



World



God

Bible

World

Jesus

Faith

BC is a series of five studies that parallel a faith journey toward Jesus Christ. Each builds on the one before, and interested readers will find themselves somewhere on the path.

This third study assumes the existence of God and the relevance of the Bible, and explores how the brokenness of our world is consistent with a good God.

World

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3)

We began this small study of biblical Christianity outlining why we can assume that God is real. We then looked at why it makes sense to see what the Bible has to say about God. If those were not issues you wanted to explore, you will be jumping into the series at this point.

So, the great fact of a Creator gives life a foundation for true meaning. If a Person created us, then there is glory, joy and purpose in being human. From the tender mutual-giving of awakened passion to the self-sacrifice of parents, we instinctively know that people are important, and that instinct makes sense. From homemade bread to classic novels to space satellites, we are intelligently aware that human beings can accomplish things of remarkable and lasting value. All this and much, much more reflects a good God's design and plan.

So given all that, how is it that so much in the world seems so meaningless and painful? The oppressive weight of human anguish seriously questions the reality of a real, personal God. How is evil and pain consistent with a benevolent divinity?

If God *didn't* exist, then as noted previously, personhood is but a momentary illusion. In that case, life would not *have* to make sense, since there could be no moral reality to justice, injustice, pain and pleasure. In what sense could an impersonal universe treat fleeting globs of proteins "unjustly?" But if God *does* exist, then this

world and life as we know it *ought* to make moral sense for real persons created in his image.

At least three hefty problems must be addressed: the problem of pain, the problem of evil and the problem of silence. Let's review them.

The Problem of Pain

First, there is the problem of human suffering and futility. While there is the blessing of parenthood, there is also the frustration of infertility and the horror of birth defects. Classic novels showcase human brilliance, but often do so by exploring the senseless tragedy that haunts mankind in a thousand forms, lurking even in the shadows of our greatest achievements.

Life is exasperating for the most privileged, and wracked with misery for everyone else. On the day I write these words I am numbed yet again by pictures of the latest trauma of refugees—sickening living conditions, decaying corpses, dying children. I need not tell you which political situation this is, since you no doubt have later and more recent examples to contemplate. Modern journalism has many tools, yet can barely expose the sweeping natural and social plagues that afflict humanity like open sores. Unvarnished exposure to the smallest fraction of this tragedy reduces all but the most hardy of us to depression.

Even for those who find life generally exciting and rewarding, it remains confusing—a roller coaster ride that is over before you can get your bearings. You face the end before you can adequately formulate questions, let alone get answers.

Perhaps that is the worst part; it is over too soon. Death seems to deny any possibility of the meaning we sense we must have. All but the famous few are forgotten almost immediately. The idea that “people live on in the memories of others” is a myth told to quiet the frightened child inside us. There is not enough truth in it to fill

a yellowed obituary. (How much do you really know about your own great grandparents? Do you even know their full names? Do you think that three generations from now, your descendants will know yours?)

This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger. (Ecclesiastes 5:16-17)

Why is life so painful and futile if God is real?

The Problem of Evil

Second, there is the problem of human nastiness. It is not as if we are innocents trapped against our will in some frightful haunted house. Human beings have gone bad.

This is not to contradict the fact that we are truly wonderful creatures of unparalleled significance. Actually, it is *because* we are so wondrous that we can be evil. Only beings capable of good are capable of moral corruption. Rocks aren't evil, neither are ferns or crickets or zebras. Only people. Only us.

We humans are the ones who invented both the idea and reality of evil. While there is the tender self-giving of awakened passion, there is also the heart-stabbing cruelty of betrayal, abuse or icy indifference. The same space satellites that probe the stars also stand ready to guide the flight of horrible death from halfway around the world. Those refugees I recently saw on TV did not get where they were because of a volcano or tornado; they were driven there by neighbors just like themselves who wish them woe.

We are very good at pointing the finger toward others whom we deem worse than ourselves, but none of us with any self-awareness can say that we are unaffected by this moral disease. Not

everyone practices evil equally, of course. But every race, every class of people, every nationality and each gender is demonstrably guilty of every sort of crime and moral lapse imaginable. In fact, the most high-minded and sensitive thinkers of any culture tend to be those who not only perceive humanity's flaws, but sense them most acutely in their own souls.

While the Bible defines many sins quite specifically, for those without a Bible it lowers the working definition to those things which we condemn in ourselves, things we do that violate our own conscience.¹ Which of us would want our private lives and inner motives publicized with brutal objectivity? No one is entirely at ease with what he or she sees when taking an honest look inside.

Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. (Ecclesiastes 7:20)

Much of our suffering comes not from birth defects but rather from character defects, less tangible but no less real. It is most telling that when we are caught in a moral failure, we tend to excuse ourselves with, "Well, I'm only human." Why say that? Why is humanity so morally defective, even by its own standards? Why are we condemned by our own consciences if we were made by a good God?

The Problem of Silence

Finally, there is the absence of divine communication. If our humanity is real, if our personhood is more than an illusion, then our Creator must be a Person himself. If that is true, then why is there silence? Why does he not speak to us—any and all of us, all the time?

This point is at the same time the most difficult to understand and the most easy to document. Many people report religious experiences, but how many actually hear God literally speak to

them? Accurate data is unavailable. But it is also unnecessary. Does God speak to you? I am not referring to comforting religious sensations that make it feel as if God has spoken. We would not be satisfied with such *almost* encounters with other persons. Persons communicate best in language. If, as discussed previously, God is *at least* a person, surely he can use language. Why is he silent?

He has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

As the previous four quotes from Ecclesiastes demonstrate, the Scriptures are not afraid to deal with all these questions. The answers we find there are uncomplicated and direct, but they are not flattering or easy to deal with.²

The Bible traces the origin of pain, evil and divine silence to the experiences of the first categorically human beings on Planet Earth. Now, the notion of an historical record of our first ancestors may seem far-fetched, but remember that the Bible is revelation, not journalism. Moses did not discover these events from previous sources or observe any of it first-hand. In some fashion, God communicated this account to Moses, authenticating Moses' role through miracles, with the greatest being the Exodus, itself. Moses related this revelation as stylized history,³ an epic narrative capturing the truth of the situation. Put aside the battle between evolution and creationism long enough to consider the message of this account—and remember that someone, sometime began the species we know as humanity. The Bible distills the essence of their story.

Let's take a moment or two to review that story, one of the most familiar in the Old Testament. When we're done, we'll understand the reason for silence. We will also be able to contrast what we find

with the modern mindset and see which deals better with the problems of pain and evil.

Genesis 1-3

God created the universe with a purpose: to glorify himself,⁴ that is, to express himself tangibly.⁵

Adam (the name means “man”) and Eve (the name means “mother”) were uniquely created in God’s “image.” This meant that humanity was created to reveal the character of God in our care for each other and for the earth.⁶ Being equipped for our task involved all that makes our species so special: rational and self-conscious thought, ethical awareness, speech, tool making ability, social skills and so on.

God did two things to instruct us in the art of building our relationships and ordering the earth. First, God designed and built our first home, Eden, as a prototype of the beautiful and productive place we were to make of the whole planet.⁷ Second, God designed our conscience so that our sense of right and wrong resonated with his own character. Since it is possible for free creatures to choose to go against their conscience, God institutionalized his moral authority through the imaginative use of two trees.⁸ One was called the Tree of Life, since the purpose for our existence lay in sharing a life of unhindered and conscious friendship with God. The other was called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—“knowledge” not in the sense of comprehension, but in the sense of definition. Only the Creator understands what Good and Evil truly are, and therefore has the exclusive right to define it. God’s character creates the framework for our relationships.

Adam was charged not to eat of the second tree, on pain of death. The tree was not poison. The only reason Adam was forbidden it was because God said so. By choosing to respect this one command, he would choose to respect God’s unique authority.

By eating the fruit, Adam would reject the Creator's authority and claim the right to define his own life, as if he had no Creator.

In effect, Adam and Eve asserted that they had no responsibility to God.⁹ The Apostle Paul later generalized their choice in his description of all mankind ...

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! (Romans 1:21-25)

This describes what the Bible calls "sin," and it is crucial to understand what it is. It is common to think of sin as some detestable or degrading act. Murder comes readily to mind, as well as rape, genocide and other heinous crimes. While the Bible recognizes these things as examples of sin, they are not the essence of sin, itself. Sin is the determination of a created being to define its own purpose. Sin is the determination of mankind to define how we live and use this planet, irrespective of God's authority and the conscience he put inside us.

This means that murder and sexual abuse, for example, are indeed sins—but not for the reason we think. We *consider* them sins because they offend *our* conscience. But they *are* sins because they offend *God's* design and reject his authority.

This means that sin is anything that offends God, whether or not it offends us. In fact, even our most laudable efforts lack perfect motives from God's perspective. As an Old Testament prophet put it, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags."¹⁰

Adam's choice resulted in the punishment he had been warned about: death. God had warned Adam that if he ate the forbidden fruit, he would die on that very day.

We might be confused to notice that Adam went on to live for many years. But actually, on the day Adam ate the forbidden fruit, he *did* die. Since he did not keel over right away, we realize that death must be a broader concept in the Bible than the one we commonly have in mind. The common notion of death is the cessation of crucial bodily functions. The Bible, however, would consider this as only one aspect of death. The Bible defines death as the judgment of God against human sin. It is experienced in two stages.

The first stage of death did begin with the immediate curse in Eden.¹¹ It was a deterioration of the order God intended. Not only did Adam and Eve find themselves estranged from each other, but God predicted significant changes in the way men and women would relate to one other and with the world around them. Things would no longer work as God had designed them to work. God's judgment began, therefore, not with aggressive punishment, but with passively allowing the creation order to unravel.¹² Earth would now resist our attempts at dominion. Nature would become our enemy as much as our friend. Indeed, we would now find it difficult to establish order in our society and even in our own homes.

This deterioration eventually dissolves the connection of body and soul—the body keels over and stops breathing and the soul loses its interface with the physical world. Neither body nor soul

cease to exist; rather, they deteriorate to the point that they can no longer remain intact.

The second and eternal part of God's judgment has to do with the final tearing of our personal relationship with him. Not only did Adam and Eve hide from God, but for his part, God also drove them out of his sight.¹³ In the end, death is a final, relational separation from God,¹⁴ We caused the rift when we dishonored God's place as our Creator, but death is also God's response. Human death, therefore, is not "natural" or "a part of life," but the result of God's appropriate reaction against human sin, sending us away from his presence.

The Bible goes on to describe Hell as the ultimate destination of people who remain alienated from God. Hell is characterized as a place of isolation, darkness and the anguished despair that comes from never knowing God or attaining one's proper purpose.¹⁵ How ironic that God's final judgment consists in giving mankind what it foolishly wants: life without him.¹⁶

Such is the essence of the Bible's story of mankind's beginning, and the rift between us and our Creator.

Two Different Perspectives

The biblical revelation of Genesis presents a radically different picture of the world than the one upheld by the secular mind set. It is worth thinking about that difference.

The secular belief is that mankind is a freakish child of chance, a cosmic accident which could just as well never have happened. The only meaning we have is whatever we create for ourselves, a "meaning" that has no reality outside our own head, and evaporates when we are gone. At the same time, we are held to be essentially good beings—not surprising, since we define "good" to suit ourselves.

In contrast, the Bible says that mankind was given birth by God.¹⁷ We are a unique, valuable and highly significant creation, purposely created to reflect the personal characteristics of the Creator. But the initial human decision to define right and wrong for ourselves was criminal. Furthermore, this initial decision shaped our nature the way an ugly footprint hardens in wet cement.¹⁸ This means that the entire human race is essentially “fallen,” sinful and spiritually broken—not necessarily as bad as we could be, but seriously corrupted in every part of life.

In short:

- The secular point of view asserts that we are essentially good but hopelessly insignificant.
- The biblical point of view maintains that we are hopelessly corrupt but immensely significant.

Think about how these reversed perspectives affect one’s response to the very real problems of suffering, evil and the silence of God mentioned earlier ...

Dealing with the World as We Know It

Biblical Christians are often chastened for being unable to account for human suffering, but it is the secularist who has the real problem dealing with it.

Consider the secularist’s position. On the one hand, suffering feels like an indignity and insult, unfair because it is so undeserved by beings who are essentially good. The secular mind scoffs at the classic notion of God, since God would have to be either unable or unwilling to stop all this unfair pain. But on the other hand, the secularist views humanity as a cosmic accident in a universe without God, a universe that doesn’t care about us and has no future for us. In the larger scheme of things, our suffering simply makes no difference. It disappears in the background noise of the universe.

The Bible presents quite a different perspective. On the one hand, from a biblical point of view human suffering is not unfair at all. It is the tragic but just and understandable result of human sin. This is not to say that the load of adversity carried by each individual directly corresponds to his or her personal sins, but rather that the messy side of human existence is rooted in the God-dishonoring nature we share in common. The fact that some of us suffer considerably more than others is just another example of the disorder introduced by the breakdown of God's intended order. God is both all good and all powerful. He has consigned us to the just consequences of the independent course we have chosen. There is nothing unfair about that, just as there is nothing unjust about the final, eternal isolation of Hell, where God finally gives us up to our own devices.

But while the biblical point of view does not see human suffering as unjust, it does see the ruin of humanity as tremendously significant, something truly worthy of tears, even from God, himself. We are not two legged blobs of protoplasm with no past or future. We are creatures designed for the highest glory, whose temporal and eternal ruin is tragic beyond words. This is true not only on the large scale but also on the small, from the social decline of nations to the personal tragedy of marital betrayal, multiple sclerosis or drug addiction. The immense significance of humanity makes every grave a place of genuine mourning. Notice God's own reaction:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Genesis 6:5-6)

From the Bible's perspective, the condition of this world is not surprising at all. The Genesis text quoted above introduces the account of the Flood, "So the LORD said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land ... for I am sorry that I have made them.'"¹⁹ That is a reasonable response from a God who truly cares about the love and compassion and honor and integrity that we traded for greed and smugness and violence and unending pettiness. From such a point of view, human pain and evil are not surprising. The silence of God is not surprising.

Only one thing is surprising, and it is the next verse of the Genesis text ...

But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.
(Genesis 6:8)

The word "favor" in this context has the meaning of "grace," undeserved merit. Noah's deliverance was undeserved. Noah may have been a nice guy, but the Bible clearly reveals him to be a man with serious faults like the rest of us. Noah received the grace of God by faith, not by noble deeds.²⁰

This is the one thing that is surprising in the Bible: not the Flood, but the Ark—not judgement, but grace. What is surprising is not divorce, not famine, not child abuse, not terminal cancer. What is surprising is not God's wrath and anger, but rather his persistent effort to help us deal with the consequences of our own sin. What is surprising is not the condition of this world. What is surprising is a *deliverance* from the world's brokenness provided by the very God whom we have offended, a deliverance which the Bible calls "salvation."

The next pamphlet in this series is entitled "Jesus," and explores why he is our unique link to God.

¹ Romans 2:12-16.

² In fact, the answers are threatening in the extreme, and perhaps I should caution the reader that this current study will only deal with the human condition, not its remedy. For that, please go on to the next booklet, "Jesus."

³ Stylized history is factual, but broad in theme and selective in detail, relating only enough to make its point.

⁴ In this sense, "glorify" means to manifest or make visible. The Creator is not part of the physical creation and hence is literally invisible (cf. John 1:18; 1 Tim 6:15-16).

⁵ Psalm 19:1-4, Romans 1:20.

⁶ Genesis 1:26.

⁷ Genesis 2:8-9.

⁸ Genesis 2:9,15-17.

⁹ Genesis 3:1-7.

¹⁰ Isaiah 64:6.

¹¹ Genesis 3:8-19.

¹² Romans 8:19-25.

¹³ Genesis 3:22-24.

¹⁴ Note the statement of Jesus concerning the true nature of life in John 17:3.

¹⁵ Jesus' favorite way of characterizing Hell was *Gehenna*, a place outside of Jerusalem where ancient Jews sacrificed their children to idols, and later was used to burn refuse.

¹⁶ Note the repetitive language of Romans 1:18-32. Twice, God is said to have "given us over" to the very sin we have chosen.

¹⁷ Acts 17:29.

¹⁸ Adam's choices apparently passed spiritual tendencies on to his children. While Adam was created in God's image, the Bible is careful to state that Adam's children were created in *his* image (Genesis 5:1-3) after he chose his path.

¹⁹ Genesis 6:7.

²⁰ Hebrews 11:7.



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All Bible quotations are from the ESV®