

# **ISSUES OF SUFFERING, DEATH AND EVIL**

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## **1. JOB THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFERER Based on Job 1:1**

**One of the first impressions I gained at the Baptist General Conference annual meeting in Green Bay was that Christians are perpetually suffering. Every day we were reminded of leaders in our conference who are fighting with cancer. Just in our small denomination of 130,000 people there are hundreds who have cancer, and hundreds more who suffer from other diseases. On top of this, accidents are taking life, or leaving people injured and maimed everyday. If this be the case in just one arm of the body of Christ, how great must be the suffering of the whole body?**

**A Russian pastor just recently released from prison for exchange for some Russian spies spoke to the conference twice. He told of his great sorrow because of fellow pastors and lay-believers who still languish in Russian prisons, not for being criminals, but for being Christians. (This was 1979). There is no doubt about it, it's a great day to be alive, but the facts are that Christians are suffering persecution and martyrdom all over the world. In our part of the world where we have peace we suffer from disease and accidents. In conflict torn countries Christians face all of this plus the sufferings inflicted by man.**

**It is no wonder that Paul prayed that Christians might be strengthened in the inner man. Christians need internal shock absorbers to keep on going in spite of the blows dealt by life. The best shock absorbers are right thoughts about suffering. Wrong ideas and theories to explain it only adds to the burden. Helmut Thielicke, the great German preacher and scholar, who has traveled across America many times was asked, "What is the greatest weakness of American Christians?" He responded, "Their views of suffering." American Christians suffer one by one and have not gone through the holocaust of war with its cities bombed and thousands dying all around them. The result is, most of the deepest thinking on suffering comes from Christians in England and Europe where they have been through it.**

**They will not be comforted when you squeeze rose-water on their cancer. The facts of life have forced them to rethink the popular simple views that Christians hold in sunny times. Fortunately for us God has given us another way to think deeply about the mysteries of suffering. We do not have to go through the fire to see the light. The book of Job reveals the debate on suffering as no other piece of literature on earth. Just as Jesus suffered for us that we need not experience hell, so Job suffered that we need not go through hell on earth to come to right ideas about suffering. Thank God we do not all**

**have to learn by experience. It is possible to learn much from the experience of others. All of us will experience suffering, but few if any will have to go the route of Job. His severe experience can help all of us make our less severe journey smoother by giving to us the shock absorbers of right ideas.**

**In the book of Job we learn from the mistakes of others. This is the path of wisdom, for we cannot live long enough to make them all ourselves. We can make plenty of them, however, and the fact is, many go on making the same mistakes made by the friends of Job. They were good and godly men, but are the great examples of how wrong good and godly men can be when it comes to suffering. Their mistake was the common mistake still being made by Christians. They tried to impose their simple explanation on all of reality. They followed the path of all who are dogmatic. In order to get all of the evidence to support their theory, they just ignored the facts that didn't fit. They hated complexity. They demanded that Job conform to their nice neat simple formula for explaining his, and all suffering.**

**Their simple formula was that all suffering was a sign of divine displeasure. When men are good and godly they do not suffer, for God blesses them. When they do suffer they have ceased to be good and godly. They have sinned, and all suffering is punishment for sin. The beauty of this formula is that anyone can grasp it. It solves the mystery of suffering and explains everything. If you suffer it is just a reaping of what you have sown. There is really no mystery to solve. It has only one major defect-it is not true. This is what Job keeps saying over and over in his defense.**

**Many Christians, however never read the book of Job, or do not understand it if they do. The result is that many Christians suffer great mental agony because they try to explain everything by this simple but false formula. They cry out in affliction saying, what have I**

**done to deserve this? This implies that all suffering is deserved and is punishment for bad behavior. They may be conscious of some sin in their life, but there is no way that their sin can be so great as to deserve such severe punishment. So they get angry at God and accuse Him of cruelty and injustice. They know people much worse than themselves who do not suffer at all. Their faith is often damaged, and they suffer mental and spiritual torment all because they start with bad theology and a wrong view of suffering.**

**If we learn nothing else from our study of Job, let's learn the folly of trying to force all of the facts into a simple formula. There is a fascinating Greek legend about a robber named Procrustes. He had a very unusual way of treating guests who came to his home. He had only one bed for guests, and so everyone had to sleep in it. Since he wanted each guest to fit the bed just right, he would stretch short guests on a stretcher so they were the right length, and, of course, if they were too long, he cut them off so as to fit. Needless to say he was not a popular host. His perverted practice has led to the word Procrustean. It describes the friends of Job perfectly. It is a word that refers to people who will cut off facts, or stretch the truth, or anything else that is necessary to squeeze all of reality into the bed of their iron-clad formula.**

**The book of Job is anti-Procrustean, and it demands that we stretch our minds rather than the truth. It forces us to see life from a larger perspective, and to expand our theology to cover a greater diversity of facts. The book of Job forbids us from getting a hold of a piece of the puzzle and calling that the picture.**

**Let's look at some of the Procrustean beds which men have tried to force all of the facts of life to fit into, but which the book of Job rejects as inadequate formulas to explain suffering. You may not like this study anymore than Job's friends did, for maybe you will find your pet**

**theory among them. Don't feel too bad, however, for if there were not a lot of false ideas about suffering, God would not have devoted so much of His Word to the purpose of fighting them. All of us will be forced by this book to reexamine how we think about suffering.**

**The first false view of suffering is:**

**1. Suffering is the result of the sin of the sufferer. It is agreed by numerous commentators that the main purpose of the book of Job is to destroy this popular and almost universal view of suffering. Most religions of the world follow this formula. The whole doctrine of reincarnation is built around this theory. If babies suffer and die they must have sinned in a previous existence. If good and righteous people have terrible diseases, it can only be explained by the sins they committed in a former life. The main purpose of the doctrine of reincarnation is to force all of reality to fit this formula. Those who really believe this formula have solved the problem of suffering by denying that there is a problem. If masses of boat people are drowning, and thousands of children are dying, and disease is turning people into zombies of affliction, there is nothing to get upset about, for they all deserve what they are suffering. All suffering is punishment for sin, and so all is fair and God is just. This theory enables those who hold it to watch people die like flies without compassion, for they see no evil in suffering. It is all good because it is just punishment for sin.**

**Believe it or not, this is the theory of suffering held by Job's friends. No wonder those who add to life's misery by this cruel counsel are called "Job's friends." They did not believe in reincarnation, but they did believe that all Job was suffering was justified, and that it was God's way of punishing him, and trying to get him to repent. They each take turns at trying to break Job down so he will confess his secret sin. The best arguments for their view of**

suffering that you will find anywhere are right here in the book of Job. As eloquent and forceful as they were, however, they never convinced Job that he was being punished for sin. They could throw at him Scripture verses by the dozen that say, whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth. Job knew that was true of much suffering, but he refused to accept it as an explanation for all suffering, and especially his own. Why? Because it just did not fit the facts of life. You cannot just take a truth, even a Biblical truth, and impose it on all of life's experiences.

It is a Biblical truth that men reap what they sow. It is a Biblical truth that sin leads to suffering. It is Biblical truth that whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth. No one will deny that these are sound Biblical truths. Nevertheless, if they do not fit the facts of a specific case, they are not true of that case. The best of medicine is of no value for a sickness it cannot cure. Suffering can be educational, but this truth is of no value to the man who is killed, or left in a coma, by an accident. What the facts clearly reveal about Job is:

No. 1. Verse 1 tells us he was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and turned away from evil.

No. 2. In verse 8 God confirms this description and adds, "There is none like him on earth."

It is established from the start that the man we are dealing with is in the center of God's will. He is as near perfect as any man named anywhere in the Bible. This means that any theory of suffering that does not take into account that even the most righteous can suffer terribly is false. Job was not being chastened by the Lord, for the Lord loved him and held him up as the best example of godliness. His suffering had nothing to do with his sin, and, therefore, all of the arguments of Job's friends which try to convince him he has angered God are themselves what made God angry. At the end of the book they are only spared from God's wrath by Job's prayer and sacrifice

**on their behalf. Their theory which was so false in relation to Job was almost true for themselves in that they came close to great suffering for their sin of teaching that all suffering is due to sin. This is a serious sin, for God has gone to great lengths to make it clear that it is a false view of suffering, and to be ignorant where knowledge is available is sinful.**

**Does this mean the righteous do not suffer because of sin? No, it does not mean that at all. The Bible is full of examples of saints who suffer due to their sin. Poor Peter weeping because of his cowardly denial of his Lord is a prime example. It is not that there is not truth to the formula that suffering is due to sin. It is just that it becomes a false view of suffering when you try to impose it on all experiences of suffering. A partial truth made into a whole truth becomes a lie. When you take something relative and make it absolute you are guilty of idolatry and sin against God. That is what the friends of Job did, and the book of Job exists to help us avoid their mistake.**

**If you think all suffering is punishment for sin, you will be forced to pervert the image of God into a cruel creator rather than the merciful creator that He is. Imagine how cruel it would be to imply that all who have cancer or some other fatal disease are suffering because they deserve it. Such cruelty is a sin that God forbids by this book. The parents of a girl born with a crippled foot were asked why they did not have the child's foot straightened by surgery. They replied, "If we had the foot straightened He'd find some other way of punishing us." They looked upon their suffering as God's punishment, and the result was they had a perverted and pagan view of God. Had they understood the book of Job, and that tragic things can happen even to the innocent, they would have been motivated to turn to God in faith rather than from Him in fear.**

**We don't have time to look at other false views of suffering. The**

**main truths to grasp is that the righteous can and do suffer, and wicked sometimes do not. These are the facts of life. The question of course is why? Why isn't it true that only the wicked suffer, and that only the righteous prosper? It seems like the friends of Job ought to be right. Why are they so wrong? They were wrong because of the cross. The cross was in God's heart and mind long before Jesus came. The teaching of Job was essential to prepare the way for the Messiah. No one could ever believe in a Messiah who was a man of sorrows, and who would suffer crucifixion between two thieves if they were convinced that only the wicked suffer and the righteous escape it.**

**Those Jews who never learned the message of Job missed God's greatest gift, for they rejected Jesus because, like Job's friends, they said he must be a sinner, for he suffers. The poet said of Jesus:**

**The best of men  
That e'er wore earth about him was a sufferer;  
A soft, meek, patient, humble, tranquil spirit,  
The first true gentleman that ever breathed.**

**We can look at the cross and praise God for our suffering Lord, and what He purchased for us by His suffering. Those who believed, and yet believe, that the righteous can never suffer, can never grasp the truth of the cross and the fact that God Himself suffers-the only absolute RIGHTEOUS SUFFERER.**

## **2. SUFFERING IS NOT GOOD-A STUDY IN JOB.**

**We have special seats as we watch the drama of Job unfold. God has, by this opening chapter, invited us into the balcony to watch the**



**whole thing from a heavenly perspective. We get to see from the view of God and Satan, and who knows how many millions of celestial spectators. It is a sort of cosmic, SMILE YOUR ON CANDID CAMERA, set up. We are all in on it, but Job has no idea what is going on. We know that all of the dirty tricks of Satan are deliberately designed so we can all see Job's reaction. We also know that when the entertainment is all over Job will be rewarded for being a good sport through it all.**

**In this analogy Satan is the Allen Funt of the spirit world who goes about constantly trying to dream up new ways to reveal human responses to trying situations. All of this could be great fun if God would just call Satan off on account of unnecessary roughness. If Satan would have been less violent the whole drama could be enjoyable. Had he just plotted for all his possessions to be robbed, that would have been an interesting thing to watch. But Satan pulled no punches. He wiped Job out and without mercy saw to it that the vast majority of his servants and all of his children were killed. This spoils the whole show for those who are not sadistic.**

**Many have felt that God made a bad deal with Satan. Robert Frost has God explaining later to Job: "I was just showing off to the devil." Job responds, "That was very human of you." Carl Jung, the famous psychiatrist, goes so far as to say that God felt guilty for what He let Satan do to Job. The reason he says God sent His Son into the world to die on the cross was because He felt so guilty about Job. The cross was not only to atone for man's guilt, but for His own. This is certainly as extreme a view as ever uttered, but what it reveals is man questions the justice of God in allowing Satan to treat Job like He did. It just does not set right with man that God would give this much freedom to the forces of evil. He should have put more restricted limits on Satan.**

**This is man's biggest problem with evil. Why does God in His sovereignty not stop evil from being so powerful. The feeling is, if God is forced to permit evil, He is not all powerful, and if He freely permits it, He is not all good. God is forced, it seems, to give up one or the other of these attributes. Since all of Scripture however reveals God to be both all powerful and all good, man is forced to try to figure out how this can be when God permits evil to be as powerful as it is.**

**One of the answers to this dilemma is, God can allow evil to be powerful if the end result is greater good. In other words, God is justified in permitting any degree of evil that He, in His sovereign power and wisdom, can turn to good. For example, God allows Satan to buffet Paul with his thorn in the flesh, because that evil of suffering will help Paul escape the greater evil of pride that could ruin his whole ministry. Here is a clear case of God giving Satan freedom to do what He could use for good. This means that the reason God does not destroy Satan and cast him into the lake of fire is because, in a fallen sinful world, the works of Satan can be used for the purpose of God. God allows Satan freedom because it is useful for His own ultimate goals. God is in control, therefore, and evil will not be able to do anything that God cannot overcome, and make count for good in the long run. This being the case, God is off the hook, and He is justified in permitting evil.**

**This truth is easily perverted into error. Some conclude that evil is not real. If evil is used for good, they reason that evil is really a part of the good. If the good can only come by way of evil, then evil is good. If good can come of evil then evil is not really bad, and, therefore, not genuinely evil. This kind of thinking leads to the Christian Science conclusion that evil is not real at all, but is the result of false thinking. The Bible makes it clear, however, that evil is real, and that it is bad and not good. God can use it for good, but it is evil and destructive, and not His will. The fact that God is superior to evil,**

**and able to counteract it's negative power does not mean that evil is not real and awful. The fact is some evil will persist forever, and that is why hell is a reality. We must avoid the superficial conclusion that all is really good if we only understand everything. Because evil is real, there is much in life that is worthless and meaningless.**

**Those who think that evil is really good do not realize that by denying the reality of evil they make God responsible for all that we see as evil. The Bible makes it clear that evil is real and God hates it, and is not the author of it. Sometimes Christians feel that God sovereignty means that He controls everything that happens in this universe. If that was the case, then there is no such thing as freedom, and God is totally responsible for all evil. If God controls all that we do, then all of our sin must be His doing, and, therefore, His will. God then is responsible for all sin, for it He controls everything, who else can be held responsible? Since that conclusion is totally at odds with the Biblical revelation, we must go back to God's sovereignty and come up with another view of it that does not make Him the author of sin.**

**God's sovereignty means that He is the only Person in the universe who can take the risk of creating free willed beings because He is the only Person who has the power and wisdom to make sure that the risk of evil will not outweigh the good. He can end up with a universe of free willed creatures and much good and love that could not otherwise exist. God's sovereignty does not mean He does everything. It means that even though millions of beings do things He does not will, He is able to work in all things for good to those who love Him and who are called according to His purpose. God's will is not done on earth daily by millions, but because He is sovereign, His will will eventually be done in spite of all the sin and evil and rebellion.**

**This is one of the powerful messages of the book of Job. Satan set**

free to do his worst was not able to destroy Job's relationship to God, and God's final reward and blessing of Job. Paul in the New Testament said nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. The book of Job had already made this truth clear. Life, then, from the Biblical viewpoint is a comedy, and not a tragedy. A comedy is a story that, no matter how tragic the events, ends well. Job is, therefore, a comedy, and all of human life is a comedy, however many tragedies there are to endure.

Now all of this helps us to see suffering in a different light. All of the values and blessings that come out of suffering are real because God in His power and wisdom is able to use evil to bring forth good. The suffering itself is evil. It has its origin in evil powers and wrong choices, and it is evil in itself, for it will not be allowed to be a part of God's eternal kingdom. Evil has no intrinsic goodness at all and so cannot be eternal. The cause of suffering is evil, but the consequences can be good because God can work in everything for good.

God is not the cause of any defect in the body, for the body of the Christian is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Just as you would not come into the sanctuary of your church and destroy the pews and the walls or windows, and just as you would not throw garbage all over to make it a place of filth which would be repulsive to God and man, so God does not smash His temple in planes, trains, cars, or bikes, nor does He spread cancer and other diseases through His temple to make the body repulsive. All of the good that comes from Christian suffering these things are because God will work in everything (however evil and repulsive) to bring forth good. If men will cooperate with God, there is no evil that cannot be overcome to produce good. But do not conclude that this means the evil or suffering is good, or that God is the author of it for good. Both of these conclusions lead to the false concept that evil is not real, and that God is the author of evil. Anything that leads to these conclusions is not Biblical thinking. God

**is light and in Him is no darkness at all. It is impossible for God to sin, or to tempt anyone else to sin.**

**There are some Old Testament text that lead to confusion on this, for they seem to be saying that God is the author of evil. Amos 3:6 says, "Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?" The prophet is simply pointing out that God does punish sin by judgment, and that judgment is called evil, because it is from man's point of view the worse thing that can happen. It is an evil to come under the wrath of God, but when God does judge it is in reality not evil but justice. God never judges unjustly or unfairly, and so there is no real evil in His wrath, but the Old Testament often refers to it as evil from the Lord. It is the result of man's evil, and when he reaps what he has sown, it is an evil crop of suffering, but in no way does this mean God is the author of evil. He prefers mercy, but mercy rejected leads to justice, and justice for the sinner is an evil consequence.**

**Understanding all of this helps us avoid the agony of misconception. So many Christians look at the tragedies of life and Rom. 8:28, and struggle to figure out how everything works together for good. They watch their loved ones die, and suffer months and years of loneliness and heartache, and all the while wonder how they are suppose to see any good in it all. This is a futile struggle and frustration based on the misconception that evil is not real, but that all is good, and that all is of God. You owe it to yourself, and to all the body of Christ to avoid giving anyone this superficial view of life. Evil is real and it hurts, and it is not good, nor can God Himself make evil good, but He will work in all things, even the most evil things, to bring forth good.**

**But the fact remains, that is the back door to blessing. It is best to come in front door and experience blessing without having to endure the evil. Many a man's drunkenness has lead him to the gutter where he looks up for God's mercy. That is good, but better is the way of**

**man who seeks God's mercy without ever ending in the gutter. Job had great blessings when it was all over, but I wonder if Job would have had his choice, what would he decide? Would he choose to go on with his ideal family and wealth, and social prestige, and right relationship to God, and avoid all he had to suffer, or would he choose to endure the agony he did for the sake of possessing more? We don't know what Job would do, but most people in his shoes would, I am sure, choose the easiest route and avoid the battle.**

**Since we don't have a choice, however, we need to be ready for the battle. But let's not be naive and think the battle is not real, but only a good we don't yet understand. Evil is real, and life is a battle with real bullets. It is not all a mere play where we all go out to celebrate afterwards. You have seen too many good people suffer too believe that. You have witnessed too many broken homes and hearts to think that way. Jesus would not have wept if all was for the best. All is not for the best. He tried to prevent the destruction of Jerusalem, but he was rejected, and he wept over the folly of the people that would lead them to such great suffering. It was not for the best; it was evil. Suffering is not good, but thank God this not good cannot keep us from God's best if we, no matter what, remain loyal to Him. Suffering is not good, but thank God He will work with us, even in that which is not good, to bring forth what is good.**

### **3. WHY TRAGEDY? Based on Job 1:6f**

**Elie Wiesel, who survived Hitler's blood bath for the Jews, as devoted his life to telling the world of this tragedy that he feels surpasses hell in its horrors. His books have motivated others to write so that there now exists a holocaust literature. There are books, plays, articles, and poems, about history's most unbelievable tragedy,**

**which is the brutal murder of six million Jews. Wiesel did not see the entire million children who were killed, but he saw enough so that he was never the same. He wrote:**

**"Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreathes of smoke beneath the silent blue sky."**

**In another place he wrote that people tend to think that a murderer weakens when facing a child. The child reawakens the killers lost humanity and he can't go through with it. But it didn't happen. "Our Jewish children had no effect upon the killers. Nor upon the world, nor upon God." The result was that Wiesel did not respond like Job, but like Satan expected Job to respond. Wiesel wrote, "Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. How can a Jew say anything religious thereafter?"**

**Wiesel survived the tragedy but his faith did not. He could not understand how God could allow evil to be so powerful, and so he concluded that God does not care. This is the test that Satan put Job through many centuries earlier. All ten of his children were wiped out in one blow, and all of his wealth was destroyed the same day. Job also endured a holocaust. His dream world was shattered by a nightmare, and his ideal family was instantly reduced to no family at all.**

**There is obviously something wrong in a world where things like this can happen. If tragedy was just an isolated incident here and there, and limited to the bad guys, we could go along with Job's friends, and the problem of suffering would be easily solved. But tragedy does not have any respect of persons. The Jonestown**

massacre was not a mafia convention, but over 900 mostly innocent people. They were women and children, many of whom were good and godly. The worse airplane crash in American history did not go down with a load of pimps and prostitutes, but with respectable citizens, some of whom were God's children. War, famine, and terrorism are snuffing out the lives of thousands every year, and disease takes a terrible toll, and in all cases the good guys as well as the bad are victims.

If the problem of suffering in this world does not bother you, you are yourself suffering from hardening of the heart, of softening of the brain. Those who study Job's sufferings, and the tragedies of the world are forced to consider the subject called Theodicy. Theodicy is the justification of the ways of God to men. There have been many books written on this area of theology. Joni's second book, *A Step Further* is a Theodicy, and it is a good one. Many feel that the book of Job itself is a Theodicy. A Theodicy strives to show that as bad as things are, God is good and He is in control, and evil is not winning the battle. A Theodicy is the defense of God in a world where evil often seems to dominate.

The book of Job opens up the window of heaven, and enables us to see the problem of suffering from a broader perspective. Job himself did not see what we can see. He had to go through his tragedy believing that God was the sole cause of it all. Life is so much harder when you have only a partial perspective. Most of the ways we explain suffering are only partial, and none of them fit every situation. A wife comes to console and you are not long in listening to her story before you could watch her husband hang with a smile on your face. Then he comes in and tells his side, and you wonder why there is nobody taking a collection to hang his picture in the hall of fame for endurance. The point is, when you see life only from one side you have a distorted view. We have a distorted view of most of life, and especially life's



tragedies.

The first thing the book of Job does for us is give us an insight into the conflict in heaven that explains some of the tragedy on earth. God gives us a wider perspective so we can avoid the partial perspective of Job's friends. Satan is no equal to God, for God is clearly supreme. He sets the limits to how far Satan can go. Nevertheless, He does give Satan the authority to test Job within those limits. Who then is responsible for the tragedies Job suffered. Is it God for allowing Satan the freedom to test him, or is it Satan, for he is the one who actually carries out the diabolical plot. He motivates the enemies of Job to come and rob him and kill his servants. He produced the tornado and guided it to destroy the home where all Job's children were. Satan masterminded the whole series of tragedies, and so he is clearly responsible. God is only partially off the hook, however, for He gave Satan the permission. That is why we need a Theodicy. We need to explain how God can be good and just in doing this.

The book of Job is teaching us that God is sovereign and is the supreme authority so that even Satan can only operate by his permission. But yet there is great evil that results from this permission to do that which God Himself would never do. If God in His sovereignty allows others to do what He would never do, we can only conclude that God considers some other values greater than the prevention of all evil. If God can prevent evil by His sovereign power, but chooses not to prevent it, we are forced to conclude that either God is not good, or that God permits evil for a greater good. Weisel choose to believe the first, and Job choose to believe the second. Job, of course, made the wise choice, but we must still ask why? Why is Job's choice the best, and how can God's allowing tragedy be justified. Theodicy is the name for the answers to that question.

The classical Christian answer is the theodicy of freedom. God

could have said to Satan, "Hit the road you cynic. Your pessimism about Job farce. Don't come back until you have developed the skill of possibility thinking." God could have used His sovereignty that way, but instead, He chose to accept the challenge of Satan and allow him to test Job. God gave Satan freedom to do what was evil. Just as He gave man the freedom to do what was evil. If God is willing to let evil exist for the sake of freedom, then freedom has to be one of the greatest values in all the universe. When God made Adam and Eve He also gave them freedom to do evil. He warned them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but He gave them freedom to do so. He could have easily prevented it but did not. We see that evil existed before man.

As we examine freedom we discover that it is really the basic source of all evil, and yet, it is the most treasured value of God and man. The only way we can justify God's allowing Satan to test Job, and Hitler to test the Jews, and all of the other holocausts of history, is to grasp the theodicy of freedom. St. Augustine in the fourth century was the first to put this into systematic form. Ever since then it has been the traditional view of both Catholics and Protestants. Most Christians hardly ever consider it, but the book of Job forces us to do so. Since God created everything that is, and said it is very good, even Satan was made good. God created no natures or creatures that were evil. If God had made Satan evil then God would be solely responsible for the evil in the universe, but God made everything good.

How then could evil ever get started in a good universe where all creatures and all things were good? It came in by way of God's greatest gift to His highest creatures. It was by means of the gift of freedom. God could have prevented evil very simply by withholding the gift of freedom. God had the choice of making a world where no evil could exist, but He did not do it. At least in our world He did not do it. God may have created hundreds of worlds where there is no evil

**because there is no freedom. There could be worlds where all is beautiful and not one sin because all of the beings that inhabit it are programed to do only what is good.**

**We live in a different kind of world than that. Those worlds are mere toys compared to our world. For here everything is real. There is life and love and loyalty. But there is also sin and evil and death because of the freedom of will. Those who think God controls all that happens in this world have a misconception of the value of this freedom of the will in God's value system. It means everything to God to have free willed beings to relate to. They are not machines, but real persons who are able to fellowship with Him. Their love and obedience is priceless, because they are freely given, and not the automatic response due to programing. Islam says all is automatic, and God is the cause of all good and evil. Nothing can be changed for all is determined. This is pure fatalism and not the Biblical view of the freedom of choice.**

**As on earth so it is in heaven; you get what you pay for. The cost of this type of world we live in is enormous. The cost is the risk of evil, for freedom to be real there must be allowance for the choice of evil. There is no way to have freedom and avoid the possibility of evil. Satan was made with the same freedom to chose good or evil. What is evil? Since God is the creator of all, and God is good, evil is any use of freedom which is contrary to God's will, and what He would have His creatures choose. When any free willed being chooses to do what God would not have programed them to do, had He made them robots, that is evil.**

**These kinds of choices must be possible for there to be true freedom. Where there is no alternative there is no freedom. If you have to vote for the dictator in power, and there is no alternative, you are not in a free country. If you have to do the will of God, and there**

is no way to do what He does not will, you are not in a free world. What all this means is that evil is a necessity in the kind of world we live in. It is God's will that evil be possible, but it is not His will that it be actual. That is, God wills that you have the freedom to choose evil, but He does not will that you make that choice. God makes evil possible by granting free will, but only free willed beings can make evil actual by their choices. God makes man free to murder, but He does not will that they do so. In fact, He clearly wills that they do not and threatens severe punishment if they do. Who then is responsible for the evil? It is the one making that choice.

This is what theodicy is. It is a justification of the ways of God to men. There is no point in men getting angry with God and accusing him of injustice and indifference because of the great evil in the world. He is not responsible for it since by definition evil is always that which God does not will. Not only does God not will evil, He is the only one who has the power and wisdom to conquer evil, and even use it for good. To forsake God in the holocaust, or in any degree of suffering and tragedy, is to totally misunderstand the origin, nature, and destiny of evil. Evil is the by-product of freedom. If you insist that freedom is not worth the cost, maybe God will grant you the choice of being a rock, or some mindless creature of instinct. For those who prefer to be persons, however, there is always the risk of evil and suffering.

In the light of this theodicy we can better understand what is happening when God seems to be cooperating with Satan. God gives him the power to go ahead and put Job to a brutal test. Why would God ever do such a thing, and then have it recorded for all the world to read? Billy Graham gets criticized for having a liberal on his platform, and here is God with Satan on His platform, and God grants him an answer to his request. God is determined to prove to all the intelligent beings in the universe that man is truly free. Satan has

**charged that Job is a slave and has no real choice between good and evil. God calls Satan's bluff, and says go ahead and test him, for in doing so you will reveal to the whole universe just how free man is. He is no puppet. He can choose good or evil, and Job will prove it.**

**The fact is, none of the suffering that Satan could throw at Job could penetrate his inner sanctuary of freedom. Evil can march around the gate and bang upon it, but it can never enter and capture the freedom of man's will unless the bolt is lifted from the inside. The same is true for the forces of good, for Jesus stands at the door and knocks, and He will only enter a life when the door is opened from within. Man is truly a free being. He can say yes or no to both God or Satan. Man has the freedom to defy either of them, and he has the freedom to chose the way of either. Neither the power of good or evil can conquer man by sheer force. God knew that, but He had to prove it to Satan. After Satan did his worst to make God look like a monstrous evil enemy, Job still chose to be loyal to God.**

**The observers around the council table of heaven could only conclude that man is one of us. Job gained universal respect, for he could do good and evil and be able to choose the good and reject the evil. He demonstrated the worthiness of man's place in God's eternal plan. Job became a universal hero. So great is the value of freedom that God says it is worth any price. If it means giving Satan opportunity to do evil; if it means the agony of Job; if it means the torture of Hitler, and all of the diabolical suffering of history, it is worth it. That would be easy for God to say if He just sat in heaven to watch, but God did more than that, He got involved. He did not make man take all the risks of freedom. He said in order to have the best I will share the cost of such freedom. That is why the cross was a part of God's long range plans even before the foundation of the world.**

**God knew there would be hell to pay to produce a free being like**

man, and so He committed Himself to be the greatest sufferer of all. He would endure the hell His own justice demanded. The cross is the symbol of God's commitment to human freedom. It means everything to God, and the cross is the price God paid for man to be free. A young boy was looking at a picture of the crucifixion, and disturbed by its cruelty he said, "If God had been there, He would not have let them do it." That is the feeling we get as we look at the tragedies that struck Job. But God was there, and God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. The worst was turned into the best because God was there and permitted the worst. So with Job, and so with so much that we suffer in this world.

Evil is powerful in the world because man and spiritual beings like Satan are not programmed computers, but are real persons with real choices, and they often choose that which is not God's will. Evil is so great at times that those suffering must wonder if freedom is really worth it. Even when we understand this classical theodicy that makes so much sense, we get a gnawing feeling that maybe the cost is too great, even if God did pay the major share on Calvary.

The book of Job reveals also the way out of this final doubt that God can be justified for the world as it is. God is also free, and better yet He is sovereign. This means He can guarantee that His will can be ultimately accomplished, and the history of man will end as the story of Job ends, with victory over evil. P. T. Forsythe said, "To justify God is the best and deepest way to fortify men." This is what theodicy does. It shows us that God is not the cause of evil, but He is the cause of victory over evil. Job is a comedy, for in spite of all the tragedy, it has a happy ending. So life is a comedy. No matter how tragic life becomes because of freedom, God will make sure that evil will be overcome, and all its victories will be temporary.

#### **4. GOOD AND EVIL Based on Gen. 3:6**

**When Victor Hugo was at what seemed to be the height of his fame he came into disfavor with Napoleon III and was exiled for 19 years. It was only natural that Hugo would consider this as pure tragedy, but his immediate judgment was wrong. During those years he wrote far superior books, and he became twice the man he had been before. The day actually came when Hugo looked at that seemingly unhappy event and exclaimed, "Why was I not exiled before?" The evil that befell him actually resulted in a greater good.**

**It may seem ridiculous to suggest that man's fall and exile has also resulted in a greater good, but let me suggest it anyway. Biblical theology would seem to demand this conclusion, for we know that God is sovereign, and that in spite of his giving to man a free will, He will not end up when history is over with less than what He began with. God could allow the possibility of evil just because He is able to bring good out of it. Let us not get the impression that the fall was good. It was not, but it was a very definite and tragic evil. The point is, God is in control and permits only that evil to be possible out of which He can bring good.**

**It is often of small comfort in a tragic situation to say it could be worse, but it is of great comfort at the point of the fall of man. In one of Shakespeare's plays a character is made to say, "And when he falls, he falls like Lucifer, never to hope again." This is exactly what did not happen in the fall of Adam and Eve. They did not fall as Satan did. He fell by his own choice to defy God, but they were tempted by external persuasion. Therefore, their fall was not final, but rather was one where God has plans to restore them to a state of perfection. Without the fall we would not have a Savior, and however pleasant our life would be, it would be less than what we have ahead in eternity**

**because of what Jesus accomplished for us.**

**All this amounts to is the logical conclusion we must come to as Christians because of our rejection of Dualism. We believe that God alone is sovereign, and He is the creator of all. We do not believe that there are two ultimate beings as the ancient Persians and Gnostics believed, with one being good and the other evil. We believe in a limited dualism in which light and darkness battle one another with Christ leading the forces of light and Satan the forces of darkness. We believe the evil forces had a beginning, and that they will have an end in defeat.**

**Evil we say is dependent upon the good for its very existence. Good can exist alone, but evil must have the presence of good to exist, for evil can have no meaning except by contrast to a standard of good. It would be impossible to ever do a thing in the wrong way if there was no right way to do it. But one could do it the right way even if it were impossible to do it wrong. Let me illustrate. Suppose you have a puzzle all together except for one piece of a very odd shape. There is only one right way for that piece to go in. It is just because there is a right way for it to fit that it is possible to try many wrong ways. You can hold it several different ways and turn it over before you finally hit the right way. All the wrong ways can only exist because of there being a right way. If there was no right way for it to fit, there would be no wrong ways, for anyway would do. Wrongness is dependant upon rightness for its very existence.**

**God and good are supreme and ultimate, but Satan and evil are temporary intruders. This is confirmed by the record we have here of the entrance of evil into the world. It got in by the misuse of that which was good, and thereby established the basic nature of evil as being the striving for a good by the wrong means. In other words, just as God can bring good out of evil, so Satan can bring evil out of good.**



**C. S. Lewis said, "Badness is only spoiled goodness." If you examine any sin you will discover that some good is always the foundation of it. This is why sin is often so appealing. It appears to offer so much good. The greater the good involved, however, the greater the sin. If sex perversions are high on the list of sins, it is only because normal sex experience is so high on the list of God's blessings.**

**If bigotry is such a despised attitude, it is because conviction is such an honorable attitude. In other words, evil is basically a perverted good. Take orthodoxy for example, which means being sound and right in your beliefs. None can doubt that this is a good, and yet it has been the cause of so much evil because of its being converted and made an end in itself. Mark Guy Pearce writes, "Look back over the ages so far as we have any record of the world's religious history. We shall find that the cruelest thing that ever came into God's world is religion without love. It has kindled more fires for the burning of martyrs, it has invented more diabolical torches, it has wrought more dire and dreadful suffering, than wars and strong drink put together.**

**Jesus as the risen and reigning king said to the church of Ephesus that it was good that they tested men and found them to be false apostles. It was good that they were orthodox, but they had left their first love. He warned them that if they did not return to that love all their orthodoxy would be for naught, and he would remove their candlestick from its place. Christ stands squarely behind Paul's statement that though one has no knowledge and faith enough to remove mountains, but has not love, he is nothing. Jesus says by His rebuke to this church, and it is backed up by all of Scripture, and the pages of history reecho it that the end does not justify the means. No end however good, even that of being orthodox, can be attained or maintained by means inconsistent with love. If it is, the good is perverted and becomes an evil. The point that we need to grasp is**

**that any good is the source of potential evil, for evil can only exist by perverting a good. This calls for constant examination and renewed commitment lest we be subtly led into sin in our very pursuit of the good.**

**This is what happened to Eve. God had made everything good, and there was nothing that was bad or evil on earth. The only possible way Satan could introduce evil into the world would be by some misuse of what was good. The paradox of the fall is that good surrounds it completely. C. Vaughn said, "The fall is a greater mystery than the redemption." We have been studying the cleverness of Satan in getting Eve to fall, and we have seen that Satan has used truth as one of his instruments of deception. Satan could not succeed without using good for his evil goal. We see Satan using wisdom and truth to deceive Eve into disobedience. Now as we look at the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which has by Satan's subtlety become the object of Eve's attention, we discover again that good is the only thing we can see, and that is all that Eve saw as well.**

**1. First she saw-The tree was good for food. God had made all things good, and this included the fruit of the forbidden tree. It did not just look good, it really was good for food. The only possible way evil could arise out of seeking this good food would be by gaining it in a way out of harmony with God's will. That is exactly what happened. We see, however, that the good itself was good. It was only the means to get it that made it evil. Satan's success was in getting her to gain a good by an evil means.**

**God was the author of taste, beauty, and desire for wisdom, and all of these are good. It is not an evil to desire good food, but it is natural and good. All of these good factors combined to produce an evil simply because they were directed toward a good but forbidden goal. Any good that has to be gained by disobeying God is a good out**

**of which evil will come. To desire such a good when you know it cannot be gained in God's will is an evil lust. Desire is not wrong, but a lust for that which is forbidden is a desire that has gone out of God's will.**

**It was Eve's lust for the good fruit that led to the fall. Someone wrote, "Eve, with all the fruits of Eden blest, save only one, rather than leave that one unknown lost all the rest." Martin Luther wrote, "How rich a God is our God! He gives enough, but we do not heed this. He gave Adam the whole world, and that was nothing. He was only concerned about the one tree he had to ask why God had forbidden him to eat of it. So it is today. In his revealed word God has given us enough to learn. We leave that alone and search into His secret will, and yet we fail to learn it. It serves us right if we perish through such conduct." What greater folly can there be than to forsake the abundance of God's blessings and go in pursuit of what He has forbidden? The forbidden fruit was good for food, but then so was every other piece of fruit in the garden. Beware of being duped into pursuing anything just because it is good, for a good pursued out of God's will is an evil.**

**2. It was a delight to the eyes. Certainly no one would call aesthetics evil. That means the enjoyment of beauty. Beauty is God's doing, and so also is the love of beauty in the heart of man. Yet this good can also be used to draw us into the snare in gaining the good by a wrong means. Had the tree been ugly, and the fruit unappealing, and half rotten, the chances of the temptation succeeding would have been slim indeed. Evil we see again can only succeed when it has a good foundation on which to build. It cannot stand alone. It can only enter where a good standard is established. Adam and Eve could never have been tricked into doing an evil in itself. The only hope for evil to succeed was by using the good. It is still Satan's most effective means to get people to fall. If he can get us to focus our eyes on a good**

**goal that must be gained by disobedience to God, he has a good chance of getting us to go ahead. We are prone to persuade ourselves that as long as the goal is good the means do not matter.**

**Many have fallen where they never expected they could simply because they continued to gaze at the forbidden. The poet has said,**

**The ill we deem we ne'er could do, in thought we dramatize;  
What we should loathe, we learn to scan with speculative eyes.  
Alas! For ignorance profound of our poor nature's bent!  
The weakened sympathy with wrong becomes the will's consent.**

**All that glitters is not gold, and all that is beautiful is not thereby approved of by God. Joseph Parker said, "A beautiful gate it is that opens upon ruin! It is well-shaped, well-painted, and the word welcome illuminates it in vivid letters." We need to be fully conscience that evil's best tools are the good, the true and the beautiful. Spurgeon said that the serpent probably got Eve fascinated with it so that she liked it the most of all the creatures. To her it was beautiful and something to be treasured. Satan often uses beauty to lead us astray. These are three values that all men desire. People who think sin is always ugly and awful are usually very fine respectable people who will never be saved, for they do not believe they are sinners. We must be ever aware that evil is basically perverted good, for only then can we spot the sins that trap us when we think we are being righteous.**

**3. To be desired to make one wise. God certainly expected man to use the brain He gave him, and to grow wise is good. Eve desired to be wise and her hunger for knowledge was not evil. We see that a good was the object and goal, which was made to bring about man's fall. She had three good reasons to justify her act of eating. If she put all arguments for and against down in writing, there would only be one**

**against it and three for it. This shows us the quantity of arguments is not a valid basis. No number of arguments weigh anything in the scale of decision when God's command is against it.**

**Eve let 3 good goals tip the scale, and she chose to go against God's command. Our interest in this message is to stress the fact that evil could not succeed without the help of the good. Good is the foundation of evil, and without it evil cannot exist. This shows us that good is the original and evil is an intruder. All evil is a perversion of some good in God's totally good universe. One day the perverted will be destroyed, and all his perversions, and all will be good again. Meanwhile we need to grow in our discerning of good and evil that we might not be led into evil by way of the good, but that we might overcome evil with good.**

## **5. GOOD AND EVIL II Based on Gen. 3:22-24**

**Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Pretty much all the honest truth-telling there is in the world is done by children." This does not mean, however, that their truth telling is always pleasant. Especially if you have guests, or if you are like the Sunday School teacher who asked too many questions. One Sunday she told the story of the Good Samaritan, and she made it very vivid so the children could realize clearly what had happened. Then she asked, "If you saw a person lying on the roadside all wounded and bleeding what would you do?" A thoughtful little girl broke the hushed silence and said, "I think I'd throw up."**

**The truth is not only not always pleasant, but it can even be used to promote evil. William Blake wrote, "A truth that's told with bad intent beats all the lies you can invent." Satan is the father of lies, but**

he reveals right from the start that he recognizes that truth can often be even more effective than lies in accomplishing his purpose. If you think the devil never tells the truth, then you have not read Gen. 3 very closely. In verse 5 the subtle serpent tells Eve that when she eats of the forbidden fruit her eyes will be opened, and she will be like God knowing good and evil. No one can call this statement a lie without also accusing God, for in verse 22 God says the serpent's prophecy was literally fulfilled, and man did become like God knowing good and evil. Satan is not fussy. If the truth can be used to get men to disobey God, why bother inventing lies?

Truth is never an adequate reason to justify disobedience to God's revealed will. Satan will use the truth and nothing but the truth, and he will offer you the very best if he can persuade you to get it by disobeying God. Just because something is new does not mean that it is right, or that it is God's will. Adam and Eve assumed that if they could become more like God by disobeying God it must be the right thing to do. They got a good thing, but they paid too great a price, when by obedience they would have gotten not only the knowledge of good and evil, but eternal life as well. There is no doubt that God intended Adam and Eve to eat of both the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but it was to be only in His good time. This seems clear if we look closely at God's words in verse 22. These are really quite startling words, and they have led to some very radical developments in the history of theology.

God says, "Behold the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil." Many have looked at these words and said that it doesn't sound like a fall, but rather a rise. Man's first sin made him more like God than he was when he was innocent. That is an improvement, and it made man greater than he was before. Fallen man is more divine than innocent man, and so the fall must have been good. Many conclude that God intended man to fall just because it

**was the way for Him to become more godlike. They do not see tragedy in man's fall, but rather the beginning of the struggle of man to climb to the heights of perfection. What they are failing to see, however, is the fact that man got this good by disobedience, and so fell from a perfect relationship to God. It is true that eating of the forbidden fruit made them more godlike, and that is why it is reasonable to believe that God would have let them eat of it eventually after they had proven their loyalty to Him.**

**When God finished creation He said that all was good. That included the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree was not evil, nor was it bad to have the knowledge of good and evil. God has it, and no one can be like God without it. Animals do not have it, and so they are not moral beings. Man does have this knowledge and is a moral being, and is responsible for choosing good and avoiding evil. The Bible refers to the knowledge of good and evil as a precious gift. God admits here that it is a quality of His own nature, and so to have it is to partake of the divine nature. In I Kings 3:9 Solomon prays, "Give thy servant therefore an understanding mind to govern thy people, that I may discern between good and evil." In II Sam. 14:17 it is said of David, "...my lord the king is like the angel of God to discern good and evil."**

**If it was a good thing to have it, and if it made man like the angels of heaven and like God himself, why then did God not want them to live forever, and, therefore, put them out of the garden? The answer is really quite obvious. If man lives forever with the knowledge of good and evil, but with a will that is not committed to good and loyalty to God, he will be an eternal rebel. God already has eternal rebels in Satan and his fallen angels. He does not intend to allow man to become like them, and so His act of expelling them from the garden is an act of great mercy. If He allowed them to stay and eat and live forever, He would be condemning them to eternal separation from**

**himself. But if He cast them out to die as mortal, He can provide a way of redeeming them and bringing them back into fellowship with himself. This way He can give them eternal life and win an ultimate victory over Satan.**

**God's plan is not to have men who are living forever, but to have men who are living forever in fellowship with Him. A Christ like person can have the knowledge of good and evil, but chose to follow the good. If we were Adam like for all eternity, there would be guarantee that we wouldn't sometime chose evil and fall all over again. In order to achieve the best God had to prevent man from eating of the tree of life until after he was made completely like Christ. When we become like Him in eternity there will be no more chance of our disobeying God than there was of Christ disobeying. He had the knowledge of good and evil, but He always chose the good.**

**Death with the hope of eternal blessedness is certainly a better plan than eternal life with a sinful nature. Satan is an example of everlasting evilness. If God had not prevented it Adam could have become another Satan. Physical death was a blessing in comparison to eternal spiritual death of separation from God. What we have here then is God's grace in action. It may look cruel, but it is pure grace. Man was losing Eden so that God could redeem him and restore him to an even greater paradise. The devil can never die, but he is doomed forever. We can die, but we can also be delivered and live with God forever. Death was not the worst fate man could have had. The worst fate would be eternal life with a sinful nature.**

**Thank God for forcing man out of Eden. This was the greatest eviction that ever took place, and because of it we all can have the hope of returning to paradise through Jesus Christ. God did not destroy the tree of life. He just made sure that sinful man could not partake of it. In verse 23 we see God sending them out to labor in the**



**ground from which they were taken, and to which they would return. They were driven out to die, for only those who can die can be resurrected and restored to perfection. When the angels fell God cast them into hell to await the judgment, but man is not put in a place of torment, but in a place of toil, and with a promise of deliverance.**

**Verse 24 uses stronger language and says that God drove them out. As tragic as the lost was men read too much into it. Some poet wrote,**

**One morning of the first sad fall,  
Poor Adam and his bride  
Sat in the shade of Eden's wall-  
But on the outer side.**

**This was true, and the lost was real, but to add to this that they lost their relationship and fellowship with God is not true, for the next chapter goes on to show that they worshipped God and thank Him for blessings, and they offered sacrifice to Him. There is no comparison between the fall of angels and the fall of man. They fell from within, but men fell because of outside pressure, and so there was a radical difference in the nature of their fall, and in the nature of their judgment.**

**God shut the gate of paradise to Adam, but the Second Adam opened it again on the cross, and the very day of His death He promised a sinner that He would enter with Him into paradise. The closed gate with the flaming sword of the angel guarding it is no longer the true picture. Now Jesus stands at the gate inviting all to trust Him and enter in. It was a terrifying experience for Adam and Eve, for the cherubim were frightening looking creatures. They were not cute little baby angels as the artist portray them, but they were great and dreadful creatures that would frighten anyone. Adam would have**

**tried climbing over the gate at night to get a bite of that life-giving fruit if he was not scared to death of that cherubim. There is no way back to eternal life unless God takes away this awesome guard.**

**The New Testament Gospel is the good news that this guard is gone. Jesus now stands before the tree of life, and He now offers man the chance to freely partake of the tree and live forever. They need simply to yield to His Lordship and accept His atonement for the cleansing of their sin. Christians need to let the world know that the gate to paradise and eternal life is now open.**

## **6. A SIMPLE SOLUTION TO SUFFERING Based on John 9:1-23**

**One of the good things to come out of suffering is this: It forces those who cannot see any sense in it to grapple with the mystery, and strive to squeeze some meaning out of it. Almost everyone who writes on suffering does so out of their own personal encounter with this mysterious monster. In the book *When It Hurts Too Much To Cry*, Jerry Fallwell begins with this account. He tells of Clifford who left his good paying job to come to Lynchburg to study for the ministry. He had a wife and two small sons. He was an excellent student, and Fallwell was proud to have such a caliber of man in his school.**

**One Saturday night just after Cliff had finished with family devotions someone fired a shotgun through the living room window and Cliff was killed instantly. Fallwell arrived in a few minutes to see the most senseless thing he had ever witnessed, and he could not help but question God, and wonder why He would allow such a terrible thing to happen. He gave it a great deal of thought, and the only conclusion he could come to was that it is an unsolvable mystery with**

**no sense whatever on any level known to man. In the light of this tragedy he rebukes those who deal with suffering superficially. He writes, "I think Christian leaders often do their people a disservice when they spout glib and shallow cliches to people going through some of these dark experiences!"**

**There are many people who do this. He has had others in this same category. One of their fine students was going home and picked up a hitchhiker. The student was killed and dragged into the woods where his body was found. He has other horror stories as well, but the point is, you cannot look at the victims of serious suffering and not ask the question why? The disciples of Jesus could not help but wonder when they saw a man who had been blind from birth-why? Why would any man have to enter the world never to see it? Why is there such meaningless suffering? It is the most simple question to ask, but unfortunately, the answer is not so simple.**

**The disciples see no profound complexity in the situation. They are confident they have narrowed down the answer to one of two alternatives. Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind? Jesus could have taken either, and they would have been satisfied, but instead, he took neither, and said it was not personal or parental sin that caused this suffering. Jesus through a monkey wrench of complexity into their simple solution to the problem of suffering, and by so doing he taught them, and teaches us, one of the most important principles we can learn on the subject of suffering. The principle is this:**

## **I. SIMPLE SOLUTIONS TO SUFFERING ARE SUPERFICIAL.**

**Show me a simple solution to the problem of suffering, and I will show you a heresy that will fit neither the revelation of God, nor the experience of man. Simple solutions are none the less the most**

popular and widely held by the intelligent and ignorant alike. Here are the disciples of Christ who are hand picked by the Master Himself, and they view suffering with the same old worn out theory held by the friends of Job. They assume that such a terrible fate as being born blind had to be the result of somebody's sin. It was so logical and obvious to them that they did not even see the cruelty of it. They are asking, who is guilty for such an awful thing: His parents or himself. In other words, who do we blame when this horrible reality. What kind of parents must they have been to give birth to such a monstrosity as a blind baby? Or what kind of a low life scoundrel must he be that God would punish him at birth for the sins he foresaw that he would commit?

I hope the disciples at least asked their question out of ear shot of this poor blind man, for there are very few things more cruel than to make suffering people feel guilty for their own suffering. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament reject this theory to account for suffering, and it is superficial, but it is still often promoted. Fallwell tells of his personal friends Dr. and Mrs. Rudy Holland who discovered their young son had a brain tumor. Surgery removed it, but 11 months later it returned. This time it was much larger and inoperable. They were told their son had less than a year to live. They heard of a new technique developed at Boston Children's Hospital, and they took their son there. The surgery led to all kinds of complications, and he was in the hospital for months. He did eventually come home but was kept alive by synthetic hormones. Then a cyst that had formed ruptured, and he was in a coma for 32 days. After being out of it for a month he lapsed into it for another month. He lost most of his memory and was going blind. Fallwell says that you can't put into words the kind of suffering this family had to endure. Imagine the cruelty of trying to figure out whose sin it is they are suffering for.

**We want life to be simple, and we want to have easy answers that give meaning to life. We want life to be black and white where the good guys are escaping suffering, and the bad guys are getting their due reward of judgment. If life was only like the movies, but it is not, and often the real life story has the bad guys getting by with murder, and the good guys being the ones getting murdered. So it was with Able, John the Baptist, Stephen, and on and on. Simple answers are not always false, but they are so often foolish and cruel when applied to specific situations.**

**Do people go blind because they mix up a pile of gun powder and then light it? Of course they do. Do they go blind because they stare at the Sun too long? Yes they do. People go blind for all kinds of foolish things they do. They cause their blindness by the choices they make. But to take what we know to be true and make it the truth, and apply it to every blind person, is to be cruel. If we see a blind child and say, I wonder what stupid thing this kid did to become blind, then we are the ones being foolish. There are hundreds of reasons for why people are blind. Those who assume that there is only one reason, and that is that they did something evil or stupid, are a part of the problem in the suffering of the world.**

**Simple answers are convenient, but they are often worthless or cruel. Harold Kushner in his book When Bad Things Happen To Good People writes, "I once read of an Iranian folk proverb, ' If you see a blind man, kick him; why should you be kinder than God?' In other words, if you see someone who is suffering, you must believe that he deserves his fate and that God wants him to suffer. Therefore, put yourself on God's side by shunning Him or humiliating Him further. If you try to help him, you will be going against God's justice." It is simple solutions like this that make so many religious people cruel and without compassion.**

**It is true that many people become stronger through their suffering, and they become great examples of how it can strengthen character. But it is a major mistake to try and apply this to somebody else's tragedy. If a family just hears that their teenage daughter has been killed in an auto accident, and you try to comfort them by saying God wants to make you stronger, you are being cruel. You have no business trying to interpret other people's suffering. If they ask you for an opinion, you can share your theory, and they can take it or leave it, but to impose your unasked interpretation on people based on ignorance is to be a part of the problem. It is as foolish and superficial as someone standing at the cross asking, who did sin, this man or his parents that he should meet with such a violent end? This question might fit the two thieves for they were suffering as a direct result of their crimes, but Jesus was innocent. You can say that two out of three ain't bad, but it is bad when you apply a simple solution to a situation where it is superficial and does not fit the facts.**

**This was just what the friends of Job were doing for days, and they were making his life miserable, and they were completely wrong. Now the disciples are doing the same things with this poor blind man. They were not so cruel as Job's friends, for they did not spend days rubbing his nose in it, and making him feel guilty. But they believed the same simple falsehood that all suffering is connected with specific sin. Old errors die hard, if they ever die at all. They usually become so ingrained in the minds of people that even after they are rejected they continue to affect the attitudes.**

**The book of Job ends with God's rejection of Job's friends simple solution to his suffering. It would have ended with God's judgment on the friends had Job not interceded on their behalf. God was angry with their superficiality which they so dogmatically defended. Now we are seeing history repeating itself in our text. Jesus is again rejecting the simple solution to specific suffering by saying it has no connection**

with any specific sin in the sufferer or his parents. By doing this Jesus shut down the number one most popular explanation for suffering of all time. The vast majority of the human race has always clung to this simple explanation of suffering, that it is the punishment for sin. Let's consider why-

## **II. THE SIMPLE SOLUTION IS SO SUCCESSFUL.**

The reason for its popularity is its simplicity. It basically eliminates the problem of suffering altogether. If all suffering is a result of the sin of the one suffering, then where is the problem? All is as it should be, and justice is being done, and all is fair. Everybody is reaping what they have sown. Life is no mystery at all, but is perfectly sensible and orderly.

That is why billions cling to the doctrine of reincarnation. It is the simple solution to suffering perfected in a system. All that seems unjust and unfair when innocent people suffer is easily explained. They are suffering for sin in a previous life, and so there is no problem. Every miserable situation you can imagine can be accepted by these people, for even though they may be innocent babies who are suffering, it all makes sense because they were sinful scoundrels in their previous life, and their present tragedy is just what they deserve.

The simple solution allows people to live in the midst of horrible suffering and feel no guilt when they don't lift a finger to help relieve the pain, because everything is really just as it ought to be, for suffering is the just punishment for sin. The simple solution eliminates all mystery. There is nothing to wonder about and question, except maybe, is it the sufferers sin or the parents sin that is being punished? In other words, the simple solution is a denial of the problem of suffering. There is no problem because there is no such thing as

**innocent suffering. Once you eliminate the whole concept of innocent, unjust, and unfair suffering you have, in essence, eliminated evil.**

**The one thing all simple solutions to suffering have in common is that they deny the reality of evil. Like Christian Science they conclude that evil is just the result of the wrong way of looking at reality. If we look at it properly, they say there is no evil. Evil is an error of the mind. Christians fall into the same trap when they try to justify all suffering by quoting Rom. 8:28 and say, "All things work together for good." They imply by that that all things are good, and do not stop to realize that what they are doing is denying the reality of evil. If all things are really good, then there is no such thing as evil. This is pure heresy along with all the other simple solutions to suffering. It calls evil good, and makes a mockery of all the suffering innocent people have to do.**

**This theory makes it good for Judas to betray Jesus; good for Christian men to have affairs; good for people to drink and drive killing innocent people, and on and on we could go calling all evil good. This, of course, will not stand up in the court of reality. Evil is real, and the innocent do suffer, and there is no way to call it good. Rom. 8:28 is not saying that all is good. It is saying that God will not abandon us to evil, but will in every situation, even the most evil, work with us for good. But no matter what good comes out of the evil, it does not justify the evil. Any theory that rejects the reality of evil is not biblically valid, and that is what all simple solutions to suffering do.**

**What we need to see is that because something is true, it does not mean it is the truth. This is what leads every simple solution to the level of heresy. It is a partial truth exalted to the level of an absolute where it becomes a falsehood. It is obvious that there is much truth to the idea that sin leads to suffering. Adam and Eve lost paradise, and**



**began the suffering of the human race because of their sin and violation of the will of God. There is no end to examples of how sin leads to suffering. This simple solution, however, breaks down very quickly when we see Abel being murdered by Cain. All of the sudden we see the good guy dying while the bad guy lives. Now we have innocent suffering, and the mystery of suffering begins. Abel did not die because of his sin, but because of Cain's jealousy. It was not good, but evil, and it happened to a righteous man, and God did not stop it or prevent it. The Bible very quickly thrusts us into the problem of suffering, and just as quickly rejects the simple solution to suffering.**

**The greatest sufferer of all time was Jesus, and He was sinless. He was the only truly innocent sufferer whoever lived. He suffered completely because of the sins of others. John the Baptist was the greatest born of woman in the Old Testament, but he was still a sinner. But who would have the audacity to say he was beheaded in his 30's by Herod because he deserved it? He died because of the sin of others in their opposition to righteousness. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was also a young man and a righteous man. He was still a sinner, but who would dare suggest that he was allowed to be stoned by God because of sin in his life? This tragedy had nothing to do with Stephen's sin. Maybe he did lose his tempter that week, and maybe he had a struggle with envy or lust, or any number of sins, but nothing could be more superficial than to suggest that his suffering and death had anything to do with his personal sin.**

**The most popular solution to suffering of all time fails to make any sense in these and millions of other situations. You will find it still believed in high places, however. The minds of the Apostles were sold on it until Jesus set them straight. Jesus said the blind man was not blind because of his sin or the sin of his parents, but that the work of God might be made manifest in his life. What a shock this was to the disciples. Here was a man who was not sinless, but his sin had nothing**

to do with his blindness. This is true of most people who are blind, and most people who have any disease, handicap, or affliction. The reason we have compassion on these people in Christian lands is because we have rejected the idea that people suffer because of their sin. We recognize that they are victims of evil, and do not deserve their suffering. If they did deserve it, then all of our Christian compassion that tries to relieve their suffering would be putting us in opposition to God's will.

This being the case, we need to reject another major false concept that grows out of the simple solution of suffering. If all suffering is due to sin, then it follows that the innocent will not suffer. If all suffering is the deserved punishment for sin, there will be no suffering on the part of those who do not deserve it. In other words, the simple solution promises freedom from suffering to the innocent and the righteous. This is the very thing which the Bible does not promise. The simple solution denies the reality of evil, and that the innocent suffer. The Bible, however, reveals that much suffering is unjust and unfair. Peter preaches the Gospel and 3,000 souls come to Christ. Stephen preaches the same Gospel and 3,000 stones come flying at him to knock the life out of him. One gets souls, and the other gets stones. There is nothing fair about this. Many innocent people suffer the pains of life and do recover, but many do not, and the simple solution does not deal with this aspect of reality. It ignores it, and that is why it is so superficial. It is blind to unjust and innocent suffering.

The Bible does not ignore this reality. It makes it clear that this will be a major battle of life. God does not promise that life will be fair. In fact, He promises that it will be very unfair because of the power of evil. All He promises is that He will be fair, and that those who endure the unjust suffering of life will be greatly rewarded. Jesus says we can even be glad and rejoice in unjust suffering for we know that our reward in heaven will be great. Jesus prepared his disciples to expect

**to suffer for being righteous. It was just the opposite of the simple solution that relates suffering to sin. He said much suffering will be related to not sinning, and they will be persecuted because of their being godly and not going along with the unholiness of the world. All through history Christians have had to suffer just for being what God wanted them to be.**

**Christians have come to believe that they have some kind of promise to be protected from the trials and tragedies of life. This view leads to rebellion and rejection of God when it is proven false by serious suffering. A mother who lost a son in battle wrote this to her pastor. "I never intend to step inside a church again. It has failed me. It has lied to me. It has taught me to believe that God would take care of my boy and bring him back in safety as I prayed. I have prayed. My boy is dead. What do you have to say to me now? I hate God. He cannot be trusted." This has happened to millions of people who have swallowed the simple solution to suffering. They believe that only the sinful will suffer. The innocent and godly will escape suffering. When reality comes crashing in on them they blame God. Their false ideas of God lead them to be angry at God when they should be angry at themselves for neglecting to read everything God has revealed in His Word, which is a promise that in this world you will suffer.**

**The simple solution to suffering has created more atheists than any other tool of the devil that I am aware of. You read the works of the great unbelievers, and you find that the god they are angry at is the god that is created by the false and superficial ideas of suffering. When this spider web of theory cannot hold the weight of reality, they reject God for not keeping promises He never made. A good portion of the world's suffering is caused by this simple solution to suffering. People believe it is the truth, and when it turns out to be a lie they blame God. Mark Twain wrote a whole book blaming God for the rotten things in this world. He was raised to believe that God would**

**not allow bad things to happen to good people. When he grew up and saw it wasn't so, he rejected God. Nobody had any right to give that false concept of God to any child. It is a lie, and it will lead to the rejection of God who is the only ultimate answer to the problem of suffering.**

**False ideas about suffering are the cause of much suffering. I agree with J. B. Philips who wrote about the false idea that godly people will not suffer. He writes, "It seems to me that a great deal of misunderstanding and mental suffering could be avoided if this erroneous idea were exposed and abandoned. How many people who fall sickly say, either openly or to themselves, "Why should this happen to me? I've always lived a decent life."**

**"There are even people who feel that God has somehow broken His side of the bargain in allowing illness or misfortune to come upon them. But what is the bargain? If we regard the New Testament as our authority, we shall find no such arrangement being offered to those who open their lives to the living Spirit of God. They are indeed guaranteed that nothing, not even the bitterest persecution, the worst misfortune, the death of the body, can do them any permanent harm or separate them from the love of God. They are promised that no circumstance of earthly life can defeat them in spirit and that the resources of God are always available for them. Further, they have the assurance that the ultimate purpose of God can never be defeated. But the idea that if a man pleases God then God will especially shield him belongs to the dim twilight religion and not to Christianity at all."**

**The fact is, the godly often suffer even more than the ungodly. The poet put it,**

**The rain falls on the just and unjust fella,  
And sometimes more on the just, for the unjust**

**Steals the just's umbrella.**

**There is no promise that life will be fair, but only that God will. Jesus says in Luke 21:16-17, "You will be betrayed by parents, brothers, relatives and friends and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me." That is not much of a promise of a fair life. But then in the next verse Jesus says, "But not a hair of your head will parish." This is His way of saying that its an unfair world, and unjust suffering is inevitable, but in God's ultimate plan no child of His will lose one minute thing because of the power of evil.**

**Jesus says in John 16:2, "A time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God." Jesus did not hold back any punches. He told His disciples there were no guarantees that they would escape anything by following Him. He ends the chapter by saying in verse 33, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Jesus was so realistic about life, and that is why He promised trouble. But He was also reassuring, for He promised final victory and present peace in Him.**

**Paul was a great sufferer of all kinds of unjust pain, and it was not because of sin, but because he was a servant of Christ. He writes in II Cor. 11:23-29 that he was in prison frequently, had been flogged often, been exposed to death many times, received whippings, and was beaten with rods, once was stoned, three times shipwrecked, and suffered frequent dangers and pressures. Who sinned, was it Paul or his parents that he should have to suffer so much pain? The simple solution to suffering will gladly accept either alternative just as long as sin is the cause of his suffering. The biblical answer, however, is like the answer of Jesus concerning the blind man. The answer he gave is neither. Paul's suffering was unfair and unjust, and not punishment for sin. It was the price he paid to do the will of God in taking the**

**good news of salvation to a lost world.**

**Are we to conclude that suffering is not due to sin, but instead due to being an opponent to sin, as Paul was? Not at all, for this would be to replace one simple solution with another, and when it comes to suffering all simple solutions are superficial.**

## **7. ACCIDENTAL SUFFERING Based on Acts 20:7-12**

**The Chernobyl nuclear accident in Russia was one of the most headline grabbing events of the 20th century. But what we do not realize is that many accidents are not spectacular explosions, fiery crashes, or powerful events of violence. There are also very silent accidents which are equally deadly. For example, back in 1983 two employees at a hospital were clearing out a warehouse where a worn out cancer therapy machine had been collecting dust for 6 years. They had no idea that in the case of this machine were 6,000 pellets of radioactive cobalt. They sold it for scrap metal for \$10.00. Some of these pellets fell out into the truck they used to carry it to the junk yard. At the junk yard the pellets were scattered all over the place as the magic picked it up and dumped it in a pile. These 6,000 pellets were mixed with metal that was sent out to a company that made legs for tables in fast food restaurants. Others found their way into metal rods to reinforce concrete.**

**Nobody was even aware that a dangerous accident was in progress, for there was no noise or explosion. Many people, however, were being exposed to high levels of radioactivity. It was not until a truck carrying a load of this radioactive material pulled into a government project that anybody became aware. Radioactive detectors set off alarms, and the Nuclear Safety Commission immediately went into**

**action to trace these rods back to that junk yard. Then they had to trace where all the scrap had gone. They closed down the leg making factory, and they found the truck that delivered the machine in the first place. It was very hot, and it was hauled away, but research learned that up to 200 people could have touched it or been near enough to be exposed.**

**2,500 table bases had to be returned from 40 states. People eating at these tables were getting the equivalent of a one hour lung x-ray. The hottest legs of all were found in a downtown Chicago hotel. The point is, there was no big exposition by which to identify this accident, or series of accidents. It was quiet and not dramatic, and so there was no way to trace how many people were affected by it. Nobody was doing anything evil to cause this accident. The two men who started it all were acting in ignorance with no intent to harm anyone. Yet they may have done harm to thousands of people.**

**In this message we are looking at two other men who were involved in an ancient accident that only temporarily left one of them dead, but we can see that though the scale is smaller the same principles are at work. A study of them will help us better understand the causes and cures for suffering in the world. There is only one permanent cure for the suffering of any person, and that is to get a body that is no longer subject to pain and death. The only way to get such a body is by faith in the risen Christ who died and rose again that all who trust Him might have just such bodies that will live with Him forever. But until that day of total victory over all suffering there are millions of pains we are to strive to prevent in time. The only way we can be effective in preventing suffering is to keep learning more and more about the causes. That is what the study of all branches of medicine is about. If you find the cause for suffering, you have a good start toward conquering it or preventing it.**

**Let's look at this accidental death of a New Testament teenager and see what we can learn about the cause and cure of suffering. Keep in mind that this account is being written by Dr. Luke who is an eye witness of the event. Dr. Luke is not being super spiritual here at all by writing such things like: It must have been the will of God, or demons made it happen. He takes the very scientific approach that says there were perfectly logical and natural causes for this accident. If it was planned by God or Satan it would not have been an accident, but there is no hint that this event was intended by anyone. All accidents have causes, however, and Dr. Luke gives us an excellent diagnosis of the causes of this particular accident. We want to look at it through the doctor's eyes, and see his account of the cause, and by inference, his prescription for the cure. First look at-**

## **I. THE DESCRIPTION OF THE CAUSE.**

**Dr. Luke describes two basic causes for this accident which fits the majority of accidents in life. The two are circumstances and choices. For example, look at the circumstances. It was a pressure situation because of time. Verse 7 says that because Paul had to leave the next day he went on talking till midnight. When you have a lot to get done, and very little time to do it, you are in a high risk environment. It is a perfect setting for miscalculation and poor judgment. I reflect on times I have cut myself, and most, if not all, were due to being in a hurry. Speed kills and injures millions.**

**In our case study here Paul was not doing anything too fast, but because of the time factor he was trying to do too much in his limited time. The result was that he did not know he was literally boring part of his audience to death. It is a speaker's job to talk, and the audience's job to listen, but sometimes the audience finishes their job before the speaker. I do not know if any of us have had to listen to a speaker until midnight, but most of us can sympathize with Eutychus.**



**I have had to endure the suffering inflicted by a speaker who could not find the terminal. I have not only struggled with sleepiness, but with whether or not I should just leave. Eutychus did both. He went to sleep, and he left by way of the window. The going to sleep was not serious, but the unconscious exit from a third story window was a radical remedy to his dilemma. But the point is, it never would have happened had Paul ended his message at 11:30. Dr. Luke makes this clear in verse 9 where he says that Eutychus sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. Dr. Luke is describing a scene of endurance. He implies that Paul was being excessive in his speech. He hints that he too may have been eager to hear Paul's amen.**

**Eutychus had gotten himself into a situation where he was a captive of somebody else's agenda. But let's notice that the circumstances alone did not cause this accidental death. There were also choices that were made by the people involved, and they were the primary causes of this suffering. Paul made the choice to push his audience to the limit of their endurance. Eutychus made the choice of setting in an open window to listen. Here is the crucial choice, and the primary cause of the accident.**

**Others may have been sleeping too, but they were safely snoozing away on the floor or some piece of furniture. A little girl once told the preacher that she went to sleep during his sermon and had the most wonderful dream. She meant it as a complement. Sleeping in church is not always dangerous. Ben Kenchlow of the 700 club tells of his church sleeping in his book Plain Bread. He went to a Catholic school as a boy, and every morning at chapel he noticed one of the sisters kneeling with her elbow on the pew in front, and her head down in her arms. He decided to copy her.**

**He writes, "I soon realized her very worshipful posture was conducive to dozing, and one morning shortly after that I heard sister**

**snoring softly. She wasn't praying, she was sleeping! I had fought like crazy against dropping off to sleep in those early, dark mornings. I had assumed God was watching, and He'd see me there sleeping, and hit me with one of those bolts of lightning people talked about. But then I said, "If she can sleep though mass....I can, too." From then on, I slept through most of the masses I attended the rest of my 4 years at St. Peter Claver's Academy.**

**A pastor was once showing a teenager the brass scroll on the back of the church with names inscribed. The pastor said, "This is the list of our church members who have died in the service." The teen responded, "Was it the morning or the evening service?" Not too many people die by falling asleep in church, but there is a history of this kind of experience, and so Eutychus will have a lot of people to talk to in heaven about their church naps.**

**Benjamin Franklin in his autobiography tells of his first visit to Philadelphia. He saw a group of well dressed people, and he writes, "I joined them, and thereby was lead into the great meeting house of the Quakers near the market. I sat down among them, and, after looking round awhile and hearing nothing said, being very drowsy thro' labor and want of rest the preceding night, I fell fast asleep, and continu'd so till the meeting broke up, when one was kind enough to rouse me. This was, therefore, the first house I was in, or slept in, in Philadelphia."**

**One of the greatest missionaries of modern times was C. T. Studd. His fiancée became quite ill in China, and he had to nurse her back to health. When the day of their wedding came he was so tired from the strain of caring for her that he fell asleep during his own wedding address. It was before the day of tape recording too, and so he never did hear what the pastor had to say, but he woke up and had a great marriage.**

**The Puritans were prepared for people going to sleep in church. They had an office just for this very common event. Their sermons lasted for 3 hours, and so I suspect that even the most devout would at sometime feel the temptation to drift off to dreamland. No such trip was permitted, however, for the tithingman had a staff with a sharp thorn on the end. It was his job to jab those who gave evidence of being present in body, but not in spirit. Obediah Turner gives us this eye witness account from the first Sunday in June of 1646.**

**"As he strutted about the meeting house, he did spy Mr. Tomlins sleeping with much comfort, his head kept steady by being in the corner, and his hand grasping the rail. And so spying, Allen (the tithingman) did quickly thrust his staff behind Dame Ballard and give him a grievous prick upon the hand. Whereupon Mr. Tomlins did spring up much above the floor, and with terrible force did strike his hand against the wall, and also, to the great wonder of all, did profanely exclaim, "Curse ye, woodchuck!" He dreaming, so it seemed, that a woodchuck had seized and bit his hand. But on coming to know where he was, and great scandal he had committed, he seemed much but did not speak. And I think he will not soon again go sleep in meeting."**

**Even the great D. L. Moody had a problem on one occasion. He was in Dr. Edward Kirk's famous Mount Vernon Church. He was one of the most eloquent men Moody had ever heard, but on this occasion as the sermon got long Moody fell fast asleep.**

**The point is, there are millions of people who have slept through messages that did not get injured. Eutychus could have been among these snoozers had he not chosen the place where he sat. His choice to sit near the window is in harmony with his sex and his age. He was a young man, and young men suffer in ways that other people seldom do because of their risky choices. The reason insurance is so high for**

**young males is because they are more likely to take chances. Young men are not conservative, and this leads to a higher rate of accidents.**

**Winston Churchill was playing in the tree with his brother when he was a young boy. He decided to swing from branch to branch like a monkey. He lost his grip and fell 30 feet. He was unconscious for 3 days, and bedridden for 3 months. It was a year before he was back to normal. This is a frequent type of accident for young boys that seldom happens to girls, and very rarely to adults. Can anyone really believe that God has something against young boys, and that He discriminates against them? The reason they have these kinds of accidents is obvious. They are the ones who make risky choices. If girls and adults made these same risky choices, they would have more accidents.**

**So in the setting of our text it is less likely for a girl or an adult to be setting in a window during a church service. The teenage boy is most likely to make such a choice, and the result is Eutychus was the one who fell out. Maybe he was the best teenager in the church. Maybe he was the one with the best testimony, but he made a risky choice and paid the price.**

**No where does God promise to protect us from the consequences of our choices. In fact, He promises just the opposite, and that we will reap what we sow. If we take chances, and do high risk things, we will likely suffer for those choices. This does not mean we should never take risks. Paul suffered enormously by taking risks for Christ, and this is what suffering for Christ is all about. We should risk sticking our neck out to be identified with Him. But when it comes to suffering that is the result of unwise choices, there is little to commend for such suffering. Even though there was a miracle to restore Eutychus to life there is no big deal about its spiritual impact. People were comforted that he survived, but there is no hint that he was made some kind of**

**hero. This accident never should have happened, and there is no hint that it did happen for any good reason that was a part of God's plan. It was preventable, and Dr. Luke records it with this attitude in mind.**

**Notice how in verse 8 he describes another contributing factor to the accident. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where they were meeting. Why such a trivial detail? It is because Luke in his scientific evaluation of the circumstances is looking for all the clues he can to explain this unfortunate incident. He is saying that the room was too warm and stuffy for the number of people. This would explain why Eutychus went to sit in the window. He wanted some fresh air. The window was open and there could be no better place to sit for some cooler air.**

**We need to see Dr. Luke describing the situation like a detective reconstructing a crime scene. He is putting the clues together so that we see there is little mystery surrounding this accident. The combination of circumstances and choices make it a very understandable event. Dr. Luke does not hint that it is anything other than a natural event. It is all explained by the laws of nature. Men at a late hour in a hot stuffy room with a long winded speaker will tend toward sleep, and if they happen to be setting in an open window on the third story the law of gravity will encourage a fall. You can blame the devil if you wish, but Luke doesn't. There is no evil intent here on the part of anyone involved. The choices being made are unwise for the circumstances, but there is no sin. Dr. Luke gives us a totally scientific explanation of this accident. Now let's look at the implications for our second point.**

## **II. THE PRESCRIPTION FOR A CURE.**

**The point of this whole incident is not that we don't have to worry about risky choices because you can always count on a miracle to get**

**you out of the mess. The fact is, most accidents are not undone by a miracle. Carelessness cannot be justified by the hope of a miracle. To even hint at such a view of life is to encourage irresponsibility, and guarantee increased accidents and unnecessary suffering.**

**The primary prescription for the prevention of accidents is awareness of, and obedience to, the natural laws of life. This is equivalent to cooperation with God's will as we understand it revealed by the laws of nature. For example, keep medicine out of reach of children because they will eat anything. If you go back over the events leading to the accident in our text, you could easily prevent it by changing the circumstances and the choices. There was freedom to do all sorts of things. Paul could have accepted the limitations of time and stopped talking sooner. Eutychus could have asked his parents if he could slip out before he fell out, or he could have sat down by the wall and safely fallen to sleep. The entire accident could have been prevented in a number of ways, and that is our first responsibility, for we can prevent accidents by wise choices.**

**God gave Paul the power to fall on Eutychus and restore him to life. This means the accident was not a part of God's plan. Miracles are not used to counteract the will of God, but to assert the will of God in the face of negative consequences because of human sin and error. Hunger is not the will of God in the sense that He enjoys people being hungry. That is why Jesus fed the hungry crowds by a miracle. Disease and injuries are not the will of God, that is why Jesus used miracles to heal the diseased, and restore the injured to health. Death is not God's will, for he is the author of life, and one day will destroy death completely, and so Jesus used miracles to restore the dead to life. Accidents fall into the same category with all of these other negative of life that will one day be eliminated from the universe.**

**Accidents are primarily negative events in life. This is not to say**

**that God cannot use accidents for the good of those who suffer them, and for His own glory. There is no follow up on Eutychus to see if he was a better Christian because of his fall and restoration to life, or if anyone else benefited from the miracle. Dr. Luke does not record any moral with the story, or pretend that it was good that it happened. Even if he had it would not relieve Eutychus of the responsibility of his choices.**

**Sometimes God does use accidents for good. Dr. Albert Schwietzer had a magazine from the Paris Missionary Society put into his mailbox by accident. It was suppose to go to his neighbor, but he looked at it and read an article about the need of the Congo Mission. He was so impressed that he went to the Congo and gave the rest of his life to meet that need. It is was an accident, or mistake, or human error, but it lead to that history making decision, and many people were blessed because of it.**

**It would be folly, however, to conclude that every mistake made by mailmen is the plan of God. It would take a lot of people off the hook if this was so, but since very few of these mistakes lead to any good, and mostly to some degree of pain, there is no way to shift the blame for all the inconvenience to God. Even when God uses human error it does not justify the error and make it good. God could just as easily have lead Schwietzer to visit the neighbor and borrow the magazine, or receive it in the mail as a gift from a friend. God is never locked into needing human mistakes and accidents to do His will. It is foolish to assume that He has no alternative if man does not somehow blow it and make mistakes. God does not have to count on human error just because He can use them for His purpose. He is more likely to use man's wisdom, knowledge, and cooperation with the laws of nature to accomplish His will. There are five books of wisdom in the Bible, but no books of human error. That should be a clue as to what God's will is.**

**A mother who lost her teenage daughter in a car accident was grateful that a couple of her friends responded to the Gospel at her funeral, but she could not believe that this was the purpose of the accident. She said that many young people came to Christ each year in her church, and nobody had to die to make it happen. She could not believe that God planned the tragedy as a method of evangelism, for it is counterproductive. More youth die by accidents than are saved because of them, and more people rebel against God because of accidents than come to Him. It is not an efficient nor effective means of evangelism, and on top of that it is totally unnecessary. Jesus has already suffered and died paid all the price necessary for anyone to be saved.**

**God will use tragedy for good, but to accuse God of planning the tragedy and accidents is to deny His infinite efficiency in the cross. His Son died once for all that there might be atonement for all sin. There is no need for anyone else to die, or get injured, or suffer in any way for anyone else to be saved. God in His sovereignty does use accidents to change lives, but the accidents are not necessary, for people can make the right and wise decisions of life without accidents. Most people who come to Christ do not do so because of the injury or death of someone else.**

**Accidents are caused by human error and ignorance, and they are preventable. It is the sin of presumption to be careless in the hope that God will rescue you, or use the accident you may cause for good. Jesus refused to jump off the temple, for that would be tempting God, and we all need to refuse to take high risk choices with our own lives and health, as well as that of others. Part of our commitment as Christians is to live in harmony with the natural laws that God has built into creation.**

**Clovis Chappel, the great Southern Methodist preacher, tells of the**



**mother in his church who gave her teenager a car, and he tore up the road with it. One day he lost control, hit a telephone pole, and was thrown through the windshield. Chappel was called to the hospital, and the frantic mother grabbed him and asked, "Why did God let it happen?" Chappel said, "Hold on, don't blame God for this accident. If our Lord were to snatch a telephone pole from in front of your son when he was driving recklessly, He might set one in front of me when I was driving carefully. In that case none of us could drive intelligently."**

**I am convinced that Chappel was right, and we are held accountable for our unwise choices that will lead to suffering. Christians often do not like this side of reality. It is so much easier to blame God or the devil for life's pains. Eutychus could blame Paul and the poor circumstances, but he has to bear the heaviest burden of responsibility himself for his accident. We all need to recognize that our ignorance can lead to bad choices and suffering, but the good news is, we can also by wise choices prevent suffering.**

**Accidental suffering is preventable suffering because the cause of it is almost always due to ignorance and folly, and both of these are out of the perfect will of God. Nobody plans an accident, but we can plan so as not to have them, or not to cause them. This is a key to preventing much suffering in the world. Because of the reality of accidents, and human responsibility for them, the Christian is to be committed to prevention. God's people are to fight all unnecessary and accidental suffering by means of prevention.**

**The practices of smoking, drinking, using drugs, and immoral sex are fought by Christians because they hate to see other people suffer when it is not necessary. When people make foolish choices that do not have to be made, they add so much preventable suffering to the world. We are constantly teaching our children as to what to avoid in**

order to prevent them suffering harm. We do it because we know if they make the right choices they will escape much suffering in their lives. We practice in practical ways the belief that accidents are not the will of God, but are caused by human ignorance and foolish choices. Jesus said we are to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves, and when we are, we are forces in the world that eliminate much accidental suffering.

## **8. THE SEVEN CAUSES OF SUFFERING Based on Luke 13:1-17**

Someone has said that half truths are whole lies. One of the greatest causes for conflicts and misunderstanding among Christians through the ages has been over enthusiasm for a half truth. People will take an idea that has a portion of the truth and wrap it up in a box and say it is The Truth. For example, there are those who say suffering is an illusion, and not a part of reality. This is the view of the Christian Science people. The fact is, in many cases they are correct. It is a proven fact that the mind can cause all kinds of suffering by worry or fear which has no basis in reality. Some people are habitual worriers, and if they cannot find anything in the past or present to worry about, they can always find something in the future. The result is ulcers, indigestion, and a number of other nervous disorders. We must admit there is some truth in the idea, for much suffering is an illusion. But to make this the whole truth is to make it a lie, for there is so much suffering that is no illusion. Who would call the sufferings of Christ on the cross, an illusion. And who would call the sufferings of war and cancer illusions?

Another popular idea among Christians is that God's will is behind most or all of the suffering of the world. He is the one who ordains all

accidents and deaths. When a person's time has come God causes some accident or sickness to take them out of the world. It is a theory that grows out of the mystery of why some die and others do not. A woman's parachute does not open and yet she survives the fall. Others are in terrible crashes and live, while others in minor crashes are killed. One man goes through the battle field with bullets flying everywhere, and yet he lives. Another does not leave the safety of the camp, but is killed by one sniper bullet. To account for these mysteries man has come up with a simple theory that when your number is up you will die no matter what you are doing, and if it is not up, you will live no matter how dangerous a situation you are in.

This theory is based on a false assumption, and a logical conclusion that is impossible to accept. The false assumption is that death is the servant of God performing His will. Scripture represents death as God's enemy, and the final enemy to be destroyed, and not the servant of God. God declares that He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He is not willing that any should perish. There are judgments where God does take the lives of men, but most death is not His judgment.

If we think God appoints all death, then we make all the tragedies of life the will of God. Why blame Hitler for killing millions of Jews if God ordained they had to die then. If Hitler had not killed them in large groups, they would have to have died in millions of separate accidents, and so he just made the judgment of God more efficient. This is the ghastly conclusion this theory comes to, and it is totally unacceptable in Christian thinking, for it makes God the author of all evil. This theory eliminates the work of Satan in the world by making God the author of all his evil deeds.

We need to look at suffering from the point of view of the great Christian thinkers of the centuries, and not lock ourselves into any one

**simple theory that ends up making God the culprit. That God is the cause of some suffering is true, but when we see the whole picture we discover that to be just a small part of the issue. We want to look at the full picture which deals with what Christians have come to see as the seven basic causes for all human suffering. The combination of these seven will account for most, if not all, the suffering we can imagine. The whole picture will prevent us from putting the blame on God, and help us see our own role in the issue of suffering. Here then are the seven.**

## **1. THE WILL OF GOD.**

**This is simple, but hardly a satisfying or biblical answer. People who believe God is the cause of all suffering end up angry at God for things He hates even more than they do. Jesus spent a major portion of His ministry fighting suffering.**

**He had compassion on people who suffered, and He healed them, because He saw much suffering as the work of Satan, and He came to destroy the works of the devil. We read in Luke 13:16 where Jesus said, "Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"**

**When people have the attitude that suffering is the will of God, they lose the motivation to fight it and overcome it like Jesus did. In India, for example, they would throw garbage down on the lower caste because they believed all suffering was the will of God, and you would not suffer unless God willed it. Christianity changed this, and many other foolish practices that brought suffering that could be avoided. They simply recognized that God was not the author of human foolishness. Unfortunately, even Christians have been guilty of**

**believing that suffering is God's will.**

**In the 19th century, the greatest physican of the day was Sir James Simpson. He was made senior president of the Royal Medical Society at age 24. He was driven by Christian compassion to relieve suffering in operations. He had doctors come to his home on Monday evenings, and they would burn chemicals, and breathe in the fumes. One day the burned a crystal of chlorophorm. One by one they sank under the table. When they awoke they realized they had found what they were looking for. They had found a way to put people to sleep during surgery.**

**But he was attacked by God fearing people who accused him of interfering with God's will. They said, if God wanted men to sleep during surgery He would have given them a switch.**

**Simpson went to prayer. He asked God to give him a clear revelation from His Word that what he was doing was right. He started to read the Bible, and very soon came upon the verse that says, "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam." With this verse he refuted his critics, for in the first operation in history, God put Adam to sleep. God did not want Adam to feel pain when He removed the rib. He made man with the capacity to suffer, but He did not will that he suffer unnecessarily. Pain is inherent in the human body. It is part of being a creature with a nervous system. Adam was without sin, but he still would have felt great pain had God not put him to sleep. The possibility of pain is built into us by God, but the nervous system is also the source of all our pleasure. Pain has a positive side, which we will not explore now, but simply say, that the lack of pain destroys the warning system God built into us. Leprosy is a curse because it destroys the whole pain system.**

**The point I am making is that relief from suffering was God's first concern, and this was the concern of Christ in His earthly ministry.**

**Where the spirit of Christ is there will be compassion to fight the evil of suffering. History reveals that where the Gospel goes there soon will be hospitals, doctors, nurses, and all forms of research to discover ways to prevent and to cure suffering. Most suffering is not the will of God. When it is His will, it is for two things: Discipline and judgment. These are only His will in a secondary sense. His first will is that there be no discipline because there is obedience, and it is not needed. His first will is also that there be no judgment, because there is no rebellion that needs to be judged. So suffering is never the primary will of God.**

## **2. PUNISHMENT FOR SIN.**

**This is in close connection with the first one, but it is distinct. Here again, there is a truth. Suffering does result from sin, and it is the will of God that sin result in suffering, but not in the sense that God gives cancer to people who sin. All sin will result in some suffering, but not all suffering is the result of sin. The suffering from sin may not physical at all. Wicked people may live to ninety and not suffer a tooth ache, but their soul suffers hardness and blindness, and they are without God and without hope, and they are storing up wrath for the day of judgment. God does not make this life the time of His major judgment. This life is a time of probation, and a very evil person may not experience as much suffering as a righteous man.**

**When Christians sin, God may cause some form of suffering as a way of discipline. As a father I cause pain in my children's bodies in order to teach them, but I never cut off an arm, or gave them poison that would destroy vital organs. God's discipline is also to help get people back on the right path. It is never designed to do permanent damage. Here in our text in verses 2-4, Jesus used contemporary events to teach that tragedy and suffering are not God's punishment for particular sins. If He were speaking today, He might say, do you**

**suppose that young girl who died in a plane crash trying to travel around the world was more wicked than others? Jesus referred to people who died tragically as not being worse sinners than those who did not so die. The Pharisees had the false idea that people who died in violence must have been wicked. The friends of Job had the same philosophy which said, "you suffer because you sin. We are not suffering, because we are righteous."**

**There is a danger of Christians doing the same thing. Our wicked neighbor may be cutting his grass on Sunday and get his foot cut off. We say that is the judgment of God, but when we cut off our foot on Monday, we call it an accident.**

**The facts of life and the teaching of Scripture do not support the theory that suffering is always connected with sin. In fact, Jesus says a great deal of suffering is the result of not sinning. He said, "If you were like the world they would not hate you, but because you are not of the world you will be hated and persecuted."**

**The amount of suffering Christians have endured because they have refused to sin is enormous. But Jesus said, "Blessed are those who suffer for righteousness sake." Suffering is often due as much because of salvation, as because of sin. The point is, you dare not link suffering to sin, for it is a theory that will not hold water, except in clear cases, such as the bank robber who gets shot while robbing the bank. Most suffering, however, does not have a clear connection with any particular sin. So if God is opposed to needless suffering, and most suffering is not directly connected with known sin, where do we look for the answer to so much suffering? The next most common answer is-**

### **3. THE DEVIL.**

**It is obvious that the universe contains an evil force that opposes all**

**that is good, and poisons all that is pure. The Persians came to this conclusion on the basis of natural revelation. They saw a negative for every positive, and for every good there was an evil. The battle of light and darkness convinced them that the cause of all evil was the Evil One. We call him Satan or the devil. We see this battle everywhere. For the criminal element there is the police force; for fires there is the fire department; for disease there is the medical profession; for germs there are the white corpuscles, and for a lost world there is a Redeemer. Written into every structure of reality is this battle of good and evil. Paul speaks of principalities and powers with whom we struggle. In this larger cosmic struggle we find the greatest clue to the mystery of suffering, but it also is not the whole answer.**

**Satan is the cause of much suffering, but he is not responsible for a good deal of it. If I eat soup that is very hot, and I burn my tongue, this is not God's will, nor is it punishment for sin, and neither can I blame the devil. Jesus in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23) said that Satan is only responsible for some of the seed that does not grow and produce fruit. To blame the devil for everything that causes suffering does not fit Scripture or reality. I can drive 90 miles an hour trying to get to church on time. It is not God's will that I crash, and the devil can't make me do it, for if he could, he would have done it long ago. This was a choice I made, and so there are other causes for suffering, and you cannot say the devil made me do it. We want to look now at the four other causes which added to these three account for all the suffering we can imagine.**

#### **4. NATURAL LAW.**

**Cold freezes, fire burns, and matter falls with impartial mathematical precision. If you hold a match to your finger it will burn and cause much suffering. God does not want you to hold a**



**match to your finger; Satan cannot make you do it, and so if you do it, they are not to blame, but you are for trying to defy a natural law.**

**Gravity is a law necessary for the existence of our universe. God is the Creator of that law, yet it is gravity that brings planes to the ground so fast and hard that it kills. It is gravity that causes a child to fall down the stairs and be injured. Possible even for life. Without this law you would eliminate this suffering, but at the cost of eliminating life all together. All would be chaos without this law.**

**The uniformity of nature is one of our greatest blessings. It gives a world we can count on. All of science is based on it. What kind of a world would it be if one day when you stepped out of the house you began to float up into the clouds? What if when chemicals are mixed one day and you get sugar, and the next day the same chemicals make dynamite? Life would be a nightmare. We count on the laws of nature not to change. When you try to break a natural law, it breaks you. We see then that the very thing that is good and necessary for our life and pleasure is also the source of much of our suffering. We have to accept the liabilities along with the assets. This kind of world makes pain not only possible but inevitable. Thank God for minds that are able to understand these laws, and prevent much suffering. But our cooperation is not always perfect, and so every time we allow a child to ride a bike we are taking a chance on causing suffering due to a fall caused by gravity.**

**Almost everything we do carries the risk of being hurt by not obeying some natural law. Again, God does not want us to break these laws; Satan cannot make us, and so this leads us to the fifth reason for suffering.**

## **5. FREE WILL.**

**You can blame God, as many do, for making us persons instead of**

**puppets; men instead of machines. God made man a causal agent and not merely a pawn. We can make free will choices, and the result is, we can choose ways of acting**

**that make suffering inevitable. I can choose to ignore a detour sign and get stuck, and have to get out and push the car. I may fall and break a rib in doing so, and then cry out to God, "Why did you let this happen to me?" In other words, why didn't you make me with wheels and a track so I could only go where I should go? We blame God because we use poorly this great gift of free will.**

**God says, do not steal, and so we know what His will is, but people can still choose to steal, and they do. Every once in a while I hear someone bring up the idea of God's permissive will. This is a greatly misunderstood concept. People come to think that if God permits something, that means He must will it. Not so!**

**God permits everything that He forbids. All of the Ten Commandments, and every other thing God forbids, are laws that are broken every day many times over. God does not will what He forbids, He hates what He permits. To say, because God permits something that it is His will is a great perversion. He permits murder every day, but He hates it and forbids it upon great judgment. God permits evil because He respects man's free will. He permits them to use it to make very bad choices, but it is folly to blame God for these bad choices which He forbids.**

**The Sun has no interest in blinding anyone, or in giving them sunburn or strokes, but these things happen all the time because people make unwise choices. I once spent a whole afternoon in the hot sun spearing carp in a lake with some other teenage friends. I was having great fun, and did not realize I was getting too much exposure to the sun. I ended up sick in bed with severe burns because of it. It was not God's will, nor could Satan make me do it, and it was not due to any sin. I was just making a foolish choice. Much of the suffering of**

life is due to such choices. Someone told me of a pastor who was blind because as a kid he bet his brother he could look at the sun longer than his brother could. He won his bet, but lost his sight. This leads us to look at the next reason for suffering.

## **6. HUMAN IGNORANCE.**

This is a combination of two others. It is the use of your free will in relation to the laws that govern the universe. Jesus told of the foolish man who built his house on the sand where it floods every year. His house fell flat when the rains came down. The wise man, on the other hand, built his house on the rock, and he avoided the foolish loss of the other. Jesus was saying, a lot of suffering in this world is caused by human ignorance. The foolish man was not necessarily wicked at all. He was just not very well informed about an intelligent place to build a house. His ignorance cost him plenty. No doubt Satan was glad for this ignorance, but you cannot blame the devil for it. God does not want us ignorant, and so it is never His will that we do stupid things, but we are free to do them, and pay the penalty when we do not know what we are doing.

The world is full of deformed babies caused by people taking drugs, and it is tragic suffering caused by human ignorance. The plagues that killed masses of people were caused by garbage and sewage carelessly thrown in the streets. History is full of suffering people have brought on themselves by their ignorance. Some have argued that this was the will of God, but others suspected it was due to the ignorance of men, and they decided to abolish the filth. The church took the lead in helping people become educated, and avoid suffering caused by ignorance. Everytime you tell a child to wash his hands, or cover his mouth when coughing, you are cooperating with God in the fight to eliminate suffering caused by human ignorance. Before it was understood that germs cause disease, doctors were spreading disease

from one patient to another by not washing their hands. Ignorance killed many, but when knowledge replaced that ignorance many were spared.

## **7. THE TOGETHERNESS AND INTERDEPENDENCE OF MAN.**

All sports accidents are due to the fact that we play sports with other people, and we can run into them and get hurt. But the risk is taken because there is so much pleasure to be gained. We know that suffering is always a possibility, but we risk it for the blessings. We have to use the same highway with drunk and reckless drivers, and this leads to the possibility of innocent suffering. All of the communicable diseases are also due to our association with other people. We are social beings, and this means the suffering of some can lead to the suffering of others. But the blessings make it worth it, for all of our food, clothes, books, medicine, and a host of other good things come from our togetherness and interdependence. Weatherhead said, "If some people were not farmers all of the time, all of us would have to be farmers some of the time." We need other people.

One man can get angry at his boss, and do a sloppy job of tuning up a plane. This can lead to the plane crashing and killing dozens of people, all of whom have dozens of relatives who will suffer. Hundreds of schedules will need changing, and appointments canceled, and anxieties created. There will be funeral arrangements, and long range fighting over wills. A fireman called to the crash sight gets injured, and ends up in the hospital. His daughter counted on him being home for her birthday party. Her heart is broken, and in anger she hits her little brother. He goes off crying, and kicks the cat. And so you see a chain reaction of suffering from that one man that cannot be calculated, and it may run its course to the end of time.

**The only way to avoid this kind of suffering is to live a totally isolated life. You would have to keep your children at home, and not let them play with anyone, or do anything with risk. You may avoid suffering of one kind by so doing, but then you will have to endure the suffering of loneliness, which can even be worse.**

## **CONCLUSION.**

**What is the value of seeing the seven causes of all suffering? The value is, we do not then have a limited view that leads to folly. It is folly to blame God, as many do, for suffering that is not His will, and which He hates and wants His people to fight. It is folly to blame Satan for that which is a matter of human choice, and let men be excused for their folly. It is folly to blame sin for everything, for this is a slam to those innocent sufferers who may be suffering because they did not sin. The point is, a limited view of suffering will make you a part of the problem rather than a part of the answer. People suffer a lot because of stupid views of suffering, which lead them to hurt other people with their false concepts. This is what the friends of Job did, and they added greatly to his suffering.**

**There is popular view among some Christians that we are to praise God for everything. I've read several books that sound very persuasive, but the problem is, they go beyond Scripture and ignore the teaching of the Bible that does not fit. This is the problem of all good ideas that pretend to be the only idea acceptable. A partial truth made into a total truth is blown out of proportion and becomes a falsehood.**

**The Bible does teach that we are to rejoice evermore, and in everything give thanks. The positive spirit is there, but this is often twisted to mean that everything is God's will, and everything is good. This is folly. Jesus did not practice any such thing Himself. On the**

**cross He cried out, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me." Should we condemn Jesus for not praising God and giving thanks? No! We should use our heads and common sense, and recognize the reality of evil. To legalistically tell people that they must praise God for everything leads to a state of confusion where they can no longer make a distinction between good and evil.**

**Evil is real, and God hates it, and we are never to praise God for evil as if He did not hate it. In evil situations we are still to praise God, but we are not to praise Him for evil. Paul never praised God for the sin and folly of the Christians to whom he wrote his Epistles. He rebuked them, and he urged them to change their behavior, and he never once said to them to praise God for their bad behavior. He did not write to the Corinthians and say, "I praise God for your immature fighting which is causing divisions in the church." People who get so wrapped up in this idea of praising God for everything become worse than silly. They become immoral. I read of one pastor who counseled a man whose wife was being unfaithful, and he told him he had to learn to praise God that she was sleeping with another man. Others are told to praise God for one tragedy after another. Some good results can come because of a positive spirit, but in the end it leads to confusion by blurring the distinction between good and evil.**

**The person who praises God for everything has to believe that God is the author of everything, and so there is really no such thing as evil. It may not seem like it, but if you are praising God for it, it must be good. So this whole practice leads to the elimination of evil, and so, to superficial theology. This can be avoided by a common sense theology of listening to the plain teachings of the Bible that make it clear, much in this life is not the will of God. The world is full of things that God wants us to prevent, and not praise Him for. This whole idea leads people to the conception that all suffering is the will of God. This has done more harm than any other idea I am aware of.**

**When you look at the seven causes of suffering you discover that none of them are good. There is no good suffering in itself. It can lead to good if responded to properly, but that same good would be better reached without suffering. All the good that comes out of the suffering that God wills in discipline and judgment is better arrived at without suffering. A child who rebels and gets a good spanking may be a better child for it, but it would be an even better child if it never rebelled and avoided the spanking. Every other form of suffering is also bad in itself, for none of it will be in heaven where God's will is complete, and no suffering of any kind is any longer permitted. If it had any inherent value it would continue, but it is totally eliminated. All suffering is ultimately evil, and can have to part in the final kingdom of the redeemed.**

**Over the years I have met so many people who are angry at God because they blame Him for the things they have suffered. My first day in the ministry I made two calls where people had suffered tragedy, and in both cases they blamed God.**

**That motivated me to do the research that lead me to discover these seven causes of suffering. We are part of the answer when we see that much suffering is preventable with education and cooperation with God. If we are suffering, our interest should not be in the issue of who to blame, but in the issue of finding ways to prevent and eliminate such suffering. Jesus came into the world to fight and overcome the forces of evil, and this is the calling of all who love and trust Him as their Savior. We are to overcome evil with good, and be ever seeking ways to add to the world's pleasure rather than its pain. May God help us to be suffering fighters.**

## **9. DEATH AND THE WILL OF GOD ACTS 7:51-60**

**The Cruel Sea is the title of a World War II story about a German U-Boat loose in an American convoy. It had already sunk several ships, but a destroyer escort had finally picked it up on the sonar. As the destroyer prepared to launch its depth bombs, the captain saw that the U-Boat was taking a course where dozens of American men were in the water as survivors of one of the sunken ships. It was a clever maneuver and the captain of the destroyer had to make an agonizing decision. Should he plow ahead and kill his own men and get that U-Boat, or should he veer off, saving the men in the water, but loose the U-Boat which would be free to sink other ships. He decides to go ahead, killing the men in the water, but destroying the U-Boat. He choose what he thought was the lesser of two evils. It was not good those men had to be sacrificed, but he felt it was better that they die than have the U-Boat free to kill others.**

**This story represents the actual decisions that men must often make that determines the life and death of other people. There is a popular theory that says God in His sovereign will determines the precise time of every man's death. If this is true, it takes a great burden off men, for it relieves them of the responsibility of their decisions. This theory is also a great comfort to those who loose loved ones in tragic ways, for it gives some meaning to what otherwise seems so meaningless. If God willed their death, then even as tragic as it is, the will of God is being fulfilled. The important question, however, is not, is it a comforting concept. The doctrine of reincarnation is a comfort to millions. Is that the basis on which we are to determine truth? Is anything true because it is a great comfort? Almost all illusions are comforting, and people follow false prophets because they offer what is comfortable. No, the question is not, is the concept comforting, but for the Christian, the question must always be, is it true. Or put another way, is it Biblical.**

**To answer this question, I want to look at Dr. Luke's account of the**



**death of Stephen-the first Christian martyr. It is of interest to note that this first Christian to die in the New Testament died as did the first man to ever die, namely Able. Able and Stephen were both Godly men, and both died by violence at the hands of angry men who were jealous of them. Murder and mob violence were the means by which their lives were ended.**

**One's immediate impression is that murder and mob violence do not sound much like the will of God. In fact, they sound very definitely like things out of His will. As we look at the details of Stephen's death, it is confirmed that the entire proceeding was contrary to the revealed will of God. In chapter 6 verse 11, we are told that the Jewish leaders secretly instigated men to lie and bare false witness against Stephen by charging him with blasphemy. In verse 13 it says again that they found other false witnesses to lie before the council. It is clear that men are making decisions to eliminate a life they do not want in total disregard for the laws of God.**

**In his defense speech, Stephen is brutally frank in his denunciation of their injustice. He charges them with the same crimes as their fathers who murdered the prophets, and they now have murdered the Prophet of all prophets-the Messiah. You would have a hard time convincing Stephen that the Lord called his prophets home. The Jewish leaders would like that theory, for it would take them off the hook. But Stephen tells it like it is, and says, not that the Lord called them home, but that hardened and blind leaders thrust them out of this world by violent murder, contrary to the will of God.**

**In other words, the prophets did not die because God had appointed a certain time for them to die, or because they have fulfilled their purpose in life. They died because evil men made decisions to take their lives, just as Cain decided to kill Able. It may not be a pleasant thought that evil can be so powerful, but Jesus did not say**

**that pleasantness shall set us free, but that the truth shall set us free. It is always better to know the truth about death than to cover it over with pleasant illusions. I am convinced that the idea that you can only die when it is your appointed time is just such an illusion.**

**Jesus taught the very same thing that Stephen said in his defense. He taught that Godly men die because of the wicked decisions of others to resist the will of God. Jesus told the parable of the man who rented out his vineyard and went to a far country when the harvest came he sent his servants to collect the rent. The wicked tenants beat them, stoned them, and killed them. Other servants were sent, and they were treated just the same. He finally sent his son, for he thought they would respect him, but they even killed the son. So evil and unjust were these men that the owner had no choice but to come and put these wretches to a miserable death, and rent his vineyard to those who would be honest. When the chief priests and Pharisees heard this parable they knew Jesus was speaking about them, and they hated Him, just as Stephen was hated for saying the same thing to the Jews in his day.**

**The point is, we are kidding ourselves if we think God in any way approved of the death of His servants. He held men accountable for their decisions to kill them, and the idea that the Lord called them home because He had appointed the day of their death is repulsive, for if true, it would make God the author of the very evil He condemns. If God wanted His prophets killed, and willed that they die when they did, then the Jewish leaders were not disobedient at all, but fulfilled the will of God. The theory that God's people only die in His will is great cover-up for the wickedness of men.**

**I can just imagine the leaders of Israel telling the gullible people that the Lord must have needed the prophets for greater work elsewhere when they were found dead. It may have been a great**

comfort to the people, but it was a cover-up of murder. I can just hear Cain using this theory as he came home and Adam would ask, "Where is your brother?" Cain could say, "I last saw him lying in the field very still. I think the Lord has called him home. Apparently his number was up, and he had fulfilled his purpose in life." Now, if you agree that would be a cover-up of his own wicked deed, why is it any more justified to speak that way today concerning the tragic deaths of God's people?

If a missionary is murdered on the field, by what authority do we dare declare that the Lord called them home, or assume that their work was complete? In my mind, a modern murder is no different than the ancient murder of the prophets-It is an act of evil contrary to the will of God, and not an act that fulfills His will. If evil is real, and death is an enemy, then we have to face the facts, and stop the cover-up. Christians can die in many ways that are not God's will. They not only can be murdered like Stephen, but they can be killed by less personal means such as cars, airplanes, or cancer.

Is cancer more friendly than Cain? The only difference I can see between cancer and Cain is that one kills by an act of the will, and the other by impersonal laws of nature. Both are killers, however, and when they strike there is no more reason to think that cancer does the will of God than Cain. You might just as well say the Lord called Able home as to say this of a cancer victim. Nature has fallen just as man has, and there is much in nature, just as in human nature, that is defective, and which does not function as a part of God's perfect harmony.

All of the true comfort is unchanged by facing the reality of evil in both nature and human nature. The Lord did not call Stephen home, but that is where the Lord took him. He did not die because God appointed that day, but that day he was with Christ in paradise. The

**truth does not alter our hope and victory at all-It just gives us a more realistic view of evil and death. The believer goes home to be with Christ regardless of how he dies, but to say all death of the believer is the Lord's calling is to make a confused mess out of what otherwise is easy to grasp by common sense.**

**Common sense tells us death is an enemy, and that is why we rejoice when we or a loved one is spared. That is why we spend a fortune to fight all the diseases that kill. That is why we spend a fortune to provide safety equipment to prevent accidents that kill. All of life is based on the basic idea that death is a foe to be fought, and escaped as often and as long as possible. The Bible supports this common sense view of death. It nowhere encourages Christians to court death as if it was a friend. If the theory is correct that God appoints the day of death, and all His children die in His will, then death must be seen as a friend, and always the best thing for us, for it always does the will of God just when He wants it to. Death, according to this theory, is the perfect servant of God. And if this is the case, one can only wonder why God treats it so unjustly, for when history is over God casts death and hell into the lake of fire, and makes sure it has no place in His eternal kingdom. A very strange judgment indeed, for such a loyal servant. One can only conclude that death is not a loyal servant, but a rebel power that deserves destruction and damnation because it has done so much evil in the course of history. This is the logical and the Biblical view.**

**Some may look at this account of Stephen and say, God certainly wanted him to deliver this scathing speech that lead to his death, and, therefore, he died in the will of God. It is true that God willed for him to tell the truth even if it cost him his life, but it was not God's will that the Jews respond as they did. He wanted them to repent, but they chose an evil response, and if you say God willed their evil response that led to murder, you have destroyed the distinction between light**

**and darkness. John says that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If God willed both Stephen's speech and the hated response, then God is on both sides of the battle, and Jesus said a house divided cannot stand. The whole theory that God wills all death is a contradiction to the Biblical revelation of the battle of light and darkness. Stephen, as he was dying, kept this distinction clear. He saw his death, not as the will of God, but as the result of the sinful wills of men.**

**In verse 60, he prays that God will not hold this sin against them. Stephen identifies the cause of his death as sin. If God willed it, then God willed sin, and you have eliminated all meaning to the Biblical revelation. The theory that God wills all death is not only not true, it is a dangerous error, for it actually links God to evil, and makes Him the responsible agent behind the greatest tragedies of history. If the murder of Stephen was a sin, and it was, there is no way you can justify saying the Lord called him home. He saw Jesus and did go home, but not because his time was up, and not because God willed it, but because evil men chose to disobey the will of God. If the first Christian died out of God's will, it is likely many others all through history would do so also. This means evil is real and has real power, and the battle of good and evil is not fake, but very real.**

**Now this is the common sense view of Scripture and the facts of life. Many Christians who are unwilling to face up to the reality of evil and its power go on assuming that all death is the will of God. By so doing, they make God the author of all the tragic things that happen to Christians. They assume that everything has a purpose, and this includes murder, rape, stealing, and every other form of evil. It is so hard to get people to see that facts do not cease to exist simply because they are ignored.**

**We stayed in a motel one time that was on road under**

**construction. Just beyond the motel it was totally blocked so that a tank could not get through. Three or four blocks down the other way there were signs on both sides of the road saying the road was closed. In the space of two minutes we saw four cars drive past those signs and go until it was obvious that the road was closed. When we went out for supper we met another car which had passed the four conspicuous signs. He rolled down his window and asked us if he could get through ahead. I told him you just as well turn around here for you can't get through. In the few minutes that we were in that area we saw five people who were hoping to change the facts by ignoring them. I would assume that dozens of people every day keep driving past those signs until they confront the facts, and have to back up.**

**This is what we see in the realm of theology on this issue of death. You can ignore the signs and evidence of Scripture, and chose to hold to your own theory, but the facts will not change however they are ignored. Let me share some of the facts that nothing can alter.**

**In Hebrews 2:14, Jesus is said to have taken on human nature so He could die. It says, "That through death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil." The fact is, death is not a tool of the kingdom of light, but is a weapon of the kingdom of darkness. That is why resurrection is the great weapon of the kingdom of light. Resurrection overcomes death. Every time Jesus raised someone from the dead He did not reverse the will of God, but, rather, the will of Satan. Death is the devil's doing, and Jesus demonstrated that He was superior to the devil by conquering death.**

**If death was God's appointment, and people died because God had set the time, then resurrection was a reversal of His will. Jesus would not than be destroying the works of the devil by resurrection, but he would be destroying the works of His heavenly Father. The theory that God appoints all death reverses the major facts of Scripture, and**

**reduces the great power of the resurrection to an in-house conflict between the Father and the Son. This is in total conflict with the Biblical picture of the victory of the Prince of Light over the black tyrant of darkness-the devil.**

**Death is an enemy that we are fighting, and our only hope of victory is in Jesus Christ, who has conquered this foe. If it is a fiend to be defeated, how can we call it a friend by saying it is a faithful servant of God doing His perfect will by taking His people home to heaven at His appointed time? As much as I love paradox, and see it often in the word of God, I cannot believe that death, which is the last and ultimate enemy of man, so directly connected with sin and Satan, is also the faithful servant of God doing His perfect will. This is not a paradox, but a clear contradiction. It contradicts the very instincts God has built into us.**

**We are made to fear death and do all we can to avoid it and prevent it. This instinct of self-preservation would be a defect in us if death was God's servant doing His will. If that was the case, we should desire nothing more than to embrace death. The fact of our natural repulsion from death, and the facts of Scripture that shows resurrection to be a victory over death will not change no matter how often you pretend death is good by saying the Lord called someone home.**

**Peter Kreeft, in his book, Love Is Stronger Than Death, writes, "When the Christian church collaborates with a pagan culture by covering up death, it seals its own death warrant. For the whole reason for the church's existence, its whole message, is a good news or gospel about a God who became man in order to solve the problem of death and the problem of sin, which is its root..... The resurrection is the heart of every sermon preached in the New Testament. For the church to cover up death is for it to cover up the question whose**

**answer is its own meaning. Nothing is more meaningless than an answer without a question. The good news of Christianity claims to answer the bad news of death..... The Sermon On The Mount does not answer the problem of death. The resurrection does. But the answer presupposes the problem, presupposes facing death as a an enemy."**

**What He is saying is that if you say death is not an enemy then you have eliminated the need for the good news of the resurrection, for death itself becomes the good news. Death is good if it fulfills God's will, and takes us home to heaven. Death replaces the resurrection, and ceases to be an enemy. Such thinking may sound very pious, but it undermines the gospel which is the good news of Christ victory over the enemy of death. No theory can change the fact that death is the final enemy to be destroyed. There are numerous facts about death that cannot be changed by being ignored. Here are a few-**

- 1. Death came into the world as a result of sin, and the rejection of God's will. It was not a fulfillment of His will.**
- 2. Death is always associated with evil. Even when it is a result of God's judgment it is in no way good, for God's judgment is always the result of evil, which He in no way wills. God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked.**
- 3. Scripture and history are full of the evil works of men who murder and destroy life. None of this can be attributed to God without making Him the author of evil.**

**James makes it clear that any theory that links God as a cause of evil is false. In James 1:13-15 we read, "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: For God cannot be tempted with evil and He Himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has**



**conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death."**

**What this means, in the light of our theme, is that a born again Christian may die as a direct result of his own folly, or the folly of others. His desire for fame may drive him to a life-style that leads to a heart attack at age 45. His desire to conform to the world could lead him to have a few cocktails and be killed on the highway because of poor judgment. The point is, a Christian can die by natural causes or by accidents, or by the violent forces of evil. Seldom to never do they die because God says, now is the best time, the precise time I have appointed.**

## **10. PART II DEATH AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD**

**On December 7, 1941 bombs fell on many sons in Pearl Harbor, and hundreds of families had their hopes and dream shattered. On December 8, a man who had been up sobbing all night because he lost his son confronted his pastor in anger and said, "What kind of a God did this? If you God could have stopped this and didn't He must be a terrible God. And if He couldn't have prevented it, He isn't worth the time of day." The father's feelings were not unusual, but represent the feelings that millions have had as they are confronted by the reality of tragic death. This kind of anger is misdirected however, for it assumes God is responsible for sin, and all of its evil consequences, such as war and death.**

**This misconception, that leads so many to become angry at God for life's tragedies, is encouraged by those who declare that God is the one who sovereignly appoints all death. The confusion arises because**

**Christians do not think though what they mean, and what the Bible means by the sovereignty of God. If you mean by the sovereignty of God that God controls absolutely everything that happens, then you have a fatalistic theology like that of Islam. Everything is the will of Allah, and there is no way it can be different than it is. Whatever will be will be, and no amount of effort on man's part can change it. All is determined, and all is a matter of fate. This is not the Biblical view of reality.**

**In the Bible we see that God has limited His sovereignty by the freedom He has given to man, and to other free willed beings. Jesus could say to the Jews, I would have taken you under my wings but you would not respond. And so He wept over Jerusalem for their choice meant death and destruction that He did not want. The Bible reveals a God who cries out, "Why will ye die when you can choose My will and live." The Bible puts the responsibility for sin and evil, and all of its consequences upon those who choose to defy God, and not upon God, who gave them their choices.**

**God made sin and evil a possibly by His sovereign power of creation, but He is not responsible for it. An analogy can make this clear. The highway department puts up signs such as, cross over ahead, dead end, slow down, bridge out, 35mph, etc., and yet drivers will ignore these signs and go 70mph and crash through a barrier and get killed. If you want to apply the thinking of theology to this event, you could say the highway department is responsible for that death. They built the road in the first place, and had they never done so this driver would not have been killed by driving on it. They are the ultimate cause of this tragedy because they are the ultimate source of the road's existence. Not only that, they also made the crossover, or had the bridge closed for repairs, and built the road only to handle 35mph safely. They are the ones who by their power and wills made all of the tragic deaths on that road possible.**

**But, is it true that they willed his death? They made it a possibility, but the fact is they did not will that possibility to be a reality. They proved their will was against it happening by doing all they could to prevent it. They put up signs warning of all the dangers so people could make wise choices and avoid suffering and death. When a driver refuses to heed the warnings, and chooses instead to take the risk of defying what is good for his own protection, he must bare the responsibility for the consequences himself. Who could be so blind that they would accuse the highway department of being cruel and blood thirsty in planning for all of the deaths that happen on the highway.**

**This is precisely what men do when they accuse God for being responsible for tragedy, and blame Him for allowing, or not preventing, the consequences of sinful choices. You might just as well blame the highway department for the road as to blame God for making men with a free will. In fact, you just as well blame the reckless drivers mother because had she prevented her pregnancy he never would have been alive to die in his tragic wreck. Or, she could have kept him chained to a wall in the basement and prevented the whole thing. We could go on and on showing that it is nothing but folly to try and pass the buck for life's evils back to God'S sovereignty.**

**God will not allow us to escape by this trick, for He makes it clear that in His sovereignty He does not ever will sin or evil. Since sin or evil are a very definite part of reality, we must face the fact that it is the result of foolish choices on the part of man, and other free willed beings such as satan and his demons. Satan entices men to make all kinds of decisions that lead to tragedy and death, and it is an added evil when men say these tragic things are the will of God.**

**How then are we to see the sovereignty of God in the events He does not will? If so much happens that is not God's will being done on**

earth as it is in heaven, then in what way is He superior to the forces of evil that seem to get their will done on earth as it is in hell? Stephen's experience reveals this clearly. The hatred and bitter rejection of the truth that led to his unjust and violent murder was clearly a victory for the forces of evil. Sin was in control and an innocent life was taken from the earth, even though it had great potential for many years of faithful service in the kingdom of God. It was a day of darkness for many Christians who rightfully mourned Stephen's death.

The sovereignty of God is seen in the fact that when evil has killed the body that is all it can do. That is real and terrible, but it is only a temporary victory for evil, for death is now under the control of Jesus Christ. He has the keys of death and hell, and not satan, and so Stephen went immediately into the presence of his Lord. Death was robbed of its sting because it could not hold a child of God. Death was made a mere door to the Father's house. God's sovereignty is seen, not in His appointing the day of His children's death, but in that He appoints the day of their death, whatever be the cause, to be a day of joy and celebration as they are welcomed home. The day of death for the believer is always a day of victory, even if the cause of their death is the power of evil. The power of evil ends at death. That is the worst it can do, but do not fear it, said Jesus, for when it has done its worst it only thrusts you into my hands.

Evil men rocked Stephen to sleep with a motive of hate, but all they succeeded in doing was to send him on a perpetual vacation to paradise. The evil is real, and the death a tragic loss to the church, but in the sovereignty of God the total picture is one of victory. The Christian then must look on tragic death from the perspective of Jesus. He must weep with Jesus in that it is truly tragic that evil should have such power to ruin life on this earth. It is right and normal for Christians to grieve over the folly of wicked men who bring about so much unnecessary suffering and death. It is a shame

**that men have to endure a world where the forces of evil are so entrenched, and where good and godly people have suffer and die at their hands.**

**The first Christian to die in the New Testament was Stephen, and he died a violent unjust death. The first deaths in the New Testament, however, were the Jewish baby boys who were murdered by the heartless Herod who was trying to get rid of the Christ child. This was one of the most cruel and barbaric acts in all the Bible. They were totally innocent, but they died because evil powers are real, and they often care nothing about justice and fair play. Will anyone let Herod off the hook by saying that God must have appointed these babies to die on that day? If that was true then Herod was doing the perfect will of God and was God's servant rather than God's enemy. This theory has to be rejected for Herod was clearly the enemy, and what he did was evil and not the will of God.**

**But God could have stopped it, could he not? Yes He could have, and that is what most people think God's sovereignty means, that He can do anything to get His will done. That is why people look at the tragedies that evil produces in the world and say God must have had a purpose in it. Behind this thinking is the idea that since God permitted the tragedy when He had the power to prevent it, there must be some reason or purpose behind it. In a way they are right. God does permit evil for a purpose, but this is not to say that every act of evil is planned or permitted by God for some specific purpose. Evil is permitted because that is the only way God can have a truly free-willed being who can choose good rather than evil. God in His sovereign power could stop men from choosing evil, but to do so would be contrary to His ultimate purpose.**

**The tragedy is when people do not understand God's purpose in allowing evil, and begin to try and make evil good by assuming the**

sovereignty of God is behind all that is. This kind of thinking is what produced Job's friends and made them such a big pain in the neck. One of the finest books I ever read on suffering was, *If I Die At Thirty* by Meg Woodson, the mother of 13 year old Peggy, and Joey her younger brother, both of whom had Cystic Fibrosis. This incurable disease kills 50% of children who have it before their 15th birthday. The book is largely conversation between the mother and her daughter after she discovers she will not likely live many more years. If you enjoy a good cry this will be your kind of book. I don't especially enjoy it, but could not help it as I read this true story. But what impressed me most was the profound maturity of 13 year old Peggy. Listen to her words of response as she listened to a local radio talk show dealing with parents of mentally retarded children.

"Why did God make my child retarded? Why did God send that tornado? Why did God give me Cystic Fibrosis? Peggy mimicked as she turned off the radio. Why do people always say that? God didn't do any of those things." The mother writes, "Quick tears burned my eyes. How carefully I'd refrained from bringing up the question of why Peg had Cystic Fibrosis.....Somehow I'd felt I couldn't bear it if she pointed the accusing finger at God. But here she'd brought up the subject herself, and the only finger she pointed was at the people who pointed the finger at God. "Don't they know He's not like that?" She cried, indignantly. "He planned everything to be good. He wouldn't do mean things like that. They say God did this or that mean thing to make them better people. That's dumb. You know there's one thing I hate about Cystic Fibrosis camp. Half the kids there don't even believe in God. I don't know about Joey's side, but on the girls side its like they've said, God gave me Cystic Fibrosis-goodbye God."

**Here was a 13 year old dying teenager who had already learned from life the negative effects of a false theology. People who feel God in His sovereignty is the cause of suffering tend to forsake Him and blame Him. It is one of Satan's most cleaver tricks to get people to think that his evil works are the will of God. God forbid that we add to the problem by promoting such a view of His sovereignty. Let us promote the Biblical view of Christ who reveals God's will to be one of victory over evil and suffering. When His sovereign will is finally and fully fulfilled all suffering and death will be no more. This is a true picture of the sovereignty of God.**

## **11. THE MYSTERY OF DEATH Based on I Cor. 15:51-58**

**A librarian commented concerning a woman just leaving her desk that she could get more out of a mystery novel than anyone she knew. "How is that?" asked her co-worker. She replied, "She starts in the middle so that she not only wonders how it comes out, but also how it began." This illustrates what a great many people are doing with life today. They have no idea how things began, or of how things will end up. All they look at is the middle of the story. They see the contemporary scene only, and the result is that they have too much mystery on their hands, and life is confusing. They have what we could call spiritual amnesia, which leaves them stranded in the present with no roots in the past, or goals in the future. Mystery in itself is not only valuable, it is essential for making life an adventure, but to live in this much mystery is to be miserable. One has to have some basic answers.**

**When mystery reigns fear is on the throne as well. Henry St.**

**John said, "Plain truth will influence half a score of men at most in a nation, or an age, while mystery will lead millions by the nose." The unknown is always frightening and so it becomes an ideal basis for controlling people and their money. Religion in general and cults in particular take full advantage of people's ignorance about life after death. Since people do not know the unknown it is impossible for them to prove any claim to be false, and so in fear they bow down to those who speak with authority. The witch doctor had such power over whole tribes because of his claim to know something about the darkness, which the masses do not know.**

**One is always at a disadvantage when he is ignorant of the enemy. Nations know this, and that is why the intelligence forces our vital to survival. We try and find out every possible move of the enemy. We use spies and reconnaissance planes to keep current of enemy movements. Not to do is to give the enemy the advantage of surprise. Death is an enemy, and we ought to know all that can be known about this enemy, and not be content with leaving it as a total mystery. In order to protect believers from being at the mercy of mystery mongers who sell their ignorance God has given, through Paul, some clear answers concerning the mystery of death. They are not answers reserved for the elite and spiritually superior. They are public information for the benefit of all.**

**There is so much revealed in I Cor. 15 alone that it would take a whole series of messages to expound it. This does not mean that there is no more mystery. There will always be some mystery simply because we are finite and cannot comprehend infinite truth. Some poet has written,**

**Shall my gazes see with mortal eyes,  
Or any searcher know by mortal mind?  
Veil or after veil will lift-but there must be**



**Veil upon veil behind.**

**As long as we are in these bodies there will be veils, but it is our responsibility to lift those veils and remove them where God has given knowledge. There is no merit in being ignorant of that which God wants us to see concerning death. Paul begins the final paragraph of his long discourse on death and resurrection by saying in verse 51, "Behold I show you a mystery." Henry Vaughn wrote,**

**Dear, beauteous death, the jewel of the just,  
Shining nowhere but in the dark;  
What mysteries do lie beyond the dust,  
Could man outlook that mark!**

**Paul is saying that is exactly what we are going to do. We are going to look beyond the dust into the realm of ultimate destiny. Not, however, because we have any faculty capable of grasping the unknown and reducing it to the known, but because God has revealed it. It is a mystery that Paul is going to show us, and a mystery is a truth that cannot be known except by revelation. In other words, if it is not revealed it will remain in the realm of the unknown beyond the powers of man to discover.**

**The first aspect of the mystery is that we shall not all sleep. Not all Christians will die. There will be those who enter the realm of eternity directly from this life without going through the valley of death, just as Enoch and Elijah did in the Old Testament. In the case of the Christians, however, it will not be because they are such unique servants of God, but simply because they live at the end of history. The pattern of what is normal is not followed at the beginning or the end. The first of God's children on earth, who were Adam and Eve, were not born, and the last of His children on earth will not die. Both are dwelt with by God directly and uniquely. He is the alpha and**

**omega, the beginning and the end. He is the source of life and the goal of life. In between the beginning and the end God established a pattern guided by natural law. All people come into the world by birth and leave it by way of death. Only the last generation will leave this world without sleeping the sleep of death.**

**The New Testament often refers to death as sleep, and this is a real revelation of the Christian attitude. Sleep describes death as simply becoming unconscious to this world. Byron wrote, "Death, so-called, is a thing which makes us weep, and yet a third of life is past in sleep." Natural sleep, however, is pleasant even to the beholder, for one knows the sleeper is at rest gaining strength to rise again and be active. Death is a sleep from which the body does not recover, and so there is no more communication. Even the certainty of seeing them again does not eliminate the fact of a real temporary loss. Therefore, though death is sleep for the Christian, it is still a sad loss for those who are left behind.**

**The paradox of the sleep of death is that though it appears to be a permanent sleep to those alive, it is really the end of all sleep for the one who is dead. It is the last sleep from which one wakes to sleep no more, for never again will there be a need for daily recuperation. The paradox is that all our lives we are dying, but at death we cease to die if we are in Christ. The unbeliever has another death to die called the second death, which is the death of the spirit when it is eternally banished from God's presence.**

**A German proverb says, "As soon as we are born we are old enough to die." All our lives we are dying even as we live. About every 7 years we have an entirely new body. The old one is dying and disappearing on a daily basis. Our baby body dies and is replaced by the body of youth. It dies and is replaced by the body of adulthood. It dies and is replaced by the body of old age. When this last earthly**

**body dies then we receive a body that is immortal, and which shall never die. Death for the Christian is the end of death and the beginning of life without death. John Donne wrote, "One short sleep past, we wake eternally, and death shall be more; death thou shalt die."**

**This is the experience of all believers until the second coming, but those alive then will not need to die, for Paul says they too along with the dead must be changed. Death is not essential to entering the kingdom of God, but a transformation is essential, and so every believer living and dead will be changed when Christ comes again. Paul had just stated in verse 50 that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Those who felt that the Lord might come in their lifetime could fear that it would be to their advantage to die first less they get caught in their immortal bodies, but Paul assures them that there is nothing to fear, for all will be changed.**

**Paul goes on to stress that when this change takes place, and we have all put on immortality, then death shall be swallowed up in victory. It is significant that Paul uses the word victory three times in this context dealing with death, and never once uses it in all his other writings. Paul is making it clear as possible that death is an enemy, and a very powerful one, but that in Christ we can gain the victory over this most monstrous of foes. Back in verse 26 Paul says that death will be the last enemy to be destroyed. I emphasize Paul's strong language because lack of understanding on this point has caused Christians to think of death in a strange way. Paul does not stand shaking hands with death as a friend, but he stands in Christ victorious over it as a defeated fiend. It is the enemy of God, of Christ, and of man.**

**The Christian, like anyone else, can see the blessing of death in many situations. A person lingering in great and incurable pain is**

blest by the relief of death. But to build our theology about death around some of the benefits it can bring is foolish, and it leads to all kinds of superficial ideas that make death the loyal and obedient servant of God rather than His enemy. Any time you automatically use the cliché, "It was for the best, or his number was up, or God took him," you substitute sentiment for the clear Word of God. Many Christians act and talk as if they were pagan fatalists when it comes to the matter of death. This ought not to be, for it does great harm to our concept of God. Many people who hear the statements, when they have lost a loved one feel anger that God would act like a cruel tyrant in taking their loved ones. Many people would rather be lost than worship a God who twists people into knots of pain and crushes the life out of them. If you are promoting such an image of God by conveying the idea that all death is His will, then you should do it in the name of some other god rather than the God of Scripture, for He is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort.

God does not will all death. If that was so, what is all the fuss about in trying to blame tyrants for their atrocities. If God alone is the author of all death, then He has determined that people will die at the hands of cruel tyrants. They are merely His servants fulfilling His will if this view is true. Why blame Hitler for killing six million Jews if it was God's appointed time for them? This is horrible theology, but Christians promote it because they do not stop to think of the implications of what they say when they claim all death is God's will.

If you study death through the Old Testament you will discover that much death is not God's will and that His laws are often designed to prevent death when it would be certain without these laws. We need to recognize that death is truly an enemy and that it is the wages of sin. It is part of the kingdom of evil, and that is why it will have no place in God's eternal kingdom. We can only face it with a positive spirit because Jesus has conquered it and promised to bring us all out

**of the realm of death into His Father house. Death is a defeated foe, but it is still an enemy. This is not a mystery, but a clear revelation of God through the Apostle Paul in this chapter.**

## **12. SUCCESSFUL SUFFERING Based on James 1:1-8**

**Imagine the testing of the body in such a sport as football. To be on your feet and seconds later brought to the ground hard and fast. Then to get up and do it again, and again, and again, but constantly moving forward. All of that falling is not what wins the game, but whether or not you win depends a great deal on how you fall. In fact, it has been pointed out that when the coaches begin to train their teams the first lesson they teach is not how to make a touchdown, but how to fall. For days they learn to fall limp and to roll so as not to be injured. There is nothing good about a fall. It is only a hindrance to reaching the goal, but if you don't learn how to fall successfully it is not likely you will ever get a chance to reach the goal. All the training is not to cross the goal line, but to survive until you get there.**

**What is true in football is likewise true in life in general. If we hope to make life a successful experience, and reach some worthy goals, the first thing we need to learn is how to fall. Life is always filled with obstacles to overcome. Scripture says, "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward." And, "Man that is born of a woman is a few days, and full of troubles," says the book of Job. The Bible from Genesis to Revelation gives a realistic picture of life, and that picture looks more like a washboard than a slide. We must face the facts of Scripture and history and realize that the future holds trials, troubles, and for some even tragedy. This realism in the Bible,**

**however, is combined with an optimism because it reveals to us the way to triumph through our trials.**

**The Bible is very practical and one of the books most noted for being practical is the book of James. It was written by James, not the Apostle, but James the brother of our Lord. It was written by a man who grew up with Jesus in the same family, and who knew his teachings very well. There are more references to the Sermon on the Mount in James than in all the other Epistles put together. It also has the distinction of being one of the first books of the New Testament to be written. It was written about 45A.D.; less than 20 years after the death of Jesus. The very first lesson that James teaches, like that of the football coach, is the lesson on how to fall, or if we were to give it a title we might call it, The Secret Of Successful Suffering. In these first few verses James tells us of three requirements necessary for the successful suffering of trials. The first is-**

#### **I. A POSITIVE RESPONSE OF THE WILL TO TRIALS. verse2.**

**The difference between tragedy and triumph is all in how you count your trials. James says by an act of the will count it all joy when tried. Don't let circumstances take you captive and control your life, but compel them to yield the fruit of joy by a choice of the will. The Christian is never to be under the circumstances, always on top of them. Faith does not change what life brings to you, but it is to change what you bring to life. Every trial calls for a choice that involves the will. It is not what happens that determines a person attitude, but how they chose to count what happens. One man can get a flat on the way to work and count it a blast from the hand of fate, and be upset all day because he lost an hour of work. Another can have the same experience and count it as the providential protection of God that may have saved his life, and he rejoices all day in thanksgiving to God. The**

**difference between the scowling crab and a smiling Christian is all in how you count your trials. The scowler counts them a jinx; the smiler counts them a joy.**

**The Bible has a high view of man's will power, especially after he has been delivered from being dominated by the forces of evil. For James to say, count it all joy, it is assumed that if they will so choose they have the will power to do so, and only if they do can they be successful in their suffering. James can urge them, warn them, and counsel them, but only they can make the choice, but they can if they will.**

**When those two planes crashed in mid air some years ago killing all aboard there were three men who watched it on the radar screen. They saw the two planes on a collision course and they shouted and shouted until they saw them hit. One of them became violently ill, the second passed out, and the third had a nervous breakdown and was institutionalized. They saw the danger but did not have control of the plane, and so all their efforts were in vain. So it is in our experiences of falling into trials. James can shout, count it all joy; preachers down through history can shout it; your friends can shout it, but then all they can do is stand and watch you go down unless your will responds in a positive manner and counts it all joy. In other words, your will is the pilot in your life. If it gives up all is lost, but if it refuses to be defeated you can never fail. Your plans may fail, and the plane may go down, but the positive will, even then, land you safely with the parachute of joy. As long as the will responds positively there is no such thing as defeat.**

**When Dr. Maxwell from Prairie Bible Institute was in the Twin Cities, he told the story of the first man to bring a plane out of a tail spin. His name was Stinson, I believe. He was flying one day doing some fancy tricks when suddenly he went into a tail spin. No one had**

**ever come out of a tail spin before. He tried everything he could think of. He pushed and pulled, turned and twisted, and nothing happened. It looked hopeless and time was short as he plunged toward the earth. He finally decided to give it everything and get it over, and to his amazement, as he gave it the gas he pulled out of the tail spin. He wondered, could it be he discovered the way to come out of a tail spin? The only way to know was to try again, so he climbed up high and purposely went into another tail spin, and came out of it by the same method. By an act of the will he turned a trial that had always brought tragedy into triumph.**

**Scripture tells us that God works in all things for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose, but nothing works for good to those who will not count it good. If we refuse to consider a thing good even when it is, it will not be good for us. Like the woman who always complained about so many bad potatoes in her field. One year almost all of them were good, and then she complained because she had no bad ones to feed the pigs. Even blessings are not good to the person with a negative will, but to the person with a positive will even trials can bring joy. But James makes it clear that this positive response of the will to trials must be based on the second requirement which is-**

## **II. A POSITIVE RECOGNITION OF THE WORTH OF TRIALS. verses 3 and 4.**

**The Scriptures tell us that no chastening for the present seems to be joyous. James does not expect us to be joyful because we are suffering, or even while we are suffering, though that is not impossible, but the joy comes in reflection and by our recognizing how even trials can help us attain the spiritual goals of our life. If we allow them, they can teach us patience, which is an essential virtue in becoming all that God wants us to be. The joy we can have in trials is in recognizing**



**that Christlike character is our goal, and if trials can help us to be more like Him, then we can rejoice and suffer successfully.**

**Virtues grow out of the possibility of vices. Who has ever been brave who did not have a chance to be a coward? How can one have courage who has never faced danger? Who can know what patience is who has never been tried by impatience? Trials are opportunities to develop virtues. It is not the trial that brings joy, but the knowledge that the trial can teach us things that are never learned by a life of ease. Nobody would ever bother to watch football if there were no obstacles to overcome. Take away the opposition and the game loses all meaning.**

**A young Italian working in an American stone quarry had both eyes blinded, and he lost one arm by careless handling of dynamite by others. He was helpless and the future looked dark, but a woman who lived near the hospital where he was, and who knew Italian, had compassion on him, and she helped him get into a school for the blind. He was grateful for the fact that someone cared, and he became an eager student. He went on to become one of the most popular teachers in that school. If he had never had his tragic experience he likely would have remained an illiterate the rest of his life. The loss of his sight lead to him seeing more than he ever did before. He once said, "The day of my accident was the birthday of my mind." He counted his trial all joy.**

**Archidimus in Thucydides, the famous Greek historian, said, "We should remember that man differs little from man except that he turns out best who is trained in the sharpest school." Henry Howard has pointed out that this is true in nature as well. The Australian black-butt is a tree that grows in rich soil where there is a great deal of rain, and they grow so close together they are sheltered from the wind and storm. It becomes huge in its life of luxury and ease, and it**

**grows to a height of 300 feet, but in its sheltered life it develops no toughness of fiber, and, therefore, is practically worthless for any purpose where endurance is required.**

**In contrast with this tree is the English oak which battles the storms from its birth until it is strong and mature. It grows slow but solid. The Australian-butt will rot under ground in 6 months, but English oak is used in England for underground wooden pipes, and after 300 years they were dug up and found to be as good as when they were laid. The proof that it is the trials endured that gives it the strength is that if the English oak is planted in Australia with its less vigorous climate, it grows twice as fast and is much feebler. Therefore, even nature teaches that trials are of great worth in producing quality.**

**Who can find a greater quality of music than that of Handel's Messiah? It did not come out of a life of ease, but one of great trial. In his biography we read, "His health and his fortune had reached the lowest ebb. His right side had become paralyzed, and his money was all gone. His creditors seized him and threatened him with imprisonment. For a brief time he was tempted to give up the fight, but then he rebounded again to compose the greatest of his inspirations, the epic Messiah." If all had been going great for him, he may never have created his greatest work.**

**The greatest trial in all of history led to the greatest triumph in all of history. When Jesus in the agony of Gethsemane recognized the worth of what He was to suffer for, responded with His will saying, "Not my will but thine be done." He counted it all joy to go to the cross. Scripture says, "Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross." Never has there been such successful suffering, and James urges us to follow that same pattern that Jesus followed by making a positive response of the will to trials, based on a positive**

**recognition of the worth of trials. The particular value which James stresses is patience, which we will not deal with now, for now we want to look at the third requirement which is-**

### **III. A POSITIVE REQUEST FOR WISDOM IN TRIALS. verses 5-8.**

**In a sense, we are ending with the beginning. We are covering last that which comes first. Just as the response of the will is based on our recognition of the worth of trials, so our recognition of the worth of trials is based on our request for wisdom to be able to see it. In other words, learning how to triumph in trials, and to suffer successfully, begins with prayer for the wisdom needed to guide our will to the proper choices. Success in anything for the Christian comes down to the simple phrase, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness."**

**Like the football player, we do not wait until the tackler is upon us before we learn how to fall. We learn this before the trial comes. A Japanese proverb says, "Dig the well before you are thirsty." Another says, "Shingle the roof before the storm." The football player prepares through practice; the Christian prepares through prayer. James is saying, if you don't have the will power to count it all joy when trials come; if you are not convinced that trials can be of great value, then you lack the wisdom which only God can give. Therefore, you had better make a positive request for such wisdom, for without it you can never suffer successfully.**

**Notice, he does not say we are to ask to be delivered from trials, but ask for the wisdom necessary to make them work for good in your life. Alexander Maclaren said that the lack of wisdom is the chief defect in the average Christian. It comes only by persevering in prayer. Paul was constantly praying for the Christians of his day that**

they might have the wisdom of God. In Col. 1:9 we read, "We do not cease to pray for you that you might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding." We have not because we ask not James says. Here is a clear statement that to ask for wisdom is always in the will of God, and God delights to grant it. James himself was known to be a man of prayer, and that explains his practical wisdom. Tradition says he has knees like a camel because he spent so much time on them.

Donald M. Baillie relates of how in the 17th century the Westminster Assembly met to draw up a Protestant Confession of Faith. At that assembly was Dr. John Selden, one of the greatest scholars of the day, but who was a defender of the Erastian heresy. He gave such a brilliant argument for the heresy that the good Presbyterians there were at a loss as how to defend the truth. Then, unexpectedly, George Gillespie, a young Scotsman, rose in the meeting and spoke against the heresy in an amazingly effective way which swept away years of labor on the part of Dr. Selden. When his speech was over his friends got a hold of the notebook that had lain in front of him hoping to find the outline of his argument, but on the page they found nothing but a single sentence penciled over and over again as he sat there waiting to speak. There were just three Latin words, "Da lucem, Domine," which means "Give light, O Lord." He lacked wisdom but he asked of God.

Wisdom includes knowledge, but is more, for it is the ability to use knowledge to arrive at the best ends by the best means. Wisdom directs the use of knowledge. Many people have the knowledge of how to drive a car, but they lack the wisdom which is necessary to drive it properly. When a drunken man wants to drive a car, it is not knowledge he lacks, but wisdom. Wisdom is the capacity to use knowledge effectively for good purposes. Everyone suffers, but only

**the wise makes a success of it, for only the wise recognize that trials can be of profit if they are wisely used.**

**Disraeli said, "The fool wonders but the wise man asks." But notice that our asking must be positive. It must be in faith without doubt. God is ever ready to grant the request for wisdom, but He cannot answer the prayer of the double minded. This is one who is not sure he wants God's will, and so he would not be able to receive the wisdom of God anyway. He is like Augustine who in his early prayers before he came all out for Christ use to pray, "O God, make me pure, but not now." He was double minded. He wanted to follow two paths at the same time. Jesus said you cannot serve two masters, for you will love the one and hate the other. The double minded man literally does not have a prayer. God refuses to grant any request from such a person. They are like people who are "Trying to serve the Lord in such a way as not to offend the devil." They think they can be a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and get by with it. God demands a simple and single minded faith.**

**The lesson on how to suffer successfully involves the whole of one's spiritual life and relationship to God. In learning this lesson we will learn that which is necessary to be a complete and entire Christian. We will learn to fall in such a way that we are brought closer to our goal of Christlikeness for having fallen. We will do this by a positive response of the will to trials; by a positive recognition of the worth of trials, and by a positive request for wisdom in our trial. The most important thing to remember is that we must be asking God for wisdom if we are going to suffer successfully.**

## **11. GOOD OUT OF EVIL Based on Phil. 1:12-26**

**Luther Burbank, the world famous scientist, worked for years to try and develop a black-petaled lily. He had several thousand experimental lily plants in his laboratory. A sudden cloudburst let loose a flood of rain that they were all washed away. William Stidger tells of sympathizing with him over what had happened, and Burbank said to him , "When anything like this happens I always remember a little couplet my mother use to quote:**

**From the day you are born  
Till you ride in a hearse,  
There's nothing that happens  
Which couldn't be worse.**

**We have all sought to comfort ourselves at some point in life by recognizing this reality-it could be worse. It is almost always true, but still it is a negative comfort. Your life can be a mess, but others are even worse. If this is the best you got, then it has to be what you hang on to, but there is a better and more positive way to deal with the negatives of life, and that is to wait and see if what you thought was bad turns out to be good, and instead of being the worst, it may in reality be the best thing that could have happened.**

**That is what Paul is writing about to the Philippians. They are worried about Paul. They heard he was thrown in prison in Rome, and they have naturally concluded that his being arrested was not a good thing. They assumed that his ministry, which they supported, was now on hold, and Paul would be of no value in advancing the Gospel now. Paul says not to worry, for your gifts are not money down a hole. His being arrested turns out to actually help the advance of the Gospel, and give him a better ministry than the one he had planned.**

**The key to being an optimist is having the patience to wait and see**

**what God will do with your negative experience. We so often jump to the conclusion that bad stuff is just that, and that alone. Sickness, trials, shipwrecks, stoning, and prison do not sound like prizes for which you would sell many lottery tickets. Nobody wants this sort of stuff in their life if they can avoid it. What Paul learned by his experience is that the bad stuff of life can be a way for God to use your life in a way that good things could not be used. Paul's being a prisoner led to his having a ministry to the palace guard of Nero, and some of these soldiers came to Christ, which never would have happened had he not become a prisoner. He never would have crossed their path had he not been arrested.**

**The fruit of Paul's ministry in prison was quite extensive, and he writes in 4:22, "All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household." Paul had Christian friends in the highest places, even the house of the Emperor. There is no reason to believe this ever could have happened if Paul had not been treated like a criminal. This is one of the answers to the question-why do bad things happen to good people? It is because bad things are often the only way to get us in touch with the right people, and to make us willing to go the way God wants us to go. In other words, bad things are tools God uses to get the job done in our lives. The point is not to rejoice in bad things, but to rejoice in the Lord who can use bad things for good goals we never would have achieved without the bad things.**

**Colonel Bringle of the Salvation Army became a very popular author. He came out of Harvard with honors, and began his ministry on a street corner in Boston. A drunken hooligan threw a brick at him and hit him in the head. He received a concussion that put him in the hospital for months. During his convalescence he wrote a book called Help To Holiness. He added four volumes, and these devotional aids sold in large numbers around the world. He said, "My brethren, if there had never been a brick, there never would have been a book."**

**His bad experience opened up doors he never would have entered had they not compelled him to do so. Don't be so quick to label bad things as a curse. Wait to see if it might be a blessing. Even pray to that end.**

**Grace Crowell wrote a poem that says it all.**

**Yet as I live them, strange I did not know  
Which hours were destined thus to live and shine,  
And which among the countless ones would grow  
To be, peculiarly, forever mine.  
If I but wait, perhaps, this hour will be  
Like silver in the sun, some day, to me!**

**Paul never dreamed that his days in prison would be days God would use him to let his light shine through all of history because of the epistles he would write there. We should pray, "Lord this is a bad day I am having, what good can you help me make of it for your glory?"**

**F. W. Borham, the great Australian preacher and author, tells of his pastor friend who was asked in Seminary to preach at a certain church one weekend when the pastor became ill. He had other plans with 2 of his best friends, and he did not want to go. He suggested other names and begged to be excused, but the Professor refused to let him off the hook. It was with deep anger that he submitted, and he went to the church in a negative mood, wanting to curse them rather than bless them. But all of his negative feelings were sheer waste, for he met the love of his life there, and his whole future was changed. Had he just waited to see what the end result would be, he could have saved himself a lot of grief. One of the most common phrases of the Bible is wait on the Lord, and the reason is, we need to learn to wait and see what God in his providence is going to do before we label bad things as a curse.**



**Bad things often turn out like Paul's being thrown in prison. They are stepping stones to fruitful blessings that could not be foreseen. God loves to work in all things, even bad things, for good. It is God's specialty, and wise is the Christian who has a wait and see attitude toward bad things. Because Paul had this attitude, he did not have to back off earlier testimony. Had he jumped the gun and written saying this is the worst thing to ever happen to me, and now my ministry is ruined, he would have been embarrassed to have to later say it was a great blessing. He waited to see what God would bring to pass. Jowett wrote, "The cloud, which appeared so ominous, brought a gracious shower; the restriction became the mother of a larger liberty." Prison bars and progress sound incompatible, but Paul just waited and sure enough, he saw his arrest lead to advance. It was a promotion to a higher ministry.**

**Why is it so important for Christians to grasp this reality that God can use evil for good? Because most of the unbelief in this world is base on this very issue. Most atheists are so because they say a good God cannot exist and permit all the terrible evil and suffering there is in this world. Many people do not believe in God because they feel they are better than God, for they would not permit the evil that exists if they had the power of God. So who needs a God who is less noble and compassionate than they are themselves? This would be a fairly powerful argument if the Bible did not reveal that God permits evil for a higher good. He permitted evil men to kill His Son for the sake of redeeming lost men. He permits men to become lost, because only those who are lost and then found again can be truly righteous and loyal to God forever. Satan was made perfect by God, but he fell because of pride. That will never happen to those redeemed by the Son of God. They will be eternally loyal, for they know they are what they are by the grace of God, and not by their own wisdom, power, or goodness. If God is going to have an eternal kingdom with assurance their will never be another rebellion, he had to permit a world with**

**evil and free choice. This terrible fallen world is essential to the perfect world to come. God will bring good out of all its evil.**

**What good is evil? It is the opportunity to be a child of God. Paul says do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Use evil to reveal your good. Let your light shine by showing the contrast of the good to the evil.**

**Where there is hate show love.**

**Where there is greed show generosity.**

**Where there is bitterness show forgiveness.**

**Where there is gloom show joy.**

**Where there is anxiety show peace.**

**Where there is violence show gentleness.**

**The point is, if there was no evil there would be no way to identify the good. The goal of history for the Christian is to bring good out of evil, so that evil does not win the war. Whenever you stop with evil, you let it win. The Christian is to overcome evil with good, and that means to go over, around, or through it, and if you can't avoid it no matter what, then seek to use it for some good and outwit it. The providence of God is God working in history to make bad events and circumstances lead to good consequences. Paul's imprisonment was bad for it was unjust and unfair, and caused by hate. God used their evil scheme to get the Gospel into the very household of Caesar. This was the beginning of Christianity becoming the official faith of the Roman Empire.**

**We often forget the idea of no pain, no gain philosophy, and we resist making anything bad for our children to endure, even when we should know that helps them to become stronger. Cheryl Forbes, a Christian journalist who worked for Zondervan Publishing House, wrote a book called Backdoor Blessings. Her first job was terrible. The boss was an older woman who made her rewrite almost**

everything she submitted for publication. For a year she resented this snooty miss know-it-all. But slowly it dawned on her that she had become a good writer, and she owed it all to this boss she did not like. Had the boss been a good buddy, and let her get by with less than her best, she never would have attained the level of expertise she had reached. The one she thought was her enemy was really her secret friend.

In Acts 9:16 God said of Paul, "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Paul was chosen for a tough life, but out of all the evil he had to suffer, the world is still, and will forever, reaping the good fruit of his life. His thorn in the flesh was a pain he had to endure lest his pride caused him to lose his favored status with God. It is a principle of life that if someone you love will be a better person by what they suffer, then love will permit that suffering for the sake of that goal. If your child will be more loving as a person by being discipline, then in love you must inflict pain for the sake of this higher goal. If it's a good enough principle for God, it is a good enough principle for us to practice in all loving relationships.

I had to hurt Lavonne over and over again this past week. I rubbed her damaged muscle to fight the inflammation. It was painful, but I did it willingly, for I knew it was the only way to get her back to health. Pain was the necessary path to pleasure. I hurt her on purpose for the sake of a positive goal. That was why Paul was in prison, and that is why a lot of negative things happen in life to all of us. The path of pain can lead to pleasure for those who wait to see where the path will lead.

Dr. Reuben Youngdahl, of Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, tells of his experience on a world tour. He was enjoying the white sands of the Indian Ocean at Durban, South Africa. He gave no thought to sunburn until it was too late, and he looked like a

**lobster. He was so sick in the night he considered going to the hospital. He had to spend the rest of his time there sitting in the shade watching others have fun. The day of his great suffering was the day the blue-battle fish infested the shore waters, and with their stingers sent over 1000 swimmers to the hospital. 150 were poisoned serious enough to be hospitalized. Several almost died. He could have been one, and so he realized that his misfortune was also his good fortune. His pain saved him from worse pain, or even death.**

**President Theodore Roosevelt lived before bifocals were invented. The result was he had to carry two pairs of glasses with him. One was for near vision, and the other for far vision. In his last campaign he was shot when he was in Milwaukee. The surgeon who examined his wound handed him his steel spectacle case and said that the bullet hit this case, and it was deflected from your heart, and saved your life. The president took the case with its shattered spectacle and said, I've always considered the burden and handicap of having to carry these two pairs of glasses, especially these heavy ones that were in this case, as a very sore one, and here at last they have been the means of saving my life." It was a long wait to see any good from that negative reality, but in the long run it turned out that his burden was a blessing.**

**Arturo Toscanini, the famous orchestra conductor, hated being handicapped with his near sightedness. At nineteen he was playing the cello in an orchestra, but he could not see the music on the stand, so he had to work harder than anyone, and memorize the music. One day the orchestra leader became ill, and suddenly Toscanini was the only member of the orchestra who knew the score. So he conducted it without the score, and got great responses from the audience. Had he not been near sighted he never would have been ready for this opportunity that lead him to become one of the great conductors of all time. The bad thing in his life became the best thing in his life for his career.**

**Charles Spurgeon tells the true story of how lies can be used to the glory of God. An evangelist was to preach in a small Italian town back when there was a great deal of hostility between Catholics and Protestants. The local priest told his people that this man who was coming was a worshipping of the devil. This scared many, and so they stayed away, but one depraved soul was interested in devil worship, so he went to hear the man. Nothing could have gotten him there but this lie. But when he came and heard of Jesus, the devil's conqueror, he became a convert to Jesus rather than the devil he was going to seek. God used a lie to bring this man to Jesus.**

**The point is not, that liars are good, or handicaps, or other bad things are of value. The whole negative aspect of a fallen world is just that-negative. It is bad, and not good, for it would all be taken into the eternal kingdom if it was good. But the fact is, it is all eliminated. We are calling black white, or evil good, for all bad things are bad. The point is, God is not limited to using good things for His purpose. He can use bad things as well, and it is to be one of the challenges of life to work with God to bring good out of evil.**

**What happened at Standard Oil is a good illustration in the world of industry. After oil is refined, a greasy black liquid is a waste product. They use to empty it at the river, but laws were passed to stop that. Then they dug a pit to get rid of it, but that failed. They tried to burn it, but that was almost a disaster. Finally, in desperation, they called in chemists from all over the country, and by accident they stumbled on to a way to make this massive nuisance into paraffin. This became one of the most profitable products of the refineries. This story is repeated in the history of dozens of waste products.**

**The point being, what is true for things is true also for events. Negatives, like the wastes of life and the bad events, can, by the grace**

**of God be transformed into valuable products and good experiences. So don't waste anything in life, for what you feel is bad and worthless can become your most treasured event. Charles Kettering was cranking his car in the good old days, and it kicked on him and broke his arm. He thought, this is terrible. There must be an easier way to start a car. This painful event motivated him to go and invent the self-starter that has saved millions of others from suffering. One man's pain led to the greater pleasure of the masses.**

**That good can come out of evil does not mean there is nothing difficult to bear in the evil. Paul lost his freedom and had to be confined in chains and pay a heavy price for the good that came of it. It was not free but costly to be used of God this way. It would be just as hard, or even harder, however, if no good ever came of it. The hard part is made easier in knowing good will be the end result. Paul did eventually get executed, but he had all the joy of seeing the good that was coming because of his suffering. This is not always the case. The nuclear crisis at the reactor in Chernobyl is a good example. Many people died in that crisis, but it forced doctors to learn rapidly about the removal, treatment and transplant of bone marrow. They had to act quickly, and they learned by trial and error, but the end result was they learned what will benefit all mankind. One of the doctors made this comment.**

**"We were like Star Trek. We were going where mankind had never gone before, but we were being dragged there reluctantly. Now, as a result, we have a whole new way to deal with an even cure cancer." The same chaotic energy that killed so many at Chernobyl may now result in a procedure of donor and autologous bone marrow transplants that will save thousands of lives. This new order was born of loss and chaos.**

**So often in history terrible things for the few can be tremendous benefits for the many. We are among the millions who are benefitting from Paul's imprisonment. Because of it, we have all the wisdom of this letter he wrote in prison. Paul suffered for your pleasure and mine. God used the bad things Paul had to endure to give good things to us. It is one of the ways of God in history to show that He is in control even though man, by his sin and folly, is perpetually doing evil and harmfully things. God is in the business of reversing the effects of man's folly.**

**What we need to learn from all of this is not to jump to conclusions, and write off bad experiences as total loss. Ask God to help you use the bad as a stepping stone to some good. If God loves to bring good out of evil, then don't waste evil, and let it be evil only, but seek for ways it can lead to good. A most dramatic and radical illustration of this comes from the diary of Ann Taylor, a servant girl coming to America from England. She was raped on board the ship. It was so devastating she wanted to die, but fortunately for her a Quaker lady named Henrietta Best was there, and she had been raped decades before by French soldiers. Now let's make this clear-this was a totally evil experience-it was pure evil. But the point is, it was not wasted, but used. Henrietta came to Ann and used her evil experience to bring comfort to her. Ann wrote in her diary-**

**"She could say to me, "Hush, it happened to me, too." And those words saved my life and my reason. What resurrected me, were her love and her understanding, which, clearly, were the fruit of her own suffering; she could identify with me without pious pretense. When she consoled me and took me in her arms, I experienced the presence of God."**

**The evil of the past was still evil, and those who did it will be judged, but good was brought out of the evil by a wise use of it. Had Paul laid around his cell swearing at the guards, his evil experience would not have been used for good. He had to be an impressive witness to his joy in Christ in spite of his suffering, or he would have seen no fruit from his evil experience. Bad things don't lead to good by their nature. They only root like fruit and get worse. They can only lead to good as we learn to use them wisely.**

**The point here is not to say let's all get arrested and see what good can come of it. We are to avoid all evil, and try to prevent every bad thing in life. But when we cannot, and we have to suffer in this fallen world, let's not waste it, and jump to the conclusion that it is of no value. Let's work with God, and seek to overcome evil with good, and rob the devil of his pleasure. Robert Schuller in his popular book, *Life's Not Fair But God Is Good*, deals with this issue, and gives many marvelous illustrations. One is of Serena Young, a Los Angeles Orthopedic Surgeon. As a two year girl in Taiwan, this Chinese toddler contracted polio, and lost the use of her legs. She was in and out of the hospital until she was 21, but never regained the use of her legs.**

**She was a bitter young woman. She was angry at God for allowing this to happen to her. She started to search in high school for some way to make sense of this, which seems so senseless, and this is what she discovered; Rom. 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have called according to His purpose." She wanted her handicap to be used for good, and so she began to pray that God would use her tragedy for something good. She stopped her grieving and accepted her disability. She decided she wanted to be an orthopedic surgeon. She was told that it was crazy, but she felt it was God's calling, and though the training was so hard she wanted to quit at times.**



**she persevered, and now has a very fulfilling career helping people deal with their handicaps. The Los Angeles Times had a picture of her propped up on crutches leaning over an operating table giving help and hope to others, who like her, had been dealt a bad hand. She was not wasting her bad experience, but was using it for good, and for the glory of God, whom she praises for helping her see bad things can be used for His purposes. May God help us all learn this lesson, and strive by God's grace to bring good out of evil.**

## **12. GOOD OUT OF EVIL PART2 Based on James 1:12**

**A tornado came sweeping across the prairie of Minnesota destroying everything in its path. When it struck Rochester, Minnesota, hundreds of people were injured, and 23 were killed. It was a tragedy, yet millions of people have been thankful for what God did to bring much good out of that tragic evil. After the storm, the Mayo brothers, William and Charles, worked with their father, who was the local doctor, in bandaging wounds, setting broken limbs, and performing operations. Sister Alfred, the mother superior of the Convent Sisters of St. Francis was so impressed with their work, she offered to build a hospital if the Mayo's would take charge of it. They agreed, and Mayo Clinic was opened in 1889.**

**Dr. Mayo and his two sons had never even had an hospital internship, but they turned that hospital into one of the most famous in all the world. They probably would never have been heard of outside of their own small territory, but because of that tornado they got the chance, and they took advantage of it, and became some of the best known surgeon's in America. Millions of people have been helped, cured, and blest because of the suffering of a few. It is one of the great**

**truths of history, that God delights to bring good out of evil, and turn a negative into a positive.**

**The vast majority of victories over disease in this world are the result of someone's suffering. Out of suffering comes the victory over suffering. Because John D. Rockefeller suffered an illness at age 55, he was motivated to give millions to medical research. Several million a month is spent by the Rockefeller foundation to promote good health throughout the world, just because a rich man got sick. It may sound strange, but the fact is, many can say thank God that Rockefeller never had perfect health. Thank God he suffered, for out of his suffering millions have been able to conquer suffering.**

**Thank God that Dr. Sabha Rav had a brother that died of a disease called sprue in India. That may sound cruel, but listen to the full story. He was so crushed by his brother's death that he was going to bury himself in a Hindu Monastery for the rest of his life. A Christian missionary urged him to, instead of that, do something to help others who suffered as his brother did. His imagination was inspired by the idea, and he went off to Spain, and then London, and finally to Harvard. After 15 years as a professor in Harvard Medical School he became the director of the mammoth research center in the Lederle Laboratories in New York. With 300 assistants he discovered the cure for sprue, and with his own money he sent the drug back to India where the disease that killed his brother was wiped out. Dr. Rav became a Christian, and one of the most Christlike men of our time, as well as one of the greatest medical men. Thank God for the tragic trial he had to endure, for out of it came blessings for millions.**

**We cannot know the value of any experience at the time of experiencing it. There is no way to know if that which makes us cry now it will be one of our most precious blessings in the future. Jesus said blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. In**

other words, our weeping will be turned to rejoicing, and the very thing that we feel bad about now will make us glad in the future. James says the same thing as his divine brother in verse 12. "Blessed is the man who endures trials for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him." Evil endured will end in good. What this amounts to is a challenge to be an incurable optimist, always assuming that life's trials are opportunities to cooperate with God in bringing good out of evil. Only time can reveal the true worth of any experience.

Lin Yutang tells the story of a Chinese nobleman who lost a beautiful horse. This was bad luck, and so his friends came to console him for his misfortune. But the next day the lost horse returned with ten other fine wild horses he had befriended in the wilderness. This was a stroke of good luck, and his friends gathered to congratulate him on his fine fortune. But the next day his son tried to break one of the wild horses, and was thrown off, and broke his leg. His friends gathered to bemoan this bit of bad luck. But the next day a local war was declared, and the noblemen's son was unable to fight in the bloody battle because of his broken leg, and it turned out he would certainly have been killed if he had gone into battle. So his friends gathered for a feast to rejoice over his good fortune.

The story is portraying the fact that just do not have enough knowledge to judge the value of what comes to us in life. We call it a trial if it hurts now, but we do not know what benefit it can bring to make us rejoice later. Like the pain of getting a tooth drilled and filled that we might enjoy the peace of painless months ahead. One of the main purposes of James is to help Christians see that life's negatives may have very positive value, and so we are to be optimists even in times of trial.

This takes enormous patience, for the value of a trial may not be

seen for a long time, and may not even be seen in time at all, but will only be made manifest when we receive our crown in glory. Anybody can be optimistic if the reward is just around the corner, but what if it is a long way down the road? A sign on the bank in Sioux Falls, South Dakota says, "God give me patience, and I want it right now." We are often impatient in our desire to grow in patience. It is the very fact that we cannot see the value of what we suffer right now that develops patience. We must learn to wait, believing that God is always working to bring good out of evil.

This was the case of Jim Morton, a newsman who was bitten by a rattlesnake in North Carolina. He was in a disaster area where a hurricane had blown down all the telephone lines, and so no doctor could be called. Morton's buddy applied a tourniquet and used what medication was handy. It was the next day before he was gotten to a hospital. Doctors were puzzled that he was alive. Upon examination they found that an injury he had received earlier in his life saved him. The circulation was so poor in that leg that the poison venom did not spread to the rest of his body. There is no way he could have known that when he was injured in that leg that that negative experience would one day save his life. It was a blessing he was wounded, but only a man of faith could believe it. Only faith can be optimistic in trials expecting that what is bad now will lead to some good in the future.

James says, this is just practical Christianity, and you need to pray in faith for the wisdom to see life from this perspective. In other words, do not judge life's events impatiently, assuming what is bad now is going to be perpetually bad. Rather, assume that God will work in your life to bring some good value out of what is bad, so that the day will come when you can thank God for it.

Paul had so many places to go, and things to do, and how frustrating it must have been to get arrested and thrown in prison.

**The needs of the churches were urgent. How could there be any good in this delay? Yet, we know now that Paul's imprisonment was one of the greatest blessings of history, for while in prison he wrote his Epistles that have been God's guiding light for His church for all time. Multiplied millions have been blessed by Paul's imprisonment. Paul and James were in perfect agreement on the optimistic view of life: That God works in everything for good with those who love Him, and are called according to His purpose.**

**Thomas Edison lost his hearing, but he had the wisdom to see its value. He was convinced that his amazing power of concentration had been made possible by his deafness. He was able to work undisturbed in the most noisy places, where others developed nerve problems. His handicap enabled him to concentrate and discover things that were a blessing to millions. Most negative experiences are not calamities if one has the right spirit, and the insight to see beyond the present. The same wind that blows out the match fans the smoldering coals to a fierce flow.**

**One ship drives East, another drives West,  
While the self-same breezes blow;  
Tis the set of the sails, and not the gales,  
That bids them where to go.**

**Like the winds of the air are the waves of the fates,  
As we journey along through life;  
Tis the set of the soul that decided the goal,  
And not the calm, or the strife.**

**James agrees with the poet. It is not what happens to you, but how you count it that really matters. It is your mental attitude that determines how you handle life. If you are pessimistic, you can turn a blessing into a problem. Like the farmer who had so many bad**

potatoes in his field. One year almost all were perfect potatoes, and then he complained because there were no bad ones to feed the pigs. If you are determined to be a pessimist, you can cloud every beautiful day with a spirit of gloom, but it is also true that if you can see the value of trials, you can turn every rainy day into a picnic. It is your responsibility to get the wisdom it takes to be an optimist, says James.

If from the affliction somewhere do not grow  
Honor which could not else have been, a faith  
An elevation and a sanctity;  
If new strength be not given, nor old restored,  
The blame is ours, not God's.                      Wordsworth

Again, James agrees with the poet, for he says, God will gladly give us the wisdom to see the value of life's trials, if we ask in faith. If we fail to ask, or if we doubt, and we are double minded, we will not receive the wisdom we need to see. The pessimist is a self-made man. The optimist is a God made man. The person who can see no good in anything, and who is forever complaining of life's lousy breaks, is in that state of mind, not because God wills it, but because he has chosen to live in doubt that God delights to bring forth good out of evil. Bad things always have the last word with the pessimist, and they are ends, but to the optimist they are means to a greater end.

Madam Guyon, the French mystic, was left a widow at 28. She resolved to devote her life to the poor and needy. She was arrested and put in the Bastille for 7 years. Like Paul, she used this time for writing, and her works have made her one of the most quoted women in history. She has ministered to millions because of her trials, or rather, because she was able to heed the wisdom of James, and count her trials a joy. She wrote,

My cage confines me round, Abroad I cannot fly

**But though my wing is closely bound, My heart's at liberty.  
My prison walls cannot control the flight, The freedom of my soul.  
Oh! It is good to soar these bolts and bars above,  
To thee whose purpose I adore, Whose providence I love;  
And in thy mighty will to find, The joy, the freedom of the wind.**

**History is filled with examples of the truth of what James is teaching. We can share our own testimony of how the near fatal accident of our daughter Cindy has turned out to be a blessing for her and us. Her whole life has been radically changed physically, mentally, and spiritually because of that negative experience. There is no way we could know at the time of the crisis. Everything was dark and negative, but in time good came from that evil. This truth of James is demonstrated time and time again in history, and can be experienced in our own lives. But I want to warn you of the dangers involved in this precious truth. Just as good can come out of evil, so evil can come out of good by abuse, misunderstanding, and superficial application of the truth.**

**Christians tend to push this theme of good out of evil to a point where they deny the reality of evil, and lose their balance. If God works in everything for good, they say, then everything is really good after all, and just seems to be evil. This is the Christian Science view of life. Sin and evil are just wrong ways of thinking, and are not real. This is not only heresy, it is nonsense, and we need to avoid any connection with such folly.**

**The book of James is packed with clear revelation of the reality of evil that is to be avoided. In this first chapter he makes it clear that doubt and double-mindedness makes us miss God's best. Temptation is not of God, but comes from our own inner lust, and leads to sin and death out of God's will. Anger is an evil that does not do the will of God. Christians can be deceived, and be hearers of the Word, and**

**not doers. They can use their tongue in many evil ways. In chapter 2 he says Christians can be prejudice, and sin terribly in showing partiality. He can profess faith, but be superficial because he does not follow it up with good works.**

**In chapter 3 he warns of the danger of teaching, and how we can make many mistakes, especially with the tongue. It can do so much evil that hurts the body of Christ. It is pure stupidity to think of this as good. So it is with the jealousy and selfish ambition that Christians can display. In chapter 4 he says, war is not God's will. It comes from the evil heart filled with covetousness. Unanswered prayers are common he says, because we only ask to fulfill our own passionate drives. Christians can be such proud, arrogant sinners that they become friends of the world and enemies of God. They can speak evil of their brothers, and plan their future with no thought of God. In chapter 5 he condemns the rich Christians who live in luxury and pleasure at the expense of others.**

**The point of this survey is to give balance, lest we jump to the false conclusion that because God can bring good out of evil, all evil is really good. Not so! Life is full of evil, and the Christian church is full of folly and sin, and harmful practices that make life miserable for many, and with no redeeming values. Christians hurt each other, injure each others faith, and their ability to function properly in the body, and there is nothing good about it. It is folly and nothing else. Keep the superficial idea out of your head that everything is good. You will find this in the literature of the cults, but not in the Word of God. Everyday rotten things happen to Christians. If God can bring good out of evil, but man can bring evil into good, we obviously have a confusing conflict that calls for some clear thinking.**

**It calls for us to be aware of the danger of justifying evil because God can use it for some good. Evil is still evil, and will be judged as**



such, even if God does use it for good. When a fresh shipload of slaves from Africa was unloaded in Newport in colonial days, the minister publicly prayed and gave thanks to God for bringing these benighted blacks under the blessed influence of the Gospel. He probably deceived himself, and all who were present, but it did not make slavery good. No matter how much good did come out of it, those who sinned in doing it will be held accountable for evil. The good that comes out of evil is God's doing, and will not be credited to those who do the evil. If that was the case, the opponents of Paul were correct who said, "Let us sin that grace may abound."

If this was a valid principle that God followed, Hitler will be credited for the destruction of his own evil philosophy. It was his prejudice that made him drive Einstein, Bohr, Fermi, and others from Germany, and they became the nucleus around which American and British scientists rallied to produce the atom bomb. Good came out of the folly and hatred of Hitler, but that was God's doing, and is no credit to Hitler.

Without balance every truth has the danger of leading to error. A temperature is good, for it warns of a problem in the body, and it fights the infection, but we all know that if it goes to an extreme, it kills you. So it is with the truth that God brings good out of evil. This truth can lead to promoting and justifying evil, if pushed to extremes. For example, 50 thousand people are killed on U. S. highways each year. Believe it or not, that means big business for junk dealers, repair men, doctors, hospitals, lawyers, and florists. In other words, there is good that comes out of the evil of accidents, but only a fool would say, therefore, accidents are good, and should be promoted. Instead, we do all we can to fight them and prevent them, and so it is with all evil. The Christian is to prevent all forms of evil as far as possible. However, there will always be some evil that we cannot prevent. When it comes you have the choice of letting it defeat you, or

**of cooperating with God, who will help you to bring good out of evil.**

### **13. A BELIEVER'S RESPONSE TO DEATH based on II Sam. 12:15-23**

**A young Harvard professor sat in a room once occupied by George Washington. He was exceedingly lonely and dejected. He wondered if that great man ever felt as he did then. He had lost his wife 3 years before, and had not yet been able to escape from the grip of grief. His life seemed to be an empty dream, and though he was also a poet he no longer had any heart for poetry. As he sat there looking out of the window he realized he had to stop nursing his despondency and get up and get going.**

**Almost as if he was inspired his poetic began to pour forth lines that lifted him, and have since lifted millions. No poem ever became so famous so fast. It was taught in schools, discussed in pulpits, and on platforms all over the world. It was translated into many languages. At one time a poll revealed it to be the favorite poem of this nation, and even now it is heard quite often. I want to share just a portion of Longfellow's poem, The Psalm Of Life.**

**Tell me not, in mournful numbers, Life is but an empty dream!  
For the soul is not dead that slumbers, And things are not what they  
seem. Life is real! Life is earnest! And the grave is not its goal; Dust  
thou art, to dust returnest, Was not spoken of the soul.  
Not enjoyment, and not sorrow, Is our destined end or way;  
But to act, that each tomorrow Finds us further than today.  
Trust no future, how e'er pleasant! Let the dead past bury its dead!  
Act, -act in the living present! Heart within, and God o'erhead! Lives**

**of great men all remind us We can make our lives sublime And,  
departing, leave behind us Footprints on the sands of time; Footprints,  
that perhaps another, Sailing o'er life's solemn main, A forlorn and  
shipwrecked brother, Seeing, shall take heart again. Let us then be up  
and doing, With a heart for any fate; Still achieving, still pursuing,  
Learn to labor and to wait.**

**We want to look back to a great man who left behind footprints in  
the sands of time. They were footprints that have done just what  
Longfellow predicted they could. They have caused many a forlorn  
and shipwrecked brother to take heart again. The way David  
responded to the death of his loved one has encouraged and helped  
many to escape the sinking ship of despair, and to stand on the solid  
rock of hope and victory. All of us will one day face the sorrow of  
losing a loved one, and many of you have already done so. Since the  
experience of death is continuous and inevitable, it is important that  
we be prepared at all times to respond to it with attitudes that are  
fitting for those who know the conqueror of death, and who is the Lord  
of life.**

**The mind and the will must be prepared before hand, and so I trust  
that our examination of David's attitude toward death will make a  
conscious impact on each of our lives. And prepare us to be fully  
Christian in the day of crisis. There are three attitudes that David  
exhibits, or three footprints he has left in the sand along the shore of  
the sea of tragedy. They are footprints that each of us will want to  
follow when we come to that same place. David has been involved in  
one sin after another that has brought him to an hour of judgment.  
God has determined that the child born to Bathsheba, as David's wife,  
but conceived out of wedlock, shall die. The child becomes very sick,  
and David faces the death of one he love dearly. The first attitude we  
see him exhibit is-**

## **I. PERSISTENCE.**

**David had faith that God is able to deliver, and he was determined to fight to the end. He was told point blank that the child would die, but he did not give up in despair. He went to his knees in prayer. He prayed and fasted in the hope that God would spare the child. In verse 22 he says he had hope right to the end. As long as the child was alive the only proper attitude he could have was that of persistent trust and faith that God could prevent the death of the child. David did not pray and fast in fear, but in faith. David's attitude was, where there is life there is hope, and those who know the author of life need never despair as long as there is life.**

**It is not Christian to give up in the face of any amount of negative evidence. Henry Amiel said, "It is dangerous to abandon one's self to the luxury of grief; it deprives one of the courage, and even the wish for recovery." Whether it be yourself or a loved one approaching the gate of death, you are to face it in faith believing that recovery is possible. In other words, when the Christian dies, or a loved one, it should be, not because he has given up hope, or has ceased to pray. The Christian is to enter death victoriously, and not in defeat. Therefore, our first attitude when we confronted with the possibility of death is to be persistence in faith that goes on trusting God, and never gives up the fight. Martin Tupper wrote,**

**Never give up! If adversity presses,  
Providence wisely has mingled the cup,  
And the best counsel, in all your distresses,  
Is the stout watchword of Never give up!**

**Many of you have heard the story of Captain Eddie Rickenbacker whose plane was forced down in the Pacific on a war mission. He and his men drifted in a raft for 8 days without food or water in the**

**scorching tropic sun. They were burned, parched, hungry, and exhausted. They were discouraged to the point of despair, and had given up hope. All, that is, except Eddie. He had faced death before, and now that he faced it again he did so in faith and hope. He was relying upon God to bring them through. He never ceased to pray and believe that they would be rescued.**

**One of the men had a Bible, and he started an evening and morning prayer meeting and Bible reading. On the 8th day it looked bad. Some were sick from drinking sea water, and some were showing signs of delirium. But Rickenbacker continued to pray and believe, for his attitude was like that of David-where there is life, there is hope. Death was staring them in the face, but it had not yet conquered. After prayer meeting on the 8th day a seagull came out of nowhere and landed on Rickenbacker's head. He gently reached up and caught him. Each man had a bite of food. They ate even the small bones. Then they used the innards for bait, and they caught a mackerel and a speckled sea bass. They were only 6 to 8 inches, but no fisherman has ever been happier with a catch as they were. That night a rain storm supplied them with drinking water.**

**These answers to prayer so changed their attitudes that though they had to drift for nearly 2 more weeks before being found, they all had developed faith. They were now willing to persist, and not give up. They were almost dead when they were found, but almost does not count in death, and their faith made them victors. When Rickenbacker was asked how they did it, his simple answer was- "we prayed." David prayed too with death staring him in the face, but his prayer was not granted. The point we are seeking to understand is not that you will never die, or that loved ones never will, if you persist in faith and prayer, but that the attitude of persistence is the only attitude a believer can consistently have. Every believer in God must face the fact of death with faith rather than fear, just as**

**David did. When he discovered that his prayer was to no avail, and the child died anyway, we see his second attitude.**

## **II. ACCEPTANCE.**

**The servants of David were fearful that when he found out the child was dead he might go hysterical and do himself harm, and possibly even take his own life. This is a common reaction to the loss of one who is greatly loved. The loved one who is left longs to join them in death. David surprised them, however, for he was only fasting and weeping in prayer because he knew there was hope. When he heard the child was dead, and hope was gone for keeping the child with him, he left off from his prayer and fasting. He washing himself, changed his clothes, and went to church. Then he went home to eat a hardy meal.**

**Ordinarily it was after the death of a person that people mourned and wept, but not for David. When death had come he thought it would be out of place to be fasting and weeping then. He accepted the fact that there is no more that can be done, and one just as well get back into the normal pattern of life. Who can doubt that David's attitude of acceptance is the most reasonable, and most helpful, in going through the crisis of losing a loved one?**

**William James, the famous psychologist, said, "Acceptance of what has happened is the first step to overcoming the consequences of any misfortune." It is not fatalism to accept the past. A fatalist would never have had the first attitude of persistence. He would be without hope, and would bow to the inevitable tragedy even before it was a reality. A Christian is never a fatalist. He never gives up hope for the future in any situation when he is trusting God as he ought. But when the event is over, and death has come, it is not fatalism to accept it. It is only common sense. It is irrational to do anything else. You cannot**

**fight what is done, and you cannot prevent the past.**

**Those who go on in grief, and carry the burden of the past for too long are not being sensible. Like David, we must recognize that what is done is to be accepted, and then get on with the gift of life that God has given and not taken yet. Even a wise pagan can see the folly of excessive grief. Xenophon, the Greek, put it as well as any when he said, "Excess of grief for the deceased is madness; for it is an injury to the living, and the dead know it not." When a loss is certain, and it cannot be regained, why add to the loss by losing more of life than is necessary. David's attitude and actions are to characterize believers. They must accept the past, and get busy on the future.**

**Dr. James Gordon Gilkey, pastor of the South Congregational Church in Springfield, Mass., has stated this truth in such a clear way. He wrote, "Misfortune cannot be conquered by furious and continuous resentment. It can be conquered only by quiet acquiescence. We win victory over bereavement only when we face our loss, accept our loss, and then make our way through and beyond our loss. You ask how we make our way through it and beyond it? We do so by deliberately reentering the world of daily activity-the busy world of problems, duties, friendships, opportunities, and satisfactions. And immolated, resentful, self-pitying life is a doomed life. Only the life which deliberately picks up and starts again is victorious."**

**Alfred Tennyson said, "I must lose myself in action lest I wither in despair." The Word of God, and the best of men's wisdom agree that David's attitude of persistence before death, and acceptance after death are high and worthy attitudes befitting a child of God. A woman who lost her daughter in an accident left the hospital and drove blindly away from the city. Late that night she came to a motel and got a room. She paced the floor in agony of spirit. On the desk**

**was a Gideon Bible. Something compelled her to open it, and she began reading the Psalms. It got late, but she couldn't stop, and so on into the night she read until she came to the last verse which said, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord."**

**Later she gave her testimony and said, "That reading of the Psalms did something very wonderful to me. All of life was there; joy and sorrow, happiness and heartbreak. I found my answers deep and satisfying. My heart was comforted. When I started reading I wanted to die; when I finished, I wanted to live. The Scripture is like a massive dose of antibiotic for the wounded heart and mind. The faster we come to acceptance, the sooner we can enter again into a life that would please the one we lost. Norman Vincent Peale went so far as to say, "I really believe myself that when the person left behind grieves excessively it may even trouble and disturb the dear one who has passed into the spiritual life." David becomes our example of swift acceptance. David has one other attitude which he expresses in verse 23, "I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." We have here the attitude of-**

### **III. ASSURANCE.**

**David accepted the past, but that did not mean he accepted it as final. Death had won the battle, and David accepts the defeat, but he also has the assurance that when the war is over, he will be reunited with his child. Death is not the end says David. His child is only a prisoner of war, and is only taken from him temporarily. William Penn wrote, "The truest end of life is to know that life never ends...death is no more than a turning of us over from time to eternity." David recognized that his child just changed his sphere of his existence.**

**So great is the desire of the human heart to believe in life beyond**



**death that even Robert Ingersall, the famous American agnostic, once stood at the grave of a friend's child and said, "If somewhere else there is another dawn; if somewhere else your child lives again, surely its life will be as good as ours. So be comforted. Take up your daily lives; help each other, and hope that someday you will know and love again the child you loved here."**

**God has given us visual aids in His creation to help us gain assurance that death does not have the final word. Cecil B. DeMille, the famous motion picture producer, used to like to get off by himself to think out a problem. On one such occasion he went out in a lake in a canoe. He just drifted until he came to rest in a place where the water was only inches deep. Looking down he saw at the bottom was covered with water beetles. As he watched, one of them came to the surface, and slowly crawled up the side of the canoe. When it reached the ridge it died.**

**DeMille went back to thinking of his problem. Sometime later he looked at the beetle again. In the hot sun the shell had become dry and brittle. As he watched, the shell split open, and from it there slowly emerged a dragonfly, which finally took to the air, and flew away with beautiful colors flashing in the sunlight. It flew over the water several times, but the water beetles below could not comprehend its new existence. They lived in their limited sphere while this winged cousin had gained the freedom of soaring between earth and sky. Later when DeMille shared this experience he concluded with a very penetrating question. "Would the Great Creator of the universe do that for a water beetle, and not for a human being?" He didn't think so, and neither should we.**

**David did not need to speak with so many ifs. He used none, in fact, but declares in an attitude of perfect assurance that he will be with his child beyond the grave. Death only shifted the object of his**

**faith. Before death he had faith that the child would not die. After death he had faith that he would be with him in eternity. David may not have been conscious of it, but his 3 attitudes in the facing of death of a child have been of great value to millions who have followed in his footsteps in the sands of time. Leigh Hunt said, "Whenever evil befalls us, we ought to ask ourselves, after the first suffering, how can we turn it into good? So shall we take occasion, from one bitter root, to raise perhaps many flowers."**

**David's misfortune, because of his God honoring response, has resulted in much comfort in getting the flowers of faith to bloom in the hearts of the bereaved. We have a Gospel of salvation in Christ that far surpasses anything David had. God forbid that as believers in the Christ who conquered death, that we fail to exhibit the attitudes of persistence, acceptance, and assurance in the experience of death.**

## **14. DELIVERED FROM DEATH BASED ON PSALM 116**

**Memorial Day began as a day to honor and remember those who died in the Civil War. The very first soldier to die in that war was Colonel Ellsworth, a personal friend of President Lincoln. Lincoln gave his regiment the honor of being the first to cross the Potomac into Virginia and pull down the rebel flag. Ellsworth took a private with him and went up to the roof and pulled down the flag himself. As he came down the stairs he was shot by the owner of the hotel. At his funeral in the East Room of the White House, Lincoln stood by his body and exclaimed, "My boy, my boy, was it necessary that this sacrifice be made!" Little did he dream that in the next four years nearly a million more from both North and South would follow this first casualty to the grave.**

**As the war proceeded, Lincoln realized that there would be an enormous price to pay to fight the evil of slavery, but that price had to be paid, for when wrong is strong, right must fight, and pay the cost however high. Ever since, America has been a nation that says freedom is a value worth dying for. It is true that more people die on the highway of our land than in the battlefields defending our freedoms, but those who die on the battlefield die for a purpose. That is why there is a holiday to commemorate such deaths.**

**It is only purposeful death that we memorialize. That is why we also have frequent communion, for it is a remembering of a death with ultimate purpose, for it saves all who put their trust in Jesus from the final death and separation from God. It gives us eternal freedom to live and enjoy all God made us for. It is the ultimate purposeful death.**

**But Memorial Day is a day of remembrance of those who died for our temporal freedom, and these were also significant purposeful deaths. Over a portal of a cemetery in North Assam where many American soldiers lie, who fought in India and Berma in World War II, stands these words, "Tell them we gave our todays for their tomorrows." Today is that tomorrow that was purchased for us by their deaths. If we appreciate the freedoms and the opportunities to enjoy life in America, because of the sacrifice of others, then we can say, "Precious in the sight of Americans is the death of her soldiers." This does not mean that we are glad that they died, or that we rejoice in their death, but that we recognize the values for which they died, and, thus, see the preciousness of the purpose for which they died.**

**We need to keep in mind that those who fought and lived also fought for our freedoms. Most fighting men did not die. They lived to enjoy the values they fought to preserve. Thank God not all had to die, for it is their living that makes those who died, not to have died in**

**vain. That was Lincoln's great commitment, and his words are in the marble behind the tomb of the unknown soldier. They read, "We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain." Only the living can make sure the dead have not died in vain, and so we thank God for survivors. It is great to be alive, and that is what Psalm 116 is all about. It is about being a survivor, and being alive when, except for the grace of God, the author would be dead. He was delivered from death, and this is his song of thanksgiving.**

**Back in 1951, when open heart surgery had been performed less than fifty times, Doris Sillimon entered a Boston hospital without much hope. Two weeks later she was so enthused about her dramatic recovery from her heart surgery that she made a vow to tell others, and encourage them as they face the same dreaded ordeal. She got her doctor to contact other heart patients, and an organization was formed called, Mended Hearts. Doris was elected president, and her wonderful idea became a visible reality. It met so great a need that Mended Hearts chapters were formed from coast to coast. Dedicated people, who had been through it, took fifteen hours of study to learn all about the heart, and what open heart surgery was all about. Then they spent hours explaining it to waiting loved ones as the surgery was being performed. They have helped thousands bear the burden. Their theme is, "It's great to be alive and help others."**

**This is also the theme of Psalm 116. We do not know who the author of this Psalm was, but we do know he came very near dying, but was then spared, and this Psalm is his song of praise and thanksgiving for that deliverance. He rejoices in verse 9 that he walks before the Lord in the land of the living, and he wants to pay his vows, he says twice, in the presence of all God's people. He wants his testimony to be a help to others. His message here can be summed up, "It's great to be alive and to help others." The mended hearts idea goes**

**way back to this Old Testament saint who had been through the valley, and wanted to encourage others who had to face the same journey.**

**That, of course, means all of us, for all of us have a terminal illness, and that is life. It is deadly to be alive in a fallen world, for it is only that which is alive that dies. For all practical purposes life is always fatal. The few exceptions where men by-pass death to go directly to heaven are not relevant to us, for that detour has long been closed. When Christ returns, the Rapture Road will be opened, which also by-passes death, but until that day all of God's people must go the regular route.**

**The Psalmist had to take this road also, but this song is about his joy because the original trip was rescheduled. He was about to die but, like Hezekiah, he cried out for the Lord to save him, and God did it. He had to die later, but he was so grateful for the chance to stay in the land for the living a while longer. We want to examine his testimony to learn about what a believers attitude ought to be when he faces death. The first thing we see in this song is-**

## **I. HIS HONESTY OF EXPRESSION.**

**He did not pretend that death was a welcome visitor, but expressed his honest feelings that its presence made him suffer distress and anguish. The Living Bible puts it, " I was frightened and sad." That is an excellent rendering, for modern studies show that the two most common reactions to death are fear and sadness.**

**It is often assumed that a believer does not face death with these negative emotions, but the facts of scripture, and life's experience prove otherwise. The Psalmist makes it clear that he wept in deep depression as he faced the loss of his life. As an Old Testament saint**

he did not have the New Testament hope of the Christian, but his emotions are not that much, if any, different from what Christians go through as they face death.

Billy Graham, in what I consider his best book, *Hope For The Troubled Heart* writes, "I have faced death many times, and my reactions have not always been the same. One time I had an operation that almost ended me. I knew this could be serious, so before they wheeled me in the operating room I called two of my closest friends and gave them instructions about my wife, my family, and my ministry. Ruth had gone to be with the children, and I tried to keep the seriousness of the situation from her. Whether this was right or wrong, I don't know. At least I am living to tell the story." "I remember alternating between two feelings. First, the complete peace I had, knowing that I would be with my Lord Jesus Christ, and second, the fear of leaving my loved ones. I certainly thought I was going to die."

The Bible does not anywhere encourage us to put on a mask and deny the reality of the negative emotions that are inevitable. No one ever lived that had more faith and hope than the apostle Paul, yet he expressed the same honest emotions as did the Psalmist, when he praised God for sparing his friend Epaphroditus from death, lest he have sorrow upon sorrow. In other words, even perfect assurance that death leads a Christian directly into the presence of Christ does not eliminate the negative emotions. There are circumstances when death is a welcome release, and the Christian does not suffer these negative emotions, but in the majority of cases Christians cannot escape the reality that death is an enemy.

Peter Kreeft in, *Love Is Stronger Than Death*, is extremely blunt and honest in his expression of the fact. He writes, "Death is loss, loss of life. Life is good. Loss of a good is an evil. Therefore, death is an

**evil. Loss of a great good is a great evil. Life is a great good. Therefore, death is a great evil. Not to see this is a great blindness. Blindness is a great evil. Therefore, not to see death as a great evil is a great evil."**

**"Death is.....the undoing of creation. Death is the most uncreative thing there is. It literally uncreates creation, whether it is the creation of man or God, whether it is a painting destroyed by fire, or a nation destroyed by war, a soul destroyed by vice, or a body destroyed by cancer. Death is the enemy of God. It undoes the divine work, creation."**

**The emotions of both the Old Testament and New Testament saints support this view of death as an enemy. You usually do not become hilarious in your expression of joy at being delivered from a friend. It is obvious that death is an enemy to motivate such strong joy and gratitude when one is spared from it. Verse 15 of this Psalm does seem to contradict this conclusion, and has lead to a great deal of confusion on the issue of death. It says, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints."**

**Much of the false thinking about death can be traced back to this verse. It is usually quoted in total disregard of the context. The context is a song, not in praise of death, but in praise of God who has delivered from death. This verse cannot mean what it is usually quoted to mean-that God delights in the death of His saints. If that is what it meant, the Psalmist would be saying I am so happy I didn't die, but God would be happier if I did. God let me escape death even though He would have preferred that I died. In other words, the popular interpretation of this verse says that his being spared was God's second best choice. Life was a compromise, but death would have been God's first choice, for He delights in the death of His saints more than their being spared from death.**

**Something is clearly wrong with this popular interpretation, for it amounts to praising God for giving up His own will for the sake of the will of man. The Psalmist would be saying in effect, "Not thy will but mine be done." Or, "Thank God he didn't have his way." How can we interpret this verse to make sense in the context of the joy of deliverance from the jaws of death? Most commentators are of no help for they tend to deal with it in isolation as a funeral text for comfort. Alexander Maclaren, the great Baptist expositor, is one of the rare ones who seek to make it fit the context. He writes, "The meaning is that the death of God's saints is no trivial thing in God's eyes, to be lightly permitted." In other words, not trivial in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints, but, rather, it is a tremendous issue in the sight of God. If death was a light and trivial matter to God He would not bother to interfere with it, and deliver His saints from its clutches. But because it is a precious matter to God to see His saints die, He takes death very seriously.**

**God does not deal with us like a paper cup that is used and tossed away, but like a rare piece of China that is treated with great care. Precious in the sight of God is the breaking of His best China. When a believer dies it is no minor incident, but a major matter of concern with God. The Living Bible is one of the few places where this concept comes through. It says, "His loved ones are very precious to Him and He does not lightly let them die." This interpretation not only fits the context of this passage, but it makes sense in the other Psalms where this same idea is expressed. In Psalm 72:14 we read, "Precious is their blood in His sight." Taken out of context it makes God look sadistic by delighting in the violent death of His people. But seen in context, and interpreted properly, it shows God's great concern for the lives of His people.**

**Psalm 72:12-14 reads, "For He delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak and the**



**needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence He redeems their life; and precious is their blood in His sight." In other words, because their blood is precious in His sight, He does not desire to see it spilled in violence, and so He delivers from death. The point of these passages is, God is the great deliverer because He takes seriously the shedding of His saints blood and their death. The popular interpretation, out of context, makes these verses mean just the opposite-that God somehow delights in the death of His people. This concept not only contradicts the context, but the entire spirit of Biblical revelation which considers long life a blessing of God.**

**God takes death so seriously that He detests man's audacity in tampering with the lives of His people. David had this truth deeply ingrained in him. He would not kill King Saul even when he had the perfect chance, for he was the Lord's anointed. David knew that God would not take lightly the killing of even this rebel anointed one. How we treat the lives of others is of the highest priority in the sight of God, for the death of any of His saints is a precious matter in His sight. Many have so divorced this verse from its context that they use it to teach that God in His sovereignty delights in all His children's death, because He appoints the day of their death, and it is always a good thing when they do die.**

**Many see this as a good Calvinistic interpretation of Scripture, but John Calvin could see that the contexts of this verse would not support any such interpretation. He saw it as a challenge to the ungodly who think they can kill God's people without judgment. He says this verse is saying to those with this false idea about God's concern, and I quote Calvin, "That God does not hold His servants in so little estimation as to expose them to death casually." Calvin goes on to say that the wicked may shed innocent blood and think it is nothing, but they will learn in judgment that death was a precious matter in the sight of God, and they will pay dearly for their shedding of that blood so**

precious in His sight.

We have labored this issue because it is more often abused than properly used. It is abused when it is made to say the opposite of what it means. It means death is a major issue with God and those who minimize it and say death is no big deal, contradict the mind of God. Death was a big deal to the Psalmist, and that is why he was so miserable when he thought he was going to die, and so happy when he had been delivered. To teach that death is no big deal, but a mere minor event in the life of a believer, is to make trivial that which is never trivial to God. The Psalmist made a big deal of it by his honest expression of negative feelings. He did not pretend, with a pious indifference, that it made no difference to him whether he lived or died. It made a big difference to him, and so the second point we want we to look at is--

## **II. HIS HOPE OF ESCAPE.**

The popular misunderstanding of verse 15 could make a saint submit to death as if this spirit would be pleasing to God, since He, by that view, delights in the death of His saints. The man who wrote that verse, however, did not resign himself to death, but resisted it with all his strength, and prayed earnestly that God would help him to escape the snare that held him. You will find no support here for yielding to death as a friend. He fought it as an enemy to be defeated. He knew he would eventually have to die, but he did not assume that this was his appointed time. He was determined to win as many victories over this foe as he possibly could. His was a death-defying attitude like that of Edna St. Vincent Millay who wrote,

"Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave.  
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;  
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.

**I know, but I do not approve, and I am not resigned.**

**Where there is life there is hope. This is the Christian perspective. David fasted and cried out to God for days for his sick child. When the child died he ceased his struggle, and looked to a hope beyond death. But until death was a reality, he fought it with all the weapons he had at his disposal. This is the kind of attitude that has enabled millions to escape what otherwise would have been certain death. Every time we can outwit this foxy foe, the more life we will have to devote to the service of God. This song of praise has been sung by millions because the Psalmist was able to escape the grim reaper for a time.**

**What this means for practical living is this: The Biblical attitude toward death supports any effort to improve the quality and the quantity of life on earth. Medical research is Christian in its motivation to find answers for all the diseases that destroy life. Health diets, jogging, and any other addition to ones life's style that encourages longer life is legitimate for the believer. The reverse is also true, that any habit or life style that hastens death is a collaboration with the enemy, and it is contrary to God's will for our lives. Just as an American citizen has no business promoting communism, so the Christian has no business promoting the enemy of life. Jesus came that we might have life, and not just life after death, but life abundant before death. Anything we do that encourages and strengthens the power of death to rob us of that life is inconsistent with God's purpose.**

**Every good commander learns from his enemy. If you expect to get good at any competitive sport you must learn from your opponent. So the Christian must learn from the enemy death. It has some powerful lessons that God wants us to learn. Even out of death God can bring forth good for those who want to learn. John Gunther and**

his wife Frances lost their 17 year old son to a brain tumor. John wrote of it in his well known book, *Death Be Not Proud*. In this book his wife sums up the value of death to her. "Death always brings one suddenly face to face with life. Nothing, not even the birth of one's child, brings one so close to life as death....It raises all the infinite questions....What is the meaning of life? What are the relations between things; life and death? Man, men, and God?"

"To me it means loving life more; being more aware of life, of one's fellow human beings, of the earth....It means caring more and more about people, at home and abroad, all over the earth. It means caring about God." She learned what the Psalmist learned, and what we all need to learn from the reality of death, and that is, that it is great to be alive, and to be delivered from death. Thank God everyday you are delivered from death, for everyday is an opportunity to enjoy the freedom and abundant life Jesus died to give us. The best memorial you can give to those who have died is to enjoy what they died to preserve for you--deliverance from death.

## **15. THE VALUE OF DEATH BASED ON PSALM 116**

There are two subjects that men have tended to be shy about all through history. These two subjects have been considered off limits as topics of public conversation. It was taboo to speak of them openly. The two subjects are, sex and death.

The paradox of this is, there are no two more universal topics. Life begins with sex and ends with death, and between the two they play a major role in life. Nobody can escape either one. If you are awake at all you are aware that we are in the midst of a sexual revolution where

**few things are openly discussed more often than sex. Death is a long way behind in popularity, but it is nevertheless no longer an obscure subject. Courses on death and dying are being taught in schools and hospitals all over our country.**

**All of this radical change is just getting us back to what life was like in Bible times. The Bible is neither shy nor silent on sex or death. The sexual nature of man is dealt with frankly and openly in the Scriptures. And so also is the finite nature of man dealt with openly, which means that he will die.**

**By rough estimate I counted 750 references to death and dying in my concordance of the Bible. If we are to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, then no Christian can be honest with God's word and ignore the subject of death. It is a major subject of God's revelation, and not to study it is to be disobedient. Death has many faces, and you cannot look at all of them at the same time, and so to really take a study of death seriously, you have to deliberately search the Word and categorize the various faces.**

**Psalm 116 reveals death as a enemy that has been conquered. It is a success story of one who encountered the enemy on the battlefield of life and came away victorious. This is a true story, and the kind of story that we all like, for we prefer happy endings to stories of trial, for they give us encouragement that we too can fight and win. It is true and a valuable aspect of life, but the fact is, it is not the whole of life. Not to be prepared for seeing death from another point of view, such as a victorious enemy rather than a defeated enemy, is to be unprepared to face the world as it really is.**

**The three friends of Daniel who were thrown into the fiery furnace were ready for facing death defeated, or death victorious, and, therefore, were prepared for whatever would come. This is true**

**realism, and true surrender to the will of God. In Daniel 3:17-18 they state their profound convictions-"If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O King. But if not, be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image you have set up."**

**They were ready for deliverance or death, but either way they would be loyal to God. All too often Christians are not ready for unanswered prayer, and when death comes, they are disillusioned, and their faith is shaken. One of the values of studying all the faces of death is that it prepares you to be aware that not all stories have happy endings in time, as is the case of Job or the Psalmist here in Psalm 116.**

**Vance Havner, the great evangelist and author of many books, prayed so earnestly for the miraculous healing of his wife Sara. He already had a sermon prepared for the dramatic testimony they would share with the world. But it was not to be. In spite of the best care known to man they lost the battle. The disease so disfigured her fair face they did not have an open casket at the funeral. Vance was in intensely disappointed in God, but sober thinking on the matter changed his mind. The dramatic healing would have been sensational, but the facts of life are that such experiences are rare, and the masses who listened to him or read his books would have said, "Most of us do not have such miracles. Our loved ones die, our hopes fade, and we need a word for those who walk the valley with no happy ending to the story."**

**Havner, as he reflected on life and saw that most saints are not delivered by miracles, he concluded-"I can see now that God denied me what I sought that I might bring a message to a multitude like myself when prayers were not answered as hoped."This story of an**

unhappy ending is a great comfort to many, for they do not feel alone in their defeat. If we are going to apply the Biblical principle of weeping with those who weep as well as rejoicing with those who rejoice, then we need to share the records of defeat and unanswered prayer as well as the success stories. Failure to do this hurts a lot of people and is inconsistent with the Biblical pattern of balance. Some of the Psalms do not have happy endings, but are cries of misery. This is so both sides of reality are presented. This is not only honest, but it is very helpful in dealing with those who suffer.

Peg Woodson was a teen girl dying of Cystic Fibrosis. She convinced her mother to take her to a healing service for she knew it was the only hope for her to live. It was a hard experience, for she had such a high level of hope, but nothing happened. They returned home in silence, and then the mother finally spoke and said, "Did it bother you Peg that the minister acted like everybody would be healed?" "Well, it was when he was tellin all the stories about the people who got healed in his other meetings that I really got my hopes up. I think to be fair he should have told stories about some people who didn't get healed too." Here was wisdom from a child. She saw the need to share unhappy endings also, for they are just as real, and they need to be known as well as the happy ones so that people do not feel left out, as if they are the only ones not healed.

Recognizing this need, Miriam Morgan got twenty Christians to write about their experience with death. They include some of the best known names in the Christian world, and some unknown names. Her book is called, *Death: Jesus Made It All Different*, is excellent because of its balance. One chapter is called, *A Christian Fights Suicide*. The author has been chronically ill since childhood. She suffers intense pain which cannot be alleviated. There is never ending weariness, and on top of that there has never been normal family love. Although she is an earnest Christian, she has fought the temptation of

**suicide into her forties. Listen to her testimony-**

**"I was passed forty before I once mentioned this problem to anybody, and then it was to my Christian physician. It seems that even Christian ministers are horrified to think that a fellow-believer could be tempted in such a way. I have fought my most desolate battles alone, and I give all the glory to God for keeping me from this grievous sin. But O, if the troubled spirit could but pour out its anguish to another believing soul, could but grasp the hand of fellowship and faith rather than shrink from censorious recoil, how much easier could be the road to victory."**

**Here is a case which combines both defeat and victory. The battle goes on, but the victory does too, and so it is neither a happy nor an unhappy ending, for the story does not end. The Psalmist in Psalm 116 had a battle that ended, and a clear answer to prayer, and a deliverance. The point I have been stressing is this: It is not the only kind of experience that God's people have. They also have more complex experiences, and they also endure unanswered prayer.**

**It is superficial to pretend there is always a happy ending in time, but thank God it is often the case. There is nothing superficial about the joy of the author of this Psalm. He was in the grip of death, and verse 8 makes it clear that he shed many tears of anguish, and that his hope was mighty low. The value of his coming so close to death was first-**

## **I. IT GAVE HIM A GREATER APPRECIATION OF LIFE.**

**He loved God with a greater intensity, and was determined to be a greater man of prayer. His spiritual life was improved by his encounter with death. In verse 16 he surrenders his life to be God's**



**servant, and over and over he declares he wants to pay his vows in the presence of God's people. He is just so happy to be in the land of the living that he wants his spared life to really count for the glory of God.**

**The value of death is in the greater quality it can add to our life when we encounter it. You tend to take things for granted until there loss is threatened. Life can be taken for granted until you become aware that it can be lost, and then it becomes more precious than ever. Scarcity confers value, and when death forces you to consider how scarce the time of your life may be, you suddenly realize just how precious life is, and you are motivated to use it more wisely. The reality of death can lead you to appreciate more fully the value of life.**

**It is really tragic to go through life never being aware of life. The neglect of death is a waste of life. Those who do not consider their end do not live for values that last. That is why Moses in Psalm 90 prayed in verse 12, "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." The context makes clear that he is saying, Lord help us to be aware of death that we may make our life count. The lack of thought about death is the cause of so much folly and waste of life.**

**Death has the power to make us focus on the real values of life. Secular values dominate our culture because we are in a death denying culture. Spiritual values become more real when people are made to face up to the reality of death. We do not know how faithful the Psalmist was before his encounter with death, but we can see that after it he was determined to be more spiritual.**

**He Is Not Gone, is the title of a book by Pastor Bernard Brunsting. It is a story of how he and his wife fought the battle with Leukemia in their three year old son, Donny. They did not know yet of the nature of his problem, but the doctor had scared them and made an**

**appointment for hospital tests. On Saturday he took his oldest son Al, and a church friend of his, Bob Honig, to the Biggest Auto Show On Earth. He shared with his friend Bob about his concern for little Donny, and how it changed his whole outlook on life. Let me share a paragraph of his testimony:**

**"The other remark I made to Bob was about the relative value of things in life at the show we saw a Rolls Royce, a Lincoln Continental, and other expensive autos. But at that moment the health of one little boy was of more value to me than all the cars in the world. How ridiculously unimportant the externals of life become when the heart is torn into. How trivial are the luxuries of the world when the soul is disquieted within. Our scale of values is altered when the larger burdens of life come."**

**Facing the death of his son changed his whole value system and how he looked at life. They fought the battle with Leukemia for about a year, and the enemy was held back by the use of three different drugs, but death finally broke through the defenses. It is a story of five major unanswered prayers. None of the five things they and the other church members prayed for were answered. This book would mean so much to parents going through the same battle. Psalm 116 would leave them cold, for it deals with victory over death in time. People need to see that even when there is no happy ending in time, there is always a happy ending in eternity, for Christ has conquered death and promised eternal life to all who trust in Him. But they need to see that in time we do not always get a happy ending, and there are many who do not, and they are never alone.**

## **16. THE RIGHT TO QUESTION GOD Based on Hab. 1:1-4**

**The right to question God is a right that God Himself has given to His children. He inspired men of God to write about their own questioning of God's ways of dealing with the evils of life and all of its suffering and injustice. None is more bold than the prophet Habakkuk. He begins his book with a series of complaints as he cries out to God about his prayers not being heard. He might just as well cry out to the wall to save him, for there is no help coming from God. He questions God to His face and says "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?" The world is falling apart and the wicked seem to be in full control as they create violence and injustice at will with no power able to stop them. Later in the first chapter in verse 13 he questions God again as he says, "Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" Kirk Patrick in The Doctrine Of The Prophets writes, "The book opens with a dialogue between the Prophet and God, in which God is boldly but reverently challenged to defend His action in the government of the world." Stuart Briscoe sums up his complaint, "Why is evil and suffering rampant in our world? Goodness and justice seem to fail! How is it, God, that you are so against wrong but you go on tolerating wrong? God, is what you are doing fair? Is this honestly the moral, ethical thing to do?"**

**Here is a man who represents every believer who has ever lived who begins to wonder about the purpose and power of God in a world of so much evil and violence. Where is God when we need Him? Why does He not seem to care when evil is so prevailing in its power that it seems of no value to be righteous? God wanted Habakkuk to write about his questions and complaints to Him because He knew that this would be a common issue all through history for His people. There are many timid Christians who fear to question God, for it seems almost like blasphemy for the creature to question the Creator. But the fact is, every child comes to a point in life when they begin to question the**

wisdom of their father in the way he is raising them, and every child of God comes to a point where they question the wisdom of God in the way He is dealing with them in a sinful and violent world. In other words, there are things that just do not make sense in this fallen world and we are compelled to ask why? We are compelled to question God's will and power because it seems from our perspective that He does not seem to have the will or power to deal with the forces of evil that prevail.

God says by including such questioning in His Word that it is legitimate and right to do so, and so there is no point in trying to hide your doubts. God says we are to go ahead and get them out into the open and question His will and His ways. He actually wants us to question and to come to Him in prayer with all of our doubts and pessimism concerning the way things are. It is foolish to try and hide these feelings and pretend that all is well with us and that we do not care if it seems that evil is more powerful than good, and that Satan seems to be in control of history rather than God. The Psalms frequently ask the same questions of God that we read here. Some examples are:

- 1. How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me? Psalm 13:12. How long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked? Psalm 82:2**
- 3. LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph? Psalm 94:3**

The implication is that it is understandable that evil must be endured for awhile, but when it is prolonged and goes on and on and God does not step in to correct the situation, then we become anxious and question God's intention and control. We begin to doubt God's power to change things and protect His people from the forces of evil

**and violence. His inactivity in times of suffering make us wonder if He is indifferent to our pain. J. Hampton Keathley writes,**

**“Habakkuk’s name means to “embrace” or “wrestle.” As is usually the case, his name has something to do with the message of the book. I think it relates to the fact that he was wrestling with a difficult issue. If God is good, then why is there evil in the world? And if there has to be evil, then why do the evil prosper?”**

**Jeremiah prophesied at the same time as Habakkuk, and he had some of the same questions also. In Jer. 12:1 he asks God, “Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?” In 15:18 he complains, “Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?” In 20:18 he reaches the depth of despair and says, “Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?” The point is, in times of sorrow and suffering of any kind it is normal to ask God why, and want to go to Him in prayer and complain about the circumstances and the fact that He allows them and does not respond to our prayers to deliver us.**

**When we deal with deep issues like Habakkuk does here we will experience both the depths and the heights of emotion, for we will be led through the darkness into the light, and so experience both fear and faith. Joseph Parker in The People’s Bible writes, “He talks to God; he has it out with God; he plies God with sharp questions. He will have practical matters attended too; he says, Lord, this is evil; how did it come to be in thy universe, thou fair One, whose face is beauty, whose voice is music? There is no such book in all the cannon as Habakkuk. The very word means strong embrace. He gets hold of God, and throws Him in the gracious wrestle. He will not let God go. On the one side he represents pessimism or despair as it never was represented before, and on the other he rises to heights of faith, which**

**even David did not attain with all his music. We shall find sentences in Habakkuk that leave all the prophets and minstrels of the Old Testament far away down in the clouds, whilst Habakkuk himself is up beyond the cloud-line reveling in morning light.”**

**God wants all of us to be Jacob ‘s and wrestle with Him over hard issues like this. It is only by wrestling with hard issues that we find answers and purpose in a world that often seems meaningless. God does not want us to just drift through life, but to struggle and become thinkers about the major issues of purpose and meaning. If we never question God and His ways we will never really come to have understanding in a way that enables us to live by faith with a full trust in God regardless of circumstances. That is where Habakkuk came out in the end. He starts with questions and pessimism, but he end his book with the greatest optimism and faith that we can find anywhere. He writes in 3:17-18, “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.” One can never go from questioning God to trusting God without wrestling with God, and that is what we do when we wonder out loud to God why He does not act on our behalf in the way that only seems right for a God of love who has the power to act.**

**The first thing we need to keep in mind is that this first complaint of Habakkuk deals with the wickedness and violence of God’s own people. They had become totally corrupted and had fallen away from the worship of God. God kept sending them warnings but they would not listen to the prophets of God. They kept on going deeper and deeper into perversions of all kinds. We get a clear picture of what was going on in Jer. 35:15-17.**

**“15 Again and again I sent all my servants the prophets to you. They said, ‘Each of you must turn from your wicked ways and reform your actions; do not follow other gods to serve them. Then you will live in the land I have given to you and your fathers.’ But you have not paid attention or listened to me. 16 The descendants of Jonadab son of Recab have carried out the command their forefather gave them, but these people have not obeyed me.’ 17 “Therefore, this is what the LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘Listen! I am going to bring on Judah and on everyone living in Jerusalem every disaster I pronounced against them. I spoke to them, but they did not listen; I called to them, but they did not answer.’”**

**So we have an answer to the first complaint of Habakkuk. God does not listen to our prayers sometimes because people do not listen to His Word. When people close their ears to the will of God, God closes his to the prayers of the people. God does not stop the consequences of evil choices. If people insist on departing from His laws for life and live according to the lusts of their flesh, then they will have to reap as they sow, and God will not step in to change the function of that law. Evil prevails when evil is the first choice of people. It is not God’s will that people choose evil and folly. It is contrary to His revealed will, but He allows them the freedom to be fools and pay the price of folly. The consequences of a people rejecting the will of God for their own will are terrible and the innocent will have to suffer with the guilty. That is what makes it such a damnable evil and worthy of severe judgment. When a society is full of violence and evil deeds the righteous will have to suffer even though they are not involved in the evil deeds. They are victims of their times, and to make it even worse they must also suffer with the guilty when God’s judgment falls and they are carried away into captivity.**

**God goes on in verses 5 to 11 to describe the horrible judgment that He is going to bring on His people for their wickedness. He says it is unbelievable, but true, that I am going to raise up the ruthless Babylonians with all their military weapons of destruction to punish my people who will not listen to me. Habakkuk is getting an answer that he does not like at all, for though it explains why God has not answered his prayer and come to the rescue of the righteous, it seems still to make God an accomplice to evil. The Babylonians are worse than the wicked people of God. They are the worst of idolaters and they are cruel and bloodthirsty without mercy. Habakkuk questions God again as to the seeming inconsistency of using people so wicked and treacherous to achieve His goals. It makes some sense that God allows evil to run its course until the cup is full and it is time for judgment because people have exhausted their right to mercy, but does it make sense that God would use a people even more evil than His own to judge them? Habakkuk questions the wisdom of God in tolerating and showing even temporary mercy to those who show no mercy toward His people. Life is a mess and there seems to be no way to unravel it so that it makes sense.**

**This is when the heart cries out Why? Why? Why? Some feel that we have no right to question God and ask why, but my question to those people is why is the Bible so full of the question why if it is not right to ask it? You would think that God would prevent His prophets from asking why, and then recording it for all of history to read, if it was not legitimate to ask why. If we are to live by every word that comes from God, and His Word is filled with the question why, then we not only have a right to ask why, but an obligation, for God reveals it to be something that we ought to do when we are truly puzzled by life. If you have lost a child by some tragic accident or disease, you must ask why? If you have had someone you love reject you and give their love to another, you must ask why? If you have prayed for your son or daughter to become a strong Christian and instead they**



become rebels who live a life of sinful indulgence, you must ask why? We could go on and on with endless negative situations that compel the question why? This question is addressed to God often in the Bible and all through history, and nobody needs to feel they are out of God's will by asking it. It is a valid biblical question. Even if we had no other example, we have that of the highest example, for Jesus prayed from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Habakkuk has seen his people, who are supposed to be the blessed people of God, go from bad to worse, and society becoming so corrupt that the righteous are at the mercy of the wicked. Justice is ignored and powerful wicked people can break every law and not pay a penalty, but the righteous are forced to suffer for the evil acts of the wicked. The law of God is no longer honored and so the righteous who seek to live by it are sitting ducks for those who pay it no heed. It is no longer an advantage to be righteous, for the wicked can overcome you by having no restraints of the law. It is a heart breaking time for the righteous, and God seems to be doing nothing to help them no matter how much they cry for help. One author I read said it is like a policeman sitting in his car at the curb while on the sidewalk in front of him a couple of thugs are beating an elderly lady and stealing her purse, and he does nothing. If that would not make you angry, then you have a serious lack of compassion and a sense of justice.

People get angry at God all the time because of the many things that don't make sense. Does it make sense that a godly person who serves Him all their life can come to old age and suffer a disease that leaves them at the control of forces they refused to obey all their lives. Godly people will begin to swear and talk in ways they never would have before. They become an embarrassment to their families because they seem to have lost their righteousness, but it is only the loss of control of the mind that is filled with all sorts of foolishness that they

were able to keep under control when they were fit and healthy. People who see a loved one go through this are angry at God for allowing it, and they cry out Why? Many people get so disappointed with God that they stop worshiping and cut themselves off from fellowship in the church. There are many thousands of people who are angry with God, and possibly even millions, and one of the reasons is they have questioned God, but they have not waited for the answer. Habakkuk is not only about the right to question God, but also about the obligation to wait for His answer. Those who do not wait on the Lord, but just stay focused on the question that has filled them with anger and anguish become bitter people who lose the joy of the Lord. It is lack of listening to God that leads to all the judgment on His people, and it is lack of listening to God that leads to even the righteous becoming very unhappy believers or bitter apostates.

Barbara Mandrell, the famous singer, is a good example of how the believer is to deal with the questioning of God. She had a terrible accident that led her to have to suffer great pain over a long period of time. In her book *Get To The Heart* she tells of her why questions and of her waiting for the answer. She writes, “I was still in rough shape the next day, and I went to see the Naval Chaplain to talk about my accident and Sher being killed. When I saw the Chaplain, I asked, “Why did God let me loose control of that car and crash?” The Chaplain was a naval officer, and he gave it to me straight. He said, “It wasn’t God’s fault. He didn’t do it. You were the one who didn’t change your tires. You were the one who had bald tires on the car. You were the one who made it happen.”

And I asked, “Why did God let Sher get killed?” And he said, “You let Sher out, and a human being was driving too fast. You can’t blame God for that. We all have the ability to make choices. We are all going down the road. We all choose left to right. God is omniscient. He knows what road we are going to choose, but He lets us choose. He doesn’t do bad things.”

When the Chaplain told me that, it gave me such peace. It brought me back to reality, brought me to my senses. I was heart broken, blaming my Heavenly Father, but then I found out that I had messed up. Instead of blaming God, I should ask Him to help me be better in my actions.

I also don't believe God looks down and says, "Zap! I'm going to give that person cancer," or, "Zap! I'm going to give that person a heart attack." That's the way it is. There are these things, germs, diseases, accidents, in this life."

**What we see is the natural response to question God, but we also see the desire to listen for an answer. She went to someone who could help her see that God is not the cause of the bad things that happen to us. This is what waiting on the Lord is all about. It is about seeking for understanding. You have a right to question God, but then it is your duty to wait for an answer. We see this in Habakkuk. In 2:1 he writes, "I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint." Because he waited and listened he ended up an optimist praising God in spite of the miserable circumstances. Barbara Mandrell and millions of others end up with a realistic understanding about suffering because they do not stay in the questioning mode, but seek to find an answer that gives them peace and joy in the Lord. It is valid to question God, but it is vital that we get an answer, and so in this message we will seek to answer the question of why evil is so strong, and why God allows it to survive and do damage even to His own people.**

## **EVIL IS THE RESULT OF HUMAN CHOICES.**

**God did not choose for the people of Judah to become immoral and unjust. He gave laws to guide them to be a moral and just people. They became evil by their own choice. Adam and Eve chose to disobey**

**God's will for them, and every form of evil since then has been due to the free choice of those who decide their own will is superior to God's will. Jesus is the only person who ever lived who never chose his own will over that of the Father's will. Even facing the cross he prayed, "Not my will, but thine be done." All others have said by their actions, "Not thy will, but mine be done." And this is the essence of sin and evil, and the cause of most, if not all, of the misery of the world. All of the suffering of God's people came from the same source, and it was their choices to do their own thing rather than follow the laws of God.**

**So the answer as to why God does not stop evil and even the righteous must suffer and endure violence and injustice at the hands of the wicked is really quite simple. God cannot let people be free to make their own choices and at the same time prevent the consequences of those choices. There is no point in giving the law that says thou shalt not steal if God is going to make sure by His power that nobody can ever steal. He gave the law because it is His will for the good of mankind that nobody steal. But He has to let people be free to steal, for if they are not free to disobey His law, they are also not free to choose to obey. Freedom of choice is what determines righteousness and sinfulness. If God prevented all evil choices then man is not free to choose the way of goodness and obedience to God either. They are prisoners of God's will, and means none chooses to love God by their own will. This is not the purpose for which God made man. He made him to be a creature who could choose to love and obey Him, and not a toy He could wind up and watch perform actions He built into it.**

**Evil is real because choice is real. Habakkuk listens to God describe the powerful armies of Babylon who choose to use their superior power to sweep across the world destroying nations without mercy. God is going to use these terrible people to punish His own**

people for their wickedness and rebellion. It makes sense, because a righteous and compassionate people would not be coming to destroy them. God in His sovereignty can and does use evil people to accomplish His purposes in the world. It is not His choice that they be evil, but since they are, and since they are out to conquer and destroy, He can use their evil choices to achieve a goal He has of punishing His own people. God is simply using their choice to His advantage. He accomplished the salvation of His people by using the evil choices of men to send His Son to the cross. God will use evil for good, for that is the way He is able to outwit evil, but He is not the author of the evil. It is always due to the choices of people. The essence of evil is bad choices. We try to make evil such an incomprehensible mystery, but the reality is that it is extremely simple. All evil is the result of bad choices, and by that I mean choices that people make that are not choices that God would will for them to make.

Psychologist Scott Peck in his book *People of the Lie* tells of how he came to understand evil. He began counseling with a family where the parents were so neglecting their adolescent boy that it amounted to abuse. They were in denial of what they were doing, and this was made clear when they gave him a rifle for Christmas, and it was the very rifle that his older brother had used to commit suicide. They had no idea that this son was also contemplating suicide. "I awoke that night in a state of panic and terrible realization," writes Peck. "What these parents exhibited was something for which the vocabulary of medical pathology has no word. The only word that begins to describe what they did to that boy was evil. Until I could allow myself to use that very unscientific word in this situation, I had no hope to being able to treat or protect this boy." He was dealing with the bad choices of these parents, for that was the essence of their evil. They may have really loved their boy, but they were still evil because of the bad choices they were making. Even good people make bad choices and suffer the consequences, and they make others suffer with them.

**The only way God could prevent suffering due to bad choices is to prevent people from having choices at all, and this would mean that God would have to change His plan to have beings who freely choose to love and obey Him. Man is not that being, and so God's purpose in making man can only be fulfilled by having him free to choose to disobey as well as to obey Him. God made man able to make bad choices and produce evil, but He never wills that they make those choices. His will is always that they make good choices. The bottom line then is this: evil is the result of bad choices, and because man is a fallen being who often chooses badly, the world is filled with all kinds of folly and violence that is suffered by the innocent as well as the guilty. Righteous people will be victims of those who break all of the commandments of God.**

**If you pray that people in this fallen world will stop committing crimes and stop lying, stealing and doing all sorts of things that injure others, you can expect that God will not answer that prayer. Habakkuk was praying that the Lord would stop His people from being so stupid. He wanted God to prevent them from their folly of forsaking God's law and living such lawless lives that made life so unbearable for the good people of the nation. He wanted God to prevent the perversions of justice that led to the wicked being able to win over the righteous. God has nowhere promised to stop people from making bad choices. It is His will that they be free to do so, and so it is a futile prayer to ask God to prevent evil choices when it is His will that men be free to choose evil. So when you cry out with Habakkuk, "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" remember that if you are asking God to prevent bad choices you are asking for what God can never answer. The answer to all of Habakkuk's why's is simply that the evil exists because of bad choices of man, and they are permitted by God because it is His will that they be free to choose.**

**What God did do for Habakkuk, however, was to make it clear that bad choices will lead to judgment. Those who make bad choices and bring evil into the world will not go unpunished. In the long run those who make bad choices always end up in defeat and disgrace. If you study the evil rulers of history the thing they all had in common is that they did not last. Their reign of terror lasted for awhile, but they were defeated and destroyed. God goes on to tell Habakkuk that the Babylonians who do evil deeds and destroy nations, including Judah, will not last, but go down in defeat and suffer the very pains that they inflicted on others. The point is that bad choices always lead to bad results for the one making them. This goes for individuals and for nations. We reap as we sow. It is a universal law. Therefore, do not blame God for the mess the nation or the world is in. Do not get angry at God for all the bad choices that lead to so much evil. Instead, come to the recognition that Habakkuk came to, and realize that trust in God is the only hope we have in an evil world. In 2:4 we read, “but the righteous will live by his faith”**

**Faith in God is the key to surviving evil of all kinds. There is no promise of escape from suffering. If you study all manner of tragedy, disease, crime, persecution, injustice and every form of evil you can think of, you will find that God’s children suffer all of them. When they do they naturally ask why, and it is their right to do so, for questioning God is a God given right. But, like Habakkuk, they need to wait on God for the answer, and also wait on God to act in history to judge those whose bad choices made the evil a reality. He says in 3:16, “Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.” Faith in God means that you wait on Him. You give Him time to make clear to you just why you suffer evil and He does not deliver you. You wait for Him to act in history to set the record right and deal with evil. Successful survival of evil calls for going through two stages-the why of anger, and the wait of acceptance. It is normal and natural to be angry when we suffer evil, and often we**

**will be angry at God for not preventing it. This is valid and God gives us the right to question Him. But then we need to trust Him and move into the next stage and wait for the answer that helps us accept what has happened and go on in hope that God will work in all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. This is the message of Habakkuk and the whole New Testament.**



