but it is man's choice and responsibility in what he says. God also gave His encouragement to us to speak properly. "*Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers,*" Ephesians 4:29. "*But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth,*" Colossians 3:8. Man is responsible for the words that proceed from his mouth. Jesus said, "*Those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart,*" Matthew 15:18. We choose our words whether good or evil. Would we want God to script our words as in a novel, filter them, or pre-program them as in a computer driven animation? Or would we prefer that He put us on the stage of an improvisation theater?

The necessity of pain. Some people suggest that it would be good if God eliminated pain ... that pain is the problem. Some even propose that there was no pain in the pre-sin Garden of Eden ... understanding pain to be a consequence of sin. That is illogical. Did Adam feel no pain when he stubbed his toe on a tree root or when he stepped on a small sharp rock in Eden? Of course, he felt pain ... that is part of our God-given protection. I have picked up a very hot kitchen pan ... picked it up barehanded. The immediate and intense pain caused me to drop it in a split second. Without the pain, my hands would have been permanently damaged. My sense of touch and the pain I experienced were my protection. A pain-free solution to the danger of my being burned at home could be for God to control or eliminate my home's sources of heat. Then He would have to prevent me from having a stove, microwave oven, toaster, barbeque grill, furnace, fireplace, hot water heater, hair dryer, light bulb, etc. Alternatively, He could just make all of those appliances be so low in heat production as to not burn me ... rendering them useless. Even a candle would not be safe. Pain is not the problem. Pain is a necessary protection.

The compassion of God. Before delving into the causes of suffering, we need to consider the heart of God as revealed in the Bible. His lovingkindness is everlasting, Psalm 118:29. He is not the source of evil choices and their consequences. God has given man the real ability to choose good and evil. God's original creation did not include evil or suffering.

Angels. God graciously created the angels in a right relationship with Him. God also gave them the ability to make choices. The angel Lucifer, along with other angels, chose to break that right relationship via sin. Consequentially we know Lucifer as Satan and the other fallen angels as demons. Their evil acts are a consequence of their chosen first rebellion and their subsequent evil choices. However, God did not create them that way.

Adam and Eve. God graciously created Adam and Eve in a right relationship with Him. And the created world itself was good. *"God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good,"* Genesis 1:31. Then Adam and Eve sinned and their bad choices brought sin and its consequences into the world. Since that time, every human in their lineage is born out of a relationship with God. However, God has graciously provided a way for man to restore that right relationship with Him through believing in Jesus Christ.

God ... a refuge for those who suffer. *"The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold,"* Psalm 18:2. *"You are my hiding place; You preserve me from trouble; You surround me with songs of deliverance,"* Psalm 32:7. *"But the salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; He is their strength in time of trouble,"* Psalm 37:39. *"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble,"* Psalm 46:1. Jesus was compassionate to those who suffered. *"And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.' And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,'"* Luke 4:16-21. On another occasion Jesus said, *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep,"* John 10:10-11. God is not the source of evil or the source of the suffering that comes from it. God is a refuge for those who suffer ... a source of compassion, strength, and comfort. Moreover, He is the One who has provided a way for man to come to Him and avoid eternal suffering.

Why is suffering so unjustly distributed? Why does suffering seem more random than just? The answer is, *because it is more random than just*. God is just and righteous. "*The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He,*" Deuteronomy 32:4. Suffering on earth is not universally God's just distribution of punishment of sin. God may punish sinful people or nations on earth. He may even use the weather to do so, Ezekiel 13:13. However, most suffering is not that. Most suffering is simply a consequence of the individual or accumulative bad choices made by man.

The sources of suffering. The Bible makes it clear that suffering is a consequence of man's evil choices. God gave us the ability to make choices and He gave us the encouragement to make good choices. However, the reality is that we corporately and individually have made, and do make, bad choices. We may suffer from our own bad choices ... but much suffering comes from the evil choices of other people today or from those made by others long ago. The responsibility and accountability for those evil choices rests on those who made them (not on God). However, the suffering caused by those choices is apparently and most often distributed indiscriminately to others who were uninvolved in making those bad choices.

Satan's rebellion. The angel Lucifer and other angels exercised their God-given ability to choose. They rebelled against God ... becoming Satan and the demons. Satan is a sinner, tempter, deceiver, schemer, murderer, liar, father of lies, and one who disguises himself as an angel of light while his demons also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, 1 John 3:8, 1 Thessalonians 3:5, 2 Corinthians 11:3 & 13-15, John 8:44. Satan is a source of false spiritual and religious teaching, 1 Timothy 4:1-5. He holds people captive, steals the Word from them, and blinds them from understanding the truth of the Gospel, 2 Timothy 2:24-26, Luke 8:12-13, 2 Corinthians 4:3-4. Not all suffering is from Satan ... but he is directly and indirectly responsible for much suffering on earth.

Adam and Eve's rebellion. Their rebellion is recorded in Genesis 3. They listened to Satan, doubted God, and disobeyed God. Sin, disease, and death entered the world. The stream of mankind was poisoned at the source, Romans 5:12. God's judgment on their rebellion encompassed Satan, man, woman, and the world ... including Satan's ultimate defeat, woman's pain in childbirth, order in the home, man's increased challenge in working to provide, a world of thorns and thistles, and physical and spiritual death.

The world in decay. The curse of Genesis 3 was caused by man's sin. Because of it, the world is in the bondage of decay, Romans 8:20-22. The world is winding down. It is wearing out like a garment, Psalm 102:25-26, Isaiah 51:6. That wearing out is known in scientific terms as The Second Law of Thermodynamics. The First Law states that the fixed amount of mass and energy are interchangeable. The Second Law states that the usefulness of that mass and energy is exponentially decreasing (entropy is increasing). Suffering is a natural consequence of that bondage of decay leading to the end times described in the Bible as including wars, famines, and earthquakes.

The flood of Noah. Genesis 1:6-10 describes a created world surrounded by a water-vapor canopy. That vapor shield reflected much of the cosmic rays. The reduced damage from those rays resulted in less suffering ... somatically in one's own body and genetically to one's descendants. The pre-flood world was a place of less suffering. Mankind was very sinful in the days of Noah, and the flood was God's judgment on them and their sin. The worldwide flood was not the product of 40 days and nights of rain ... the rain was a coincidental consequence. The water vapor canopy collapsed and subterranean water broke through, and broke up, the one-continent land mass, Genesis 7:10-12. Cosmic rays were no longer reflected. The age of death exponentially declined from one pre-flood steady state to a lower post-flood state of 70 to 80 years, Psalm 90:10. And, the mountains rose and the valleys sunk (that is where the floodwater went), Psalm 104:8. Earthquakes, hurricanes, typhoons, and all sorts of violent weather became part of the post-flood world. The world became a place of much more suffering.

Suffering because of parents and grandparents. Our immediate ancestors can cause some of our suffering. A mother's choice to smoke, drink alcohol, or take drugs can cause damage to her unborn baby. Heroin addicts give birth to heroin-addicted babies. Abusers' children are more likely than other children to grow up to be abusers. The children of alcoholics are more likely to be alcoholics. The children of divorce are more likely to divorce. Parents who are not committed to education are more likely to raise children academically unprepared for life in the world. We can suffer because of our parents and grandparents bad choices. God gave them the ability to choose. It was their responsibility to choose good and not evil. Their children and grandchildren can suffer because of their choices. However, not all suffering is because of their choices. Jesus spoke to that issue in John 9:1-3. It is possible for God's discipline of sin to extend to a 3rd or 4th generation. However, the cycle can be broken simply by turning to Him, Exodus 20:5-6 & 34:6-7, Deuteronomy 5:9-10, and Ezekiel 18:1-30 (particularly definitive).

Peer-caused suffering. Many possibilities exist in this category. God gave the ability to choose to our friends, to our families, to our neighbors, to our acquaintances, to our governments, to our enemies, and to those who are strangers. It is their responsibility to make good rather than evil choices. And their unwise choices can hurt us. Consider the following abridged list.

- Abusers ... physically, sexually, and emotionally wounding others.
- Bigots ... denying equal opportunity or persecuting those who are different.
- Careless mechanics ... performing unsafe maintenance.
- Corporations ... taking short cuts, embezzling retirement funds, polluting.
- Criminals ... stealing, attacking, raping.
- Drunk drivers ... killing sober people on the roads.
- Employers ... paying unfair wages.
- False religions ... pulling people into eternal dead-ends.
- Families ... denying a safe-haven for their children.
- Friends ... pulling you into their bad choices.
- Governments ... abusing power, performing ethnic cleansing, or over-taxing.
- Greedy people ... stealing or selling unsafe but less expensive products.
- Hypocrites ... turning people away from the truth of Christ.
- Immoral or unethical people ... not respecting life or property.
- National enemies ... attacking peaceful nations.
- Pedophiles ... preying on innocent children.
- Personal enemies ... plotting, hurting, defaming others.
- Terrorists ... killing, wounding, and maiming innocent people.

Suffering because of my unwise choices. We are capable of making wise and unwise choices. Our personal choices can cause us to suffer. Our choices to consume certain things, to live life morally or immorally, to obey the law or not, to exercise or not, to accept or reject Christ, to make hundreds of good or bad choices every day can cause our suffering. All suffering in our lives is not because of my sin. Some of our suffering may be God's judgment on our sin, Genesis 6:5-8, Leviticus 18:1-30, Numbers 14:27-35, and Revelation 18-21. However, all suffering is not God's judgment against us, Luke 13:4-5.

Couldn't God stop all of this suffering on earth? Yes, He could. God could stop all suffering in a number of ways. First, He could judge and eliminate all those who make bad choices. Without those who make bad choices, there would be no evil choices or consequential suffering. The problem with that solution is that it calls for the elimination of all people because we all have made, and do make, bad choices. A second solution would be to have God limit our choices ... making us make only good choices. I lived for a few years at the edge of the historic district in a beautiful little New England town. Being outside the historic district, I could choose to paint my house any color. However, if I lived in the historic district, a town ordinance dictated color choice. Essentially the town law stated that if I lived in the historic district, I could paint my house any color I chose as long as it was New England white. That is not real choice. If God limited our choices to only good choices, those would not be real choices. A third solution would be for God to pre-program us to make only pre-determined good choices ... essentially creating us as scripted good-robots. Then we would not be real people.

What should God do? Consider the example of the man driving a car with old unsafe tires, tires ready to blow out at the smallest provocation. The man's young daughter needed to get to the hospital quickly for emergency medical care. On their speeding drive there, his right front tire hit a rock in the road and blew out. The man lost control, crossed into oncoming traffic, and drove head-on into a car carrying a family of four. All but the man died on the scene. It is easy to see whose fault this was ... or is it? The man should not have driven on old tires. He could have bought new ones or called an ambulance. But maybe he did not have the money because his greedy employer would not pay a fair wage. Maybe the ambulance company greedily over-charged people in emergencies. Or maybe his wife spent the tire-money he was saving on ten pairs of shoes for herself. Or maybe the town maintenance people negligently forgot to fill the pothole. Or maybe his parents ... or maybe his friends ... or maybe, maybe, maybe. All who, in some way, caused this suffering share in the responsibility. However, God does not. The accident was the result of many accumulative bad choices. What should God have done to prevent the accident? Should He have taken everyone's choice away? Should He have made all tires last forever (causing unemployment and low wages at the tire factories)? Should He have filled the pothole? Should He have eliminated all illness like the one the daughter had? The reality is that God would have to recreate us as robots in a fake world to prevent such accidents. We would not be people, have no real choices, have no responsibility, and have no accountability. What kind of choice-less, no-responsibility world would you want to live in? At a very practical level, how would you want God to eliminate all suffering?

Signs of the end-times? Evil and suffering seem to be increasing, what does that mean? It means that the world is winding down physically, morally, and spiritually toward what is called the end-times ... according to an all-inclusive Second Law of Thermodynamics. But rather than nose-diving into a thermodynamic cold-death, we are speeding toward the return of Christ. Biblical signs of His coming are clear. Jesus described these signs. *"He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?' And Jesus answered and said to them, 'See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many. You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold,"* Matthew 24:3-12. In addition, Paul described these signs. *"But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious*

gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth," 2 Timothy 3:1-7. Evil and suffering will steadily and exponentially increase as we draw near to the end of the age. Jesus will return un-expectedly like a thief in the night, 1 Thessalonians 5:2. To those who are ready for His return, the signs of the times give hope that evil and suffering will end.

When will God eliminate suffering? God will eliminate evil and suffering when there has been sufficient time for many to come to faith in Him. *"The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up,"* 2 Peter 3:9-10. Heaven, and the new heaven and new earth, will be very different from this present earth. The Apostle John wrote (my commentary added in parenthesis), *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes (there must be tears to wipe away); and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying (not weeping but outcry or clamor), or pain (meaning great anguish or trouble); the first things have passed away. And He who sits on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new. And He said, 'Write, for these words are faithful and true.' Then He said to me, 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost,'"* Revelation 21:1-6.

The real and meaningful goal. A comfortable, pain-free, healthy, money-filled life on earth is not the goal of the Christian life. Some persuasive preachers will tell you that it is ... and will assure you that if you send money to them, you will have it. However, the goal of the Christian life is not this side of the grave. The real goal extends on into eternity. The meaningful goal is an eternal life in a right relationship with God. Jesus said, *"This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent,"* John 17:3. Life on this earth is fragile, fleeting, and punctuated with suffering. Life eternal is neither fragile nor fleeting ... and is free from evil and suffering. Suffering on this side of the grave is unavoidable. Even the richest, healthiest, and most educated people suffer ... and then die. However, suffering on the other side of the grave is avoidable ... the choice is ours. Speaking of Himself, Jesus said, *"Whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God,"* John 3:15-18. Why the innocent suffer on earth is a good question. However, "How can I avoid eternal suffering?" is the more important question.

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