

The Problem of Pain and Suffering

John Oakes 9/27/06

This past summer I traveled to the UK on a teaching trip. I was asked to speak on the problem of pain and suffering. When I received the request my first thought was to wonder why they thought I might be qualified to speak on this topic. I certainly have not had any sort of extraordinary suffering in my life. By the end of the experience I was grateful to have been asked to speak on this question. As I pondered the subject, I came to realize that the problem of suffering and of the existence of evil in the world is the most significant apologetic question for the majority of people. Some struggle with questions about science and the Bible, others with doubts about supposed inconsistencies in the Bible, still others with claims that the Bible is historically fraudulent. I believe that for the open-minded person who is willing to put in a little effort, these questions are answered fairly easily. Those who continue to claim that the Bible is full of scientific errors have either not bothered to research the subject or bring a very strong bias to the question. Unlike other apologetic questions, the problem of evil and of suffering does not lend itself to fairly easy answers. Even sincere, intellectually honest Christians often find this question to be very troubling, despite their willingness to put their faith in God. If this is the most significant apologetic question, especially for the sincere and open-minded, then it definitely deserves careful attention.

AN APOLOGETIC PROBLEM AND A HUMAN PROBLEM

Pain and suffering is an apologetic problem. It is also a human problem. This essay is an attempt to deal with both questions. It is an apologetic problem because the existence of evil in the world naturally raises a question about God. The agnostic asks the believer two questions. First, is God all-knowing and all-powerful? The biblical response is a definite yes. Be careful, we are about to back ourselves into a corner. The next question of the agnostic is this. Is the God of the Bible a completely loving God? Again, the answer is a resounding yes. Given these two responses, it certainly seems legitimate to point out that on the face of it, this presents a logical contradiction. Considering all the human suffering in the world, the disease, pain, violence, crime, premature death and much more, it seems reasonable to conclude that there are two possibilities. Either God is very loving, but not all-powerful; he would like to eliminate such evil from the lives of humans but is unable to, or he is all powerful, but not completely loving toward the humans he created. If he is able to prevent the litany of human agony, and if he also loves us very much, surely he would put an end to all the suffering. It seems that something has to give. How is a believer to hold onto their theology in view of this apologetic question? This is the subject of the first part of this essay.

Pain and suffering is also a human problem. If we are able to deal with the intellectual challenge of the apologetic question raised above (and that is a big if), this alone does not solve the problem. Even if we can somehow simultaneously defend the omnipotence of God and his love, we are still left with a lot of pain and suffering in the world. This is not just a problem of the intellect. It is a problem of the heart. Even if we can understand the nature of suffering, the question remains: what will our personal response be to those we find in pain and suffering around us? What is our world-view of human suffering, and what is the Christian response? Having read a fair amount on the subject, I have found that most writers deal either with the intellectual or with the human problem. I propose to bring these two issues together. How should we think, how should we feel and how should we respond to the existence of evil and of suffering around us?

PAIN AND SUFFERING: AN INTELLECTUAL RESPONSE

We will begin by considering the range of the question. What is suffering, anyway? Clearly there is more than one kind of suffering. Are all to be considered equally? Do they raise different kinds of questions? In delineating different sorts of human suffering, we will eventually have to ask two questions.

First, is this suffering God's fault? Is God to blame for this pain? this suffering? Second, is this suffering truly evil? The intellectual quandary raised above is based on the assumption that suffering itself is inherently an evil. We will question this assumption. If pain and suffering is not evil then the apparent contradiction raised by the skeptic or even by the sincere seeker goes away. Please remember that there will be no simple answer to this question. Let us consider some of the kinds of suffering which are common to the human condition.

1. Pain. Acute pain, broken bones, etc., chronic and debilitating pain, cancer, etc.
2. Disease, both acute and chronic. Cancer, meningitis, lupus, leprosy, heart disease.
3. Broken relationships, unrequited love, lost friendships.
4. Poverty, hunger, depredation in general.
5. Violent crime, rape, sexual abuse, terrorism, genocide, political crimes.
6. Chronic fear, much of which is created by the items in point #5.
7. Disappointment, feelings of failure, loss of hope, loss of a job and others.
8. Death of a loved one. Bereavement, mourning.

When I was a child my parents told me the truism that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." I now believe that this proverb cannot be further from the truth. Of the kinds of suffering listed above, it is my experience that it is the emotional pain and suffering which haunts us and which we fear the most. The physical pain of childhood sexual abuse endures for a few minutes or a few years, but the emotional pain lasts for a lifetime, and even more than a lifetime. The physical pain associated with death can be intense, but the pain of those left behind is often greater and longer lasting.

In this essay, I will attempt to give a reasonable explanation of the nature of this suffering and the cause of it from God's perspective. Please remember, though, that there remains no simple answer. There are kinds and examples of suffering for which we will simply be unable to provide an explanation which will satisfy the heart. Examples include the death of a young child from brain cancer, birth defects which leave a child completely unable to have any significant quality of life, the death of hundreds of thousands in the tsunami of Dec. 30, 2004, the holocaust of the Jews under the Nazis or of the Armenians under the Turks in 1917. Even if we can provide some sort of an intellectual answer to such suffering in the treatment below, it seems somehow cruel to provide a cut and dried explanation to such suffering. Indeed, I believe it is not my or anyone else's place to provide "the answer" to such things.

Bottom line, there is a lot of suffering in the world. This is the world which God made, and which he said was very good! (Genesis 1:31) This is a very serious question. What is the cause of all this suffering, and what is the explanation from God's perspective? Is it because God lacks the power to prevent pain, suffering and evil? Is it because God is aloof? Is it because he does not love us enough to step in and prevent the suffering that happens in the world which he created? Does the existence of suffering in the world prove that God, if he exists, is evil, or at least that he is not totally good?

CAUSES OF SUFFERING

One of the questions raised above about the suffering and evil in the world is whether they are God's fault. In my own experience in relationships, I have found that the assignment of fault or blame is generally not productive. In fact, it tends to be counter productive. However, in the intellectual discussion of pain and suffering, blame is an issue which cannot be avoided. Of course, there is a sense in which all suffering is, by definition, God's fault. This is the universe which he created. No pain, no evil, and no suffering would have occurred if God had not created the universe. The president who commits us to war is ultimately responsible for any kind of evil which happens as a result of that war; even the random act of evil committed by a single deranged soldier. However, on a personal level, we do not hold the person who makes a decision to go to war responsible personally for an individual who decides, against policy and the clear directions from the top, to commit a crime of passion. How does this dichotomy apply to the creator of everything? This is something we will have to consider carefully. Again, simple answers will not do here.

FREE WILL

One of the causes of suffering, although it is an indirect one, is the existence of free will as a factor in the human condition. Remember that this essay is on the biblical theology of suffering and evil. If we are going to discuss free will, it is worth noting that the phrase “free will” is not found in the Bible. In fact, there is little if any discussion of what we call free will in the Bible. Having said that, I believe we can make a strong case that the idea of free will is very much a biblical one. Free will is, by definition, the possession by a conscious individual person of the ability to exercise their will freely in order to make choices about the direction of their lives. Does the Bible show us conclusively that human beings possess this freedom of will?

In Deuteronomy 30:15-20 God tells his people through Moses that they are being given a choice between life and death, blessings and curses. At the end of this emotional appeal, God pleads with his people, “Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him.” Similarly, at the end of his life, Joshua left this charge with the people of God, “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15) Jesus seems to agree that human beings are given free choice whether we will serve God or not. He did not try to force people to follow him. Instead he appealed to their hearts, their minds and their consciences. “If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” (John 7:17) “If anyone would come after me he must take up his cross and follow me.” (Luke 9:23) Jesus clearly called people to make a decision of their will to follow him.

There is some biblical evidence that in certain special situations, God will step into a person’s life temporarily when his sovereign will trumps that of the individual. This seems to be the case when God hardened Pharaoh’s heart and when he urged Judas to do what he planned to do quickly. In each case God temporarily violated a person’s free will in order to bring about his sovereign will: the salvation of his people. However, in both situations, God was moving a person who was already inclined toward evil. I also believe that ultimately even Pharaoh and Judas could have repented. God’s sovereign will did not remove their ultimate choice. What we are left with is the clear biblical teaching, which seems to be confirmed by our own experiences; God has given his creatures freedom of will to do good or to do evil.

Would we fault God in this? Would we prefer to live in a universe in which conscious beings do not have free will? Is lack of freedom of choice an improvement? I say that love “true love” gives choices. Does the one who chooses to criticize God prefer to live in a world in which they are automatons? Consider the case of parents who dramatically over-control their children, removing almost all freedom of choice. Is this a loving way to treat our offspring? Loving parents, like a loving God, train their children to make good choices. They influence through example, love and discipline, but they do not manipulate or remove choice.

It was God’s will to create persons who, of their own will, reciprocate his love of them by rejecting pride and selfishness; freely choosing to love and to serve God. Is this an evil thing? Let each person reach their own conclusion in the matter (but be thankful for being able to reach your own conclusion!). The question is whether God is both all-powerful and loving. I say that God is so loving and so powerful that he created beings who have both the capacity and the freedom to love or to not love their Creator.

Let us look at it from God’s perspective (if that is possible). God took a huge chance in us. He created us in his image. He gave us emotions, the ability to create, and a freedom of will not unlike his. In the person of Jesus, he even laid down his life so that we would have the opportunity to be forgiven of our shortcomings. This was very risky. Consider Adam and Eve. God took a risk with them. Most of their offspring did even worse than they did. “The Lord was grieved and his heart was filled with pain.” (Genesis 6:6). Is this because God was not powerful enough or not loving enough? Anyone who pours their life into a person with free will risks being rejected and hurt. Those of us who have been parents understand this. Parenting is an extremely risky activity. All of us who choose to bring children into the

world risk pouring our lives, our energy and our love into our offspring, only to have them reject all this sacrifice. For all we know, our children can become drug addicts, felons or simply very bitter and angry people. Why do we take such risks? We do this because in this sense we are like God. We want to give and to receive love freely.

SIN

One of the causes of evil and suffering in this world is free will. As stated above, this is only an indirect cause of suffering. The possession of free will only leads to suffering if people choose to disobey the will of God. If free will is a cause of suffering it is because sin is a cause of suffering. A loving God gave us a choice and we abused that choice in order to do evil. As stated more than once already, no single answer can explain all suffering, but I believe that by far the greatest part of human suffering is caused by sin on the part of individual people. Not all our pain can be traced to sin, but consider the amount of suffering, on an individual, family, community and even nation-wide level is produced by sin. Surely anger, greed, addictive behavior, pride, jealousy, violence, sexual perversion, selfishness, jealousy, lack of self control, the ungodly desire for power and other sins are the cause of most of the emotional suffering and even much of the physical suffering we experience. Is God to blame for this? Consider the alternative. We could live in a world in which we do not have freedom of choice, but is that the world we would choose for ourselves?

God has created the physical world with natural laws. These laws have inevitable consequences. If I drive a car into a tree at 120 miles per hour, I do not blame God for the consequences of such an action. In fact, it is these very laws of nature which make it possible for us to live, as we will see below. God has also created and revealed moral laws. Certain sinful behaviors have inevitable consequences in our lives. There are eternal consequences involved, but that is not the point. In this life, selfishness, drunkenness, violence, sexual abuse will cause suffering, both in the life of the one who commits the sin and in the lives of others. These moral laws are about as easy to avoid as the law of gravity. Sin causes suffering. Even if our sins are forgiven by the blood of Jesus, they still have consequences in this life for those who perpetrate the sins and for those caught in the cross fire. The Bible never tells us to expect this law to be broken, whether we are saved or not.

Let us consider two Old Testament passages which discuss the consequences of sin. First, in Ezekiel 18:4 God tells his people, "For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son: both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die." He continues, concerning a very sinful man, "But suppose this son has a son who sees all the sins his father commits, and though he sees them, he does not do such things: He will not die for his father's sin; he will surely live. But his father will die for his own sin, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother and did what was wrong among his people." This passage tells us that the son does not suffer the consequences of the sin of his father. It is fair to broaden this out to say that those around the sinner do not suffer the consequences for the acts of the sinner.

Next, consider another passage which, at first glance, seems to contradict Ezekiel 18. We find in Exodus 20:5 the statement that, "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." Do we suffer the punishment for the sins of others or not? What seems complicated to explain or even contradictory at first is actually quite simple. Ezekiel 18 tells us that as for eternal consequences—heaven or hell—the son is not held accountable for the sin of the father. However, Exodus 20:5 informs us that in this life we will be affected negatively by God's physical punishment for the sins committed by those we are close to. This physical judgment will obviously cause emotional pain as well. When Judah was taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar, the righteous people suffered right along with those whose gross sins caused God to bring physical punishment on Jerusalem. This is as true today as it was in the days of Moses. If a father sexually molests his own child, that child suffers for the sin of their father to be sure. Not only that, but we know from experience that the children of the victim of abuse also suffers. Without intervention, the cycle of abuse will continue "to the fourth generation." This moral law of suffering brought into lives because of sin is not eliminated altogether even if the daughter of abuse comes to Christ. She will be healed spiritually and emotionally by God. This may be true, but if we think that this Christian mother's self esteem is not affected and that it has absolutely no

effect on her children, we do not understand the consequences of sin. It is well known that the sin of alcoholism has a similar generational effect.

Selfishness, greed, anger, jealousy; these sins hurt innocent people. Are we going to blame God for this fact? This is the real (intellectual) question. Does the existence of sin, and suffering brought about by that sin prove that God is either not sufficiently loving or not sufficiently powerful? God gave us free will and we abused it. As for myself, I do not blame God for giving me a choice. I am thankful he had the courage and love to give me a choice. I am motivated to make God not regret giving me a choice to do good or evil.

Before we move on to the next cause of suffering, I want to emphasize an important point. Not all suffering is the result of sin. We make a mistake, and sometimes we commit an injustice when we assume all suffering is because of sin. The Old Testament book most relevant to the problem of suffering is Job. Job suffered an inordinate amount. Only naturally, he asks, "why me?" His friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar tell him that God is punishing him for his sin. Job responds that he is righteous and does not deserve the suffering. Who is right? The answer is that none of the participants in this debate is correct, unless we count God as a participant. God tells Job that his friends are wrong. He is not being punished for his sin. But then, Job is not right either. He is not sufficiently righteous to be able to charge God with not being fair. The point is this, Job suffered greatly, but it was not because of his sin. Let us note something in Job which may help us to understand how to deal with suffering. Interestingly, God never told Job why he was made to suffer. We learn from this that God may not answer our question "why?" That being true, we need to be very cautious to give pat answers to our friends as to why they are suffering.

We learn from the Old Testament that not all suffering is caused by evil. Jesus made the same point as recorded in John chapter nine. Concerning a man born blind, his apostles asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2) Here we see the human prejudice toward assuming human suffering is automatically the result of someone's sin. Jesus answers, "Neither this man, nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." (John 9:3)

Prejudice such as that exhibited by the apostles has not disappeared from the face of the earth. Some self-righteous "Christians" have claimed that AIDS is God's punishment for homosexuality. What arrogance! Who are we to speak for God in this matter? We need to be very careful about playing the sin card as it relates to the suffering of those around us, including ourselves. We will discuss a better response to suffering in the second part of this essay.

NATURAL CAUSES

We have already considered free will and, more directly, sin committed by those given their freedom as the cause of a great proportion of the suffering of human beings. As we have just seen, sin cannot explain all suffering. Some of the suffering which comes into people's lives is caused by natural phenomena. Obvious examples include earthquakes, hurricanes and other natural disasters. To these, one can add disease and the natural processes caused by aging. When an earthquake happens or when outbreak of an infectious disease occurs, the victims seem random. It seems irrational to tie such events to the sins of an individual or even of a nation. The agnostic, or even the believer asks, why, if God is all-powerful and completely loving did he allow two hundred thousand people to die in the great tsunami on December 30, 2004? Did all those children deserve to die? What good was achieved by whole families being wiped out?

As mentioned above, God created the world with moral laws of cause and effect. The same holds true for the laws of nature which were created by the same God. When God conceived of and created the physical universe, it was extraordinarily well designed so that life can exist. Scientists inform us that the force of gravity, the electromagnetic force and the nuclear strong and weak forces are all "fine tuned." In other words, if any of them were changed even very slightly, the universe would not have the properties to allow life to exist. If the force of gravity was a miniscule fraction smaller, galaxies, stars and planets would not have formed. If it was ever so slightly stronger, the universe would have collapsed back in on itself in just a

few million years. There is only one element—carbon—with the properties required to build the large molecules required for life to exist. There is only one magnetic element; iron. Without the magnetic properties of iron, highly energetic charged particles from the sun would destroy all life on the earth. Of course without the unique properties of hydrogen, stars would not produce massive amounts of energy necessary to support life on the earth.

The fortunate facts about the earth we live on include the production of heat inside the earth from radioactive uranium and the action of plate tectonics caused by the release of that heat. Without plate tectonics, the earth would have lost its atmosphere and the soil would have lost its ability to support an abundance of life a long time ago. Plate tectonics, a necessity for life, also produces earthquakes. Humans suffer because of earthquakes. Before we fault God for causing earthquakes, we better propose a universe and an environment in that universe which does not include plate tectonics. Are earthquakes evil? No, they are necessary to life.

The same can be said for hurricanes, tornadoes, floods and any of a number of similar natural disasters. God created a spectacularly well-tuned universe, solar system and earth. When heat is radiated from a round object toward a round object very far away, the heat is not distributed evenly. Without the natural heat distribution systems in the oceans and the atmosphere, the earth would be uninhabitable to advanced life forms due to the extremes of temperature. The weather is our friend, even if it occasionally produces effects which are dangerous. The alternative is much worse. To the critic who feels God did not do a good enough job in designing the natural world, please, suggest a better natural system than the one we have, and while you are at it, create this system out of nothing. Extremes of weather may cause suffering, but unless someone can propose a better system, we should thank God rather than doubt him. Are storms and the destruction wrought by them evil? No, weather is a blessing.

The argument can continue. Would anyone like to live in a world without bacteria? The very existence of advanced life forms on the earth is completely dependent on bacteria. The same category of one-celled life which is the cause of much disease is also responsible for putting nitrogen into the soil, for keeping the carbon cycle in balance, for producing vitamin K in our bodies and for an innumerable number of other absolutely essential chemical tasks. Forms of the same bacteria which are absolutely essential to life cause disease. Life exists in a delicate balance, but it exists. For myself, I am unwilling to declare bacteria and disease caused by bacteria evil.

In the final analysis, any conceivable natural system for sustaining advanced living beings will be dangerous. Is this an evil thing? Does this mean God is weak or not loving or not intelligent enough to solve the problems? Far from it. In the words of David, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.” (Psalms 19:1-2) God’s creation is a thing of wonder and beauty. If he were to ask my opinion, to be honest, I would ask for a world with less physical danger and with more perfect weather everywhere, but who am I to criticize the spectacular natural system created by God?

We have considered free will and subsequent sin as well as natural causes of suffering. This is not the end of the story. Additional causes of suffering still to be considered include aging, pain and death. Bear in mind that there will be kinds of suffering which none of us can explain. We will not be able to dismiss such things with a wave of the hand. As we will see, that is not God’s way. In the Bible, God takes the issue of suffering head-on.

The Problem of Pain and Suffering Part II

In the previous essay I proposed a two-pronged strategy to considering the problem of pain and suffering. The existence of evil and of suffering is both an apologetic problem and a human problem. In the first part, I tackled the apologetic issue. If God is all powerful and completely loving, is there not an inconsistency, given the tremendous amount of suffering in the world? We looked at the causes of

suffering, which include the God-given gift of free will and the subsequent sins committed by human beings. I showed that human sin is not sufficient to explain all suffering. We also looked at natural causes. Much suffering is the result of forces set in motion by God, without which there would be no life. For one to fault God in this, one must conceive of a better system of natural laws by which to govern a universe. In this, the second part of the essay I will complete a discussion of the apologetic issue by asking if pain, death and suffering itself are in and of themselves evil. Let the reader be reminded that there will be no simple answer to these questions. Lastly, we will consider suffering as a human issue and what the Christian response to suffering should be.

Are These Things Inherently Evil?

The one who raises the apologetic issue of the problem of pain and suffering probably makes the assumption that such things as pain, death and suffering are, by definition, evil and evidence that something is “wrong” with the world because of these things. Wrong, that is, if we assume that God is real. In this section, I will call into the question this assumption. None of us looks forward to experiencing pain, of course, but is the existence of pain, even horrendous pain, a bad thing? What about death? Is the death of human beings evidence of a lack of love on the part of the Creator? And then there is suffering of an emotional or physical nature. Does the existence of these things call into question the omnipotence of the love of the one who oversees all things?

Is Pain Evil?

It is hard to think of pain as a good thing. In fact, we have a word for the kinds of people who seek pain for its own sake. We call them masochists. Some ascetics have taught that physical pain is a positive spiritual good, leading one closer to God. Most famously, certain Catholic groups have practiced self-flagellation and other forms of pain-infliction as a spiritual exercise. It is extremely difficult to support such practices using the Bible. Paul tells us that “harsh treatment of the body? lack[s] any value in restraining sensual indulgence.” (Colossians 2:23)

But that is not the question. Is the existence of human pain an evil? Many who attack the Christian God would have us think so. They point us to examples of chronic pain, calling on our sentiments, demanding to know how God can allow such suffering. Perhaps they have a good point. Let us imagine for a moment a world without the sensation of pain. Actually, there exist a very small proportion of people who are born without the ability to experience pain. These people are very fortunate, right? The answer is a definite no. A person who cannot feel pain is in constant mortal danger. If they pick up a hot frying pan, they do not know it until they smell their own burning flesh. If they overeat to dangerous levels, they are unaware. In fact, they are in danger of death. If they break a bone without feeling pain, permanent disfiguring injury is the likely result.

Pain is a good thing. It was created (or evolved, depending on your perspective) so that we can thrive. If one suffers a sprained ankle, it is a very good thing that this is painful. Lepers lose the ability to feel pain. Let us ask one if they are happy they have lost the ability to feel pain in their extremities. Bottom line, pain prevents dangerous behaviors. The anticipation of pain prevents us from doing harm to our bodies. A headache is a sign from our bodies that all is not well: it is time to lower the stress level. A toothache is a warning to favor that tooth and to seek care for it.

Even emotional pain is often God's way to help us prevent self-harming behaviors. When we experience hatred and anger, it is painful. This pain can cause us to avoid being around those who would harm us. It can also teach us to not treat others this way. Emotional pain is a warning against sinful behaviors and a signal to flee emotionally harmful situations. Who said pain is evil?

Having said all that, let us admit that there are still examples of pain which are philosophically and emotionally hard to accept. The sight of a loved one suffering in extreme agony in the death-throes of cancer is hard to accept as a good thing. There are a number of nervous system syndromes which produce

prodigious pain without a corresponding protection from dangerous behavior. It is not my intent to “explain” all these situations, but I would simply point out that the alternative is certainly far worse. A world without pain—even extreme pain—is not a better one than that which we live in. Speaking for myself, I do not think I could improve on the world God has created, but I am thankful that he has given human beings the ability to discover and invent compounds which can relieve the kinds of pain mentioned above.

Is Death Evil?

On the face of it, one will have to admit that the existence of death seems like an evil thing. At the very least, it certainly is sad, and it unquestionable leads to suffering, at least on the part of those who are left behind to mourn the loss of a loved one. What is the biblical view of death, and is that view reasonable?

Death is a big part of nature: some of it grisly and disturbing. Skeptics of Christianity have pointed out the merciless violence and death in nature as proof of the pointlessness of life. They have also used it as evidence that the God of the Bible cannot be real. How can a loving God allow cute little bunnies to be savagely killed by mangy looking coyotes?

My response to this question is to point to the beauty of the system God has created. It is through life, reproduction and death that species change, adapt and improve. Without programmed death, life itself would end. The lion improves the gazelle as it mercilessly culls the weak and dying. Life cannot exist without reactive molecules which inevitably cause damage. Oxygen is necessary to animal life, but it is also very corrosive. The same processes which allow for life inevitable cause death. My response to the sentimental argument of the skeptic with regard to animal suffering is to ask this person to propose a better system which actually works. If anyone can create a self-sustaining system on paper which offers improvement, I challenge them to come forward with this system. I further challenge this person to create this system *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) as God did.

I will be honest with you. If my pet poodle were killed by a merciless coyote, I would be very sad about that. If a merciless driver of a car is substituted, my feelings would not change very much. However, I do not fault God for creating a world in which death is a part, and I definitely do not feel that it would have been better if Alex had never been born. Despite the reality of death, I still believe that life is better than non-life.

The death of conscious beings—humans—raises somewhat different questions. Let us look at what the Bible says about physical death and then ask whether this agrees with reason. Paul said in Philippians 1:21-22, “For me to live is Christ, to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!” Is Paul crazy? The answer is that if he is right, he is not crazy but honest. The conclusion that the death of a conscious being is an evil thing requires the assumption that physical death is the final end. If the atheist is right then when we die “We are dead like Rover, dead all over.” Paul declares, with the other New Testament writers, that there will be a resurrection at the end of days. “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” (Hebrews 9:27) If Paul is wrong then death is tragic. If Paul is right then for a follower of Jesus it marks a transition to something far more glorious than life confined to our physical bodies. “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.” (1 Corinthians 15:42-44)

For those who are in Christ, death is not an evil thing at all. God has words for those of us who are left behind when a loved one departs as well. “Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.” (Isaiah 57:2) “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4) If the Bible is true then death is not a final ending. It is a transition. Unfortunately, for those who abuse their free will, the final state will be one of judgment. No one will be happy about that, including God. However, even the fact that judgment will occur does not make death an evil thing.

To the atheist, death makes life appear futile. But even for the atheist, to live and to die is better than to have not lived at all. That being said, the atheist is wrong. Death is not evil because death is not the end. There is a God and there is life after death. God has given proof of this by raising Jesus from the dead. “For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31). Death is a cause for sadness, but death is not evil. Death makes all of life precious, including the suffering we experience.

Is Suffering Evil?

I will make the case that suffering is not a bad thing. All the suffering in our life is either caused by God or is allowed by God, but in either case, suffering is not evil. Suffering is good. It is a gift from God. If there is no life after death, then perhaps death is evil. If life is meaningless—a mere chasing after the wind—then perhaps suffering is evil as well. But life is not meaningless. And suffering, as we will see below, is very meaningful.[1]

Let us consider several reasons that suffering is not inherently evil at all—that it is in fact a moral good.

1. No Suffering, No Joy.

If we think about it we will realize that without suffering in our life, there is no joy. David expresses this truth in Psalms 30:5. “For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.” A warm house feels wonderful when we come out of the cold. A meal tastes infinitely better when we are famished. A brand new love is made all the more delicious because we have waited in loneliness for so long. Success is incredibly sweet when we have suffered with repeated failure. Without failure, success loses all its ability to satisfy. Without pain and suffering we would not know or recognize pleasure or joy. This is how we were made. It is how we work. For those who do not know God, it may be that joy endures for the night, but weeping comes in the morning, but for those who pour their life out in service to God and to fellow-humans, weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning. To the one who says suffering is evil, I ask whether they believe that joy is good.

Again, let us be honest about this. There are kinds of suffering which do not lead to joy, but most do; especially for those who are in a relationship with God. In fact, suffering increases our joy. It makes it alive.

2. Suffering leads to growth and to good character.

As the truism goes: no pain, no gain. We did not appreciate it when our parents quoted this proverb, but almost all of us have realized its truth by now. We have all watched the mother who expends all of her energy protecting her little charges from all possible sources of displeasure or pain. We watch in horror because we know where a life without pain and suffering inevitably leads. It produces a spoiled, ungrateful, selfish brat.

The teaching that suffering is from God and that it can produce good rather than evil is found just about anywhere one looks in the Bible. Paul tells us in Romans 5:3, “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” Even the agnostic recognizes the truth of what Paul says here. James tells us to, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

Think about the greatest human beings who have lived. All of them suffered tremendously. We do not respect those who are not willing to suffer for a cause, yet some people say that suffering is evil—that it is a sign that God is either not all-powerful or not all-loving. This position is not a logically

consistent one.

We should bear in mind, however, that not all suffering gives opportunity for growth. This is not the silver bullet to the problem of suffering. Suffering which leads to immediate death does not produce growth: at least not for that individual. Besides there are kinds of suffering which our heart tells us cannot possibly be compensated sufficiently by the good produced in human characters. Nevertheless, the claim that suffering somehow disproves the God of the Bible is not holding up well to careful inspection.

3. Our suffering brings praise and glory to God.

As a good parent, God does not delight in our suffering. However, God tells us that for several reasons, our suffering can bring praise, honor and glory to Him, and that is a good thing. A classic example of this concept is found in John chapter nine. We have already looked at this passage when proving that not all suffering is caused by sin. Let us consider it in the present context. Why did God allow this man to be born blind? Jesus told them that “this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” (John 9:3) This works two ways. One person’s godly response to suffering might be just the thing that brings another person to God. That certainly has been the case with the suffering of Jesus Christ! Besides, our own suffering may be the only thing God can use to bring us to our knees. God is not unwilling to bring suffering into our lives if it will cause us to turn to him for help. When we do so, he is waiting to offer salvation. This is certainly the case with the man born blind in John nine.

I have taught on this very point to more than one audience. I have asked those in attendance how many of them were made open to becoming a Christian because of some kind of crisis or suffering in their life. Over half the hands in the room go up. I believe that every one of these people would state with all their hearts that it was worth the suffering if it led them to knowing Christ and ultimately to heaven. In view of eternity, “our light and momentary afflictions are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” (2 Corinthians 4:17)

Does the glory which is brought to God truly outweigh the suffering which brings it on? A close friend of my family had become a Christian but drifted far away. Perhaps as a consequence of this, or perhaps not, her daughter got into some very dangerous situations. One day a few years later I got the kind of call none of us ever wants to receive. Her daughter had been murdered by her boyfriend, right in front of their child. I was asked to preach at the funeral. What could I say in such a situation? This is about as horrendous a situation as I can imagine. Through this unimaginable suffering, our friend is now a faithful Christian and her grandson is being raised in a Christian home. Was the praise and glory brought to God worth the suffering involved? Personally, I do not think I can answer this question. There is no easy answer to the problem of pain and suffering, but there are answers.

4. (Virtually) all suffering can be used for the good in the end.

If suffering is in fact evil, it is only because those who suffer do not learn and grow from the suffering. Those who have suffered from child abuse can turn the pain into conviction to do good. They can also use their suffering as an opportunity to help those who have been the victim of similar abuse. Let us remember, though, that this does not make sin good. Even if we can turn evil into an opportunity to do good, it does not make the original act any less sinful. It just shows the beauty of the system God has established. This idea is expressed wonderfully in Romans 8:28. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Notice that God is not telling us that all things are good. He is telling us that in all things, God can work for good if we will let him.

Even if sin is the cause of suffering, the suffering is always an opportunity to do good. If violence leads to a cycle of more violence, that is not God’s fault. If an evil thought leads to an evil action, which leads down a trail of depravity, it does not have to be so. Every “evil” is an opportunity for God. This is God’s plan. Either way, suffering is not inherently evil. God can work great things through our suffering. Let me offer a piece of advice. If you find someone who is involved in some sort of intense suffering, do not pull out Romans 8:28 on that person. We need to be careful how we judge situations. It is best to let

the person discover for themselves how God can work through their pain in the long run.

Is the ultimate good which can come from any kind of suffering, be it physical or emotional the bottom line answer to the philosophical and apologetic question of suffering? Probably not. There are tragedies so horrendous that it seems patronizing to say, "No problem, God can use that for the good." It seems unreasonable to explain the genocide of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia by the ultimate good which can come of it. I believe Romans 8:28 applies best to personal situations for believers in God. Nevertheless, for those who have the perspective of God, all suffering can work out for the good in the long run. Suffering is not inherently evil.

5. Suffering is the natural result of doing good.

The Jews had a general belief that suffering is a punishment from God for some sort of sin. This belief carried over into European culture until modern times. In some cases, they have a point. God used Assyria and Babylonia to judge his people for their idolatry and hard hearts. Nevertheless, the idea that suffering in this life is punishment is generally not true. The New Testament perspective is that hardship and suffering are as sign of and the natural result of doing good. The ultimate example of this, of course, is the life of Jesus Christ.[2] As Peter puts it, "But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps." (1 Peter 2:20-21). Suffering for doing good is not punishment from God. It is the crown of a righteous life. Paul made a similar statement. He put it very simply, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Tim 3:12)

I have not yet met anyone who gets fired up about suffering. Perhaps I will meet just such a masochist some day. However, when we suffer for doing good, this can be a source of great encouragement. Our histories are full of examples of people we deeply admire. Why? Because they chose to suffer so that they could make a difference. Such suffering is not evil.

Obviously this point does not explain all suffering, but it can provide some perspective for us about the nature of suffering in general. We should not seek suffering for its own sake, but we can rejoice in our suffering. "Blessed (happy) are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

6. Through suffering we come to know Christ and to fulfill his purpose.

Through suffering, those who are in Christ come to know Christ. Through suffering they experience Christ. Through suffering, they complete the work of Jesus. This may sound almost blasphemous, but it is biblical. In preparing this study, it was the discovery of this concept which changed my own thinking about suffering the most. In my studies, I have found this theme to be a very common one in the New Testament. I will share just a couple of the relevant passages. Consider Colossians 1:24-27.

"Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness: the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Paul hoped to fill up in his flesh what was still lacking with regard to the sufferings of Jesus. There is a sense in which we complete what was started by Jesus. This helps us both to know Christ and to help others to come to know him. Paul is not saying that Christ's suffering was insufficient. Rather he says that for us personally, and to some extent for others as well, it is completed, matured, filled up, realized when we suffer. In our suffering we really come to know Christ.

As humans, we understand this concept intuitively. The most powerful relationships are created through suffering. The idea of great relationships being forged through suffering for a great cause is proverbial. The sports team which endures adversity, even if it does not reach the ultimate plateau of success, is the one which creates the closest bonds. All of us know the stories of lifelong friendships forged between those who share the same foxhole. It is through suffering together that a real family is forged. Another of the many passages along this line is Philippians 3:10-11. "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." Paul is not teaching a new doctrine that our suffering saves us. He is explaining how he came to a fantastically deep understanding of Jesus. It was through suffering. It is hard to think of anyone who suffered more than Paul. He was flogged many times, beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, nearly starved to death. All this, and his greatest suffering was his deep concern for the churches he had planted. Yet, Paul was one of the most joyful people who ever lived. Why? Through suffering, he came to know Christ. In this there is great joy. Let us not avoid suffering. Do not seek it for its own sake, but welcome it as the surest means to come to the most profound place any human being can reach: knowing Christ.

Summary

For those who live in a physical body, as we do, suffering is not evil. In fact, for those in the human condition, suffering is good, not evil. There are kinds of suffering which are hard to understand. We cannot simply state platitudes and make all the emotional and rational problems associated with suffering simply disappear. However, in the big picture, suffering is not evil. It is as much a gift of God as any of his other creations. Does the existence of pain prove that there is no God, or at least that the one who exists is not completely powerful or loving? What about the stark reality of death? Does the existence of suffering draw into question the omnipotence and the love of God? The answer is an emphatic no.

This completes the section of the essay on the apologetic question of suffering and evil. The last installment will be a discussion on the human aspect of suffering. The question to be addressed is, what should our response to suffering be?

[1] To argue that suffering is evil and to therefore dismiss the God of the Bible is to make a circular argument.

Part III Suffering: A Human Problem.

Human pain and suffering raises an apologetic problem. How can the idea of a loving and powerful God be consistent with the existence of evil, pain and suffering in the world? Although I have not given "the answer" to this problem, I believe I have shown that this problem can be answered. Pain and suffering are not inherently evil. A very powerful and loving God created an amazing universe which supports advanced forms of life and persons in that universe who have been given the freedom to choose to love God or to do evil.

But pain and suffering are human, emotional problems as well. What should our response be to the pain and suffering which exist everywhere we look in the world? An individual's answer will depend on his or her world view. Our theology will play a major role in determining our response to the suffering around us.

Let us consider the world view of Buddhism, Hinduism and other Eastern religions. Of course, it requires us to greatly simplify in order to summarize the world view of these religions and the people who ostensibly believe in them. Eastern religions include Confucianism, Shinto, Jaina, Taoism, Sikhism and others. The Hindu world view is that the physical world is an illusion. The word used to describe physical reality is *maya*. According to Hindu theology, this world is an illusion, and a deceptive one at that. The goal of human beings is to see around this illusion in order to detect the deeper spiritual reality—to experience Brahman. Brahman is the ultimate reality. The concept of *maya* is common to Jainism,

Sikhism and Buddhism as well. According to this concept, our suffering is an illusion. The goal of Buddhism is to end suffering. The eight fold path is a means to escape suffering by learning to overcome and eliminate desire.

So, according to Eastern religion in general (and please remember that this is a simplification), human suffering is an illusion. The goal is to overcome suffering by transcending it, not necessarily by relieving it. This may or may not sound like an attractive philosophy, but it is not hard to imagine how this way of thinking can affect one's response to suffering. I was in India recently on a teaching visit. One thing which became striking was that a great proportion of all the benevolent work done in the country is supported by Christian groups, despite the fact that Christians make up less than one percent of the population. Of course, there are some very caring Hindus, but it is not surprising, given their world view, that so many of the basic physical needs as well as issues of social justice remain unsolved in India. The same can be said for most countries in the Eastern world. When suffering is viewed as an illusion it certainly is easier to ignore the suffering around us.

What is the world view of Islam? Unfortunately, most Westerner's view of Islam is shaped by their visceral exposure to terrorism in the news media. Few understand the basic tenets of Islam. One teaching of Islam which is relevant to the problem of pain and suffering is predestination. The view of the Q'uran is that Allah is a distant God who does not get involved in worldly affairs. When evil happens, it is God's will. The Arabic term is *inshallah*. It is the will of Allah. Islam has traditionally produced an extreme attitude of fatalism. Whatever happens it is *inshallah*—God's. It is not difficult to see how this world view might affect one's response to suffering. This can cause a cavalier attitude about the suffering and even death of those who are not in one's immediate family.

To be fair to Islam, another important aspect of the religion should be mentioned. One of the five pillars of Islam (along with confession, prayer, fasting and pilgrimage) is almsgiving. This almsgiving is intended, in part, to help the poor. The institution tends to be impersonal, but Muslims do have some notable programs to alleviate poverty. The dichotomy between the teaching on almsgiving and the theology of fatalism has caused the response of Islam to suffering be hard to stereotype. The word which comes to mind is impersonal. As with Buddhists, there are obviously some very caring people who profess Islam, but the question to be asked here is what is the world view and what is the common attitude spawned by that world view.

And then there is the world view of atheism. Because atheism is not a formal religion, it will be hard to characterize the world view of atheists (outside of the obvious, which is that they assume there is no God). One common belief of all atheists I have met is that life is inherently meaningless. We have no absolute purpose in life. The most well-known political system spawned by atheism is communism. To the atheist, the individual person is born, lives and dies. That is the end of the story. There is no inherent meaning to the individual life. In communism, the individual is not valued. The dreams and desires of a single person are not considered to be important. What is important is what is good for the community, however that is defined. It should not come as a complete surprise that the Pol Pot regime murdered over two million souls in Cambodia, or that the Soviets killed over twenty million in their gulags, only to be outdone by the estimated thirty million lives snuffed out by the communist regime in China. I am sure there are some really warm and loving communists out there, but I have not yet met one. Obviously, not all atheists can be characterized that way, but the philosophical underpinning of atheism tends to produce a cynical and cold view of human beings, with its obvious affect on how those who are suffering are treated.

What is the Christian world view, and how ought it to affect the individual Christian's response to suffering? The Christian world view can be defined by the teachings and the actions of Jesus Christ, but let us go back into the Old Testament to get started. Greek philosophy and Eastern religion view this world as an illusion or a secondary reality. The physical reality is inherently bad. The goal of religion is to escape the gross, degenerate, decaying physical world to enter the higher world of the mind or the spirit. On the other hand, we see in Genesis chapter one that when God finished his work of creation he saw that it was good: very good (Genesis 1:31). The physical world is not inherently evil. It was created by the same God who created the human soul and the angels and heaven. The physical world is a place to find enjoyment. It

is not a place from which we must to escape to find the deeper, spiritual reality. God wanted his people Israel to experience physical blessings as well as spiritual oneness with him.

From the Christian world view, suffering is not an illusion. It is a reality to which we must respond. What should our response be? Compassion! Let us consider a biblical response to pain and suffering. "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." We do not see a distant, aloof God here, but one who is involved emotionally with his people. He expects us to behave in the same manner. "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." (James 1:27) The Christian response to pain and misery is to alleviate the suffering as much as we can. We do this, not because suffering is evil. In fact, we already know that people can grow and come closer to God through suffering. We show compassion to those who suffer because that is what God does. It is the natural response of love. It is the response of a parent for a child.

Pain and suffering and loss are a visceral experience. They elicit great emotion. We should hurt with those who hurt. We should suffer with those who suffer. Human nature causes us to want to pull back—to protect ourselves from experiencing the suffering of others, but that is not what Jesus did. What was Jesus' response when he beheld the sobs of Mary over the death of Lazarus? He was deeply moved and troubled in spirit. "Jesus wept." (John 11:35) Why was Jesus so sad? He knew that Lazarus was about to be raised from the dead. Jesus was greatly moved because that is the Christian response to suffering. God weeps when we weep. This is no distant Allah who is far above all human emotion. We see no Buddhist escape from human attachment. No! We see the greatest kind of human attachment.

God understands our suffering and our emotional response to it. "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." (Hebrews 5:7,8) When we suffer, God does not mind at all if we cry out to him. Surely, watching others suffering is problematic for us. I know it is for me. Often I do not agree with God allowing some of the evil and suffering in this world.

Jesus did not hesitate to cry out to God in the garden because of his suffering. God is the loving parent who wants to hear our complaints. Listen to Asaph's complaint to God: "This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning." (Psalm 73:13-14). God does not rebuke Asaph for his complaints. He listens. He understands. An emotional response to suffering is not wrong. It is expected. Those who suffer or mourn need someone to listen to them, not to rebuke them for their feelings. God's response should be our response, which is to listen and to show compassion. Habakkuk complains to God, "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?" (Habakkuk 1:2-3) God does not duck the question of suffering and injustice in the world. He wants to hear our lament. This, of course, should be our response to suffering as well. Compassion and listening are in order.

My favorite Old Testament passage along these lines is Jeremiah 12:1. "You are always righteous, O Lord, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper?" This may sound like an impudent rebel speaking against his master. However, this is not the case. What we have here is a son who feels comfortable bringing his complaint to God. Why? Because he knows God well enough to anticipate receiving God's compassion. God wants to hear. Jesus felt this same safety in expression his fear and his suffering to his father. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.? "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 26:38, 39, 27:46). Suffering may not be evil, but it is real. It requires the Christian response, which is compassion.

Having answered the apologetic question of pain and evil and suffering, this is the key remaining question with regard to human suffering: What am I going to do about those around me who suffer physically and emotionally? How did I respond to suffering today? What actions did I take this week? Did I turn my eyes away? Do I purposefully align my life so that I can view as little suffering as possible? Am I making a difference? Am I part of the solution? The Christian view of suffering is that we need to respond with compassion and with action to bear the burdens of those who suffer around us.

Let us look one more time at Jesus and his compassion for God's people. Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciple, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matthew 9:35-38) Many of us are used to thinking of verse thirty-eight as being about evangelism, and perhaps it is, but in this context, the work Jesus is asking his followers to do is to show compassion on the harassed and helpless. This is the Christian response to the problem of pain and suffering.

Another glimpse of Jesus and his heart for the plight of human beings can be gained in Matthew 23:37. Jesus looked at Jerusalem and the people who were about to reject and kill him:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

Jesus had a boundless source of compassion for every kind of person. He did his best to alleviate physical suffering. He set an example of loving and reaching out to those who suffered emotionally. He modeled this life style and he expected those who followed him to do the same.

Again, each of us should ask ourselves individually, what am I doing about those around me who are hurting? Physical suffering is more obvious, but emotional pain—chronic fear, loss, loneliness and mourning—these are more prevalent and often more devastating. Are we following the example of Jesus in meeting these needs?

Let me suggest a few things NOT to do about the problem of pain and suffering.

1. Teach people to avoid suffering.
2. Tell people who are in the midst of great suffering that it is good for them.
3. Simply tell people to pray about it (without taking steps to relieve the suffering).
4. Tell people who suffer that it is their fault. (even if this is true, it is not our place to judge and besides it is better for people to reach this conclusion for themselves)

A few suggestions for what we should do:

1. Be like Job. Live with integrity and in faith in God despite your own suffering.
2. Forgive those who have wronged you.
3. Demonstrate empathy to those who suffer, rather than give them answers.
4. Find ways to alleviate poverty both locally and in the developing world. Try to do this in the most personal way possible.
5. When presented with physical needs, either meet them, or find someone who can.

6. Help prevent crime, avoid polluting, prevent accidents, find ways to make the world a more just place, find ways to help prevent addiction and family violence.

7. Find ways to show empathy to those who are suffering through things you have suffered through in the past. Turn your past suffering into an opportunity to show compassion.

Pain and suffering are not evil. They are part of God's plan for working in this world. This does not give us an excuse to sit idle when those around us are struggling with these things. They are an opportunity to make a difference—to show the heart of Jesus Christ. Let us follow the example of Christ. Let us "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2) "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people." (Galatians 6:10) We cannot solve the problem of pain and suffering, but let us do what we can to demonstrate the love and the compassion of Jesus Christ.

John Oakes 12/15/2006