

## **Why does a loving God allow human suffering?**

God has endowed his creatures with free will. Free will means nothing if God does not permit undesirable outcomes. When God created the angels, Satan rebelled and tried to place himself above God. For this sin he was banished; as Jesus says, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” (Luke 10:18 New International Version) Satan, whose name means “adversary” in Hebrew, has been “the prince of this world” and “the god of this age.” (John 12:31 and 2 Corinthians 4:4)

All evil in the world is the result of a creature exercising free will. When a person chooses to do evil against another person, he brings suffering into the world. But what about diseases, natural disasters, and tragic accidents? These are caused by Satan’s evil will, his malicious delight in bringing suffering to mankind.

Why didn’t God annihilate Satan after his rebellion? An omnipotent Creator could destroy any disobedient creature in an instant. Why does God allow evil to go on in this world?

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The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) place the temptation of Jesus in the desert immediately after his baptism. Before Jesus begins his public ministry to mankind, he engages in a verbal contest with Satan. In some respects, this is the beginning of his public ministry. The story of the temptation revolves around Jesus teaching Satan his proper relation to God. Jesus is trying to reform Satan. When Satan challenges Jesus to turn stones into bread, Jesus replies, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4) When Satan asks him to throw himself off of the temple, Jesus warns, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” (Matthew 4:7) Finally, when Satan asks for Jesus to bow down and worship him in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus proclaims, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.” (Matthew 4:10) It is only after Satan leaves Jesus, unmoved by his preaching, that Jesus goes on to his ministry in Galilee.

Jesus washed away the 613 laws of the Old Testament, replacing them with clear and concise commands to “love the Lord your God with all your heart” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39)

Along with this teaching comes Jesus’ command to love your enemies. This may be the hardest admonition in all of Christianity. It seems instinctive to hate people who are your enemies, and want to retaliate against them, or wish to see them punished. But Jesus teaches a transcendent, holy response: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5:44) Jesus adds mischievously, “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?” (Matthew 5:46)

This teaching is further enshrined in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.” (Luke 11:4) During the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus says, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you....Do to others as you would have them do to you....Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:27-36)

What creature has sinned against us most? Satan. Who has sinned most against God? Satan. Do we think that God, who is love and mercy (1 John 4:16, James 5:11), exempts himself from this revolutionary teaching? We know this cannot be true from the behavior of Jesus Christ. During the crucifixion, Jesus says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34) This applies to the Roman soldiers, as well as the Pharisees and chief priests who engineered his execution. But this forgiveness can also apply to Satan, who is the motivating force behind their cruelty. Would the God of love and mercy repudiate the very teaching he brings to humanity when he takes on human form in Jesus Christ? I think that such a view is unreasonable.

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Another passage in the Gospels which goes against our instincts is the parable of the Lost Son (or Prodigal Son). The parable concerns a father and two sons. The younger son asks for his share of the estate, and squanders the money in debauchery. When he is starving and miserable, he decides to go back home and say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." (Luke 15:18-19) But his father's response is to embrace him with compassion. The father calls to his servants to bring a robe and sandals for his son, and to kill the fattened calf for a celebratory feast. The older brother is angry when he hears of this, because he has been a good son all along. The father explains to his loyal son, "You are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." (Luke 15:31-32)

The idea that the son who wastes his inheritance on prostitutes can be welcomed back by his father seems unjust to the good son (and to many of us). On a superficial level, this parable answers the Pharisees' muttering about how Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. On a deeper level, it expresses the rejoicing in heaven when a sinner repents and returns to God. Killing the fattened calf is a metaphor for accepting the penitent into heaven. People who are righteous during their whole lives will share heaven with repentant sinners. At the most profound level, this parable can be extended to Satan, the Adversary. Satan is the archetypal prodigal son, whose return and repentance would fill the Father's heart with gladness. This makes sense in the context of a loving God who waits patiently for his creatures to repent and beg forgiveness.

Satan's relative position in heaven will be similar to the Prodigal Son's role in his father's household after the celebration. Describing the relative position of people in this world compared to their stature in heaven, Jesus says, "Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." (Matthew 19:30) Jesus employs variations of this theme in Matthew 20:16, Mark 9:35, Mark 10:31, and Luke 13:30. Jesus was last in this world, the suffering servant of mankind (Isaiah 53). Satan is the prince of this world and the god of this age. If Jesus now occupies the metaphorical position of honor at the Father's right hand in heaven (Matthew 26:64 and Romans 8:34), then a repentant Satan will be at the bottom of the hierarchy in heaven.

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At this point, a natural question arises: what about Jesus' imagery of sinners punished by fire? There are several examples of Jesus comparing sinners to branches, weeds and fish thrown into fire and burned: Matthew 7:19, Matthew 13:40-42, Matthew 13:49-50, and John 15:6. In these cases, Jesus does not say that the burning lasts "forever." On other occasions, Jesus warns about sinners being tossed into the fire of hell *forever* if their hand, foot or eye causes them to sin (Matthew 18:8-9 and Mark 9:43-47). But how many Christians interpret these verses literally, cutting off their hands and feet and gouging out their eyes to avoid sin? Since all people are sinners, wouldn't all Christians have to perform self-mutilation? I can't find any Christians who have mutilated themselves, or any Christian thinkers arguing in favor of this literal interpretation. I think this is an example of Jesus using hyperbole to emphasize the seriousness of sin.

This is not to say that sinners are not punished in the afterlife. Their suffering may be a metaphorical fire: wearing the shame of their evil before God. Everything that we do in this world is embedded in our being; it becomes part of us. The sinner is stained by his sin. The process of purification is not punishment by God. It is painful self-cleansing by the sinner to be worthy of God's presence. Like severe burn victims in this world who must debride their wounds, sinners must confront their sins and agonizingly peel them off over eons. It may seem like forever to them. This is why Jesus warns so strenuously against sin, employing such dire language.

So what do the Gospels mean when they say that the fire lasts "forever"? The biblical Greek words "aionas ton aionon" are translated as "forever and ever," but they literally mean "ages of the ages." The word "aionion" can mean "eternal," "forever" or "ages," depending on context. So the process of translation leads to ambiguity for modern readers; these words may not correspond to our concept of an infinite "forever," and instead express a finite period of ages or epochs.

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Moreover, we cannot imagine what comes after “forever.” Our physical human existence is bounded in time and space. In this world we are finite. While our souls are eternal, our sense-perceptions and conceptual understanding are conditioned by the dimensions of this world. As we have grown more mathematically sophisticated than people in ancient times, we are more precise in our measurements (as opposed to using “seventy-seven times,” or “seventy times seven” in Matthew 18:22 to indicate a very large number). We are also more confident in employing abstract terms: infinity, eternity, and forever. But these abstractions are only symbolic place-holders for ideas we cannot truly grasp. Only an omnipotent, omniscient Creator could comprehend them fully. And so only an omnipotent and omniscient Creator could *transcend* them. The Creator by definition transcends time, and can act outside of the limitations of “forever.” It is for God to decide what happens *after* “forever” (the human concept) has served his purpose.

And what will bring human suffering in this world to an end?

The Apostle Paul describes the end of days as Christ putting “everything” beneath him, and then subjecting all things to the Father, “so that God may be all in all.” (1 Corinthians 15:27-28) This signifies a final state of harmony for all of creation under God. This passage depicts all created beings, including Satan, as reconciled to God in eternity.

When the disciples once asked in astonishment, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus looked at them lovingly and replied, “With God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:25-26)

May we revel together in the warm light of Christ after forever’s end.

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This essay is the result of my own personal revelation and theological study. I hope it helps to explain why God allows suffering in this world. If the essay irritates or offends you, please ignore it. You have to follow the path of faith that works for you.

Regards,  
Paul

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