

Why Is There Death & Suffering?

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Death and suffering is everywhere!

“Over 170,000 perish in Asian tsunami”

“Ten girls shot in Amish school massacre”

“Hurricane Katrina devastates Gulf Coast”

“Hundreds of thousands die in Darfur”

Tragedy is constantly in our news, including large-scale “senseless” disasters that snuff out the lives of thousands. The vivid images of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York’s World



Trade Center, the Pentagon, and Flight 93 will remain with us through the rest of our lives.

On CNN television in early 2005, former U.S. presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton were interviewed by Larry King about the December 2004 tsunami tragedy.

The presidents were asked questions concerning their religious faith and how people should understand what happened in Asia in terms of the existence of a loving God. Generic statements such as “life isn’t easy” were uttered. And both presidents said that such tragedies strengthened their “faith” (though what this “faith” entails was not defined on the program). Sadly, no real answers were provided.

These men, who at one time held the most powerful office in the world, chose not to use the Bible and its very first book to present an answer. Indeed, it is in the Bible’s first three chapters where Christians can offer a questioning world the explanation of the meaning of death and suffering—and why a loving God allows them to happen.

Without taking anything at all away from the anguish and grief resulting from terrible

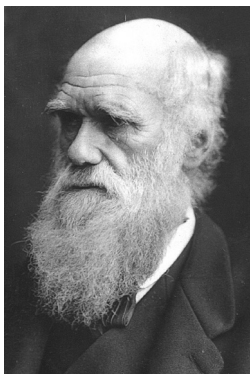
catastrophes, in an ultimate sense tragedies happen on a daily basis ... and they are the consequence of an event that occurred on the saddest day in the history of the universe: when the first man Adam rebelled against the Creator, thus bringing sin and death into a once-perfect world.

When a major tragedy captures global attention, there's usually much discussion in the media concerning how such things can be understood in terms of a loving God. While some Christian leaders are asked for their response (and usually falter, sad to report), atheists will often chime in and claim that there can't be a loving God because of such a horrible calamity.

Tragedies, of course, are not confined to today. It wasn't too long ago when an evil regime wiped out six million Jews and many others. In addition to the headline events, each of us suffers pain at one time or another—illness, headaches, accidents, and eventually death. It's not surprising when the burdens become too great, that people cry out to God in anguish, "Why don't you do anything? Don't you care?"

Time and death

It has been written of the daughter of one famous man that “Annie’s cruel death destroyed Charles’s tatters of beliefs in a moral, just universe. Later he would say that this period chimed the final death-knell for his Christianity. . . . Charles [Darwin] now took his stand as an unbeliever.”²

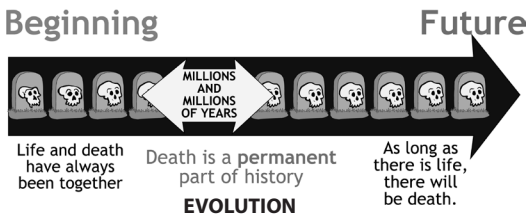


When Darwin wrote his famous book *On the Origin of Species*, he was in essence writing a history concerning death and struggle. In the conclusion of his chapter entitled “On the imperfections of the geological record,” Darwin wrote: “Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows.”³

From his evolutionary perspective on the origin of life, Darwin recognized that death had to be a permanent part of the world. Undoubtedly, he struggled with this issue as he sought to reconcile some sort of belief in God with the death and suffering he observed all around him, and which he believed had gone on for millions of years.

This struggle came to a climax with the death of his daughter Annie—"the final death-knell for his Christianity."

Belief in evolution and/or millions of years necessitates that death has been a part of history since life first appeared on this planet. The fossil layers (containing billions of dead things) supposedly represent the history of life over millions of years. As the late Carl Sagan is well known to have said, "The secrets of evolution are time and death."⁴



Sin and death

The phrase “sin and death” sums up the history of death according to a different perspective: the one that the Bible teaches. From a perspective of the literal history of the book of Genesis, there was a perfect world to start with—described by God as “very good” (Genesis 1:31)—but it was marred because of Adam’s rebellion. Sin and its consequence of death entered the world that was once a paradise (Romans 5:12 and the verses that follow). The death of man and the animals was not part of the original creation.

The true history of death, as understood from a literal Genesis, actually enables us to recognize a loving Creator who hates death.

Which history of death do you, the reader, accept? Is it one that makes God an ogre responsible for millions of years of death, disease, and suffering? Let’s look at this a little more, including one of the most-asked questions of our modern age.

How can an all-powerful, loving God allow suffering?

As the initial shock of a traumatic event wears off, people begin asking why such things occur. Inevitably the same question is raised: “How can there be a loving, all-powerful God who permits such death and suffering?”

In fact, the widespread suffering we see is often used by atheists to attack Christianity and its claim of a “loving God.” It is a legitimate question.

Multitudes have rejected God because of suffering!

Believing that the world is millions or billions of years old, some Christians will have an almost impossible task explaining the purpose behind the apparent cruelty that’s seen all around.

Darwin has been only one of probably millions of people who have struggled with this issue, trying to reconcile belief in God with the death and suffering Darwin observed everywhere, which he believed had gone on for millions of years. Darwin’s struggle over

this issue came to an end with the death of his ill daughter.

Similarly, CNN founder and billionaire Ted Turner says that he lost his faith after his sister died.

The *New York Times* ran a sobering article about him, saying, “Turner is a strident nonbeliever, having lost his faith after his sister . . . died of a painful disease. . . . ‘I was taught that God was love and God was powerful,’ Turner said, ‘And I couldn’t understand how someone so innocent should be made or allowed to suffer so.’”⁵

A famous evangelist rejected Christianity, in part because of the suffering he saw.

A former colleague of famed evangelist Billy Graham, the late Charles Templeton, published *Farewell to God* in 1996,^{6,7} describing his slide into unbelief and his eventual rejection of Christianity. Once listed among those “best used of God” as picked by the National Association of Evangelicals, Templeton listed several “reasons for rejecting the Christian faith.”

- Geneticists, he wrote, say it is “nonsense” to believe that sin is the “reason for all the crime, poverty, suffering, and general wickedness in the world.”⁸

- The “grim and inescapable reality” is that “*all life is predicated on death*. Every carnivorous creature *must* kill and devour another creature. It has no option.”⁹

Templeton, like Darwin, had a big problem understanding how to reconcile an earth full of death, disease, and suffering with the loving God of the Bible. Templeton stated:

Why does God’s grand design require creatures with teeth designed to crush spines or rend flesh, claws fashioned to seize and tear, venom to paralyze, mouths to suck blood, coils to constrict and smother—even expandable jaws so that prey may be swallowed whole and alive? . . . Nature is in Tennyson’s vivid phrase, “red [with blood] in tooth and claw,” and life is a carnival of blood.¹⁰

Templeton then concludes: “How could a loving and omnipotent God create such horrors as we have been contemplating?”¹¹

Templeton is not the only person to think like this. When told that there is a God of love who made the world, embittered people often reply with something like this: “I don’t see a God of love. I just see innocent children suffering and dying. There are so many

people committing terrorist attacks. Disease is everywhere. It's a horrible world, and I don't see your God of love. If your God does exist, he must be some sadistic ogre."

Does an atheist really have a case?

It can be useful to ask such a questioner to justify the validity of his own question *under his own belief system*. You see, for an atheist to complain that the God of the Bible is "evil," he must provide a standard of good and evil by which to judge him. But if we are simply evolved pond scum, as a consistent atheist must believe, where can we find an objective standard of right and wrong?

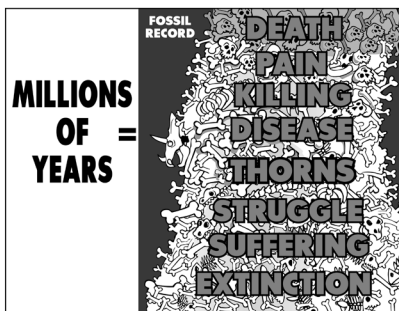
Ultimately, our ideas of right and wrong, under this system, are merely the outcome of some chemical processes that occur in the brain, which happened to give a survival advantage on our supposed ape-like ancestors. But did Hitler's brain obey the same chemical laws as those in humanitarian Mother Teresa's? So on what grounds are the latter's actions "better" than the other's? Also, why should the terrorist attacks massacring thousands of people

on 9/11 be more terrible than a frog killing thousands of flies?

A Christian, however, believes there is an objective standard of morality because it is set by an objective moral lawgiver who is our Creator. When you think about it, an atheist's argument against God because of objective evil concedes (inadvertently) the very point he or she is trying to argue against!

Such questions about God stem from a wrong view of history

Belief in evolution and/or millions of years of history necessitates that death has been a part of history since life first appeared on this planet. If you believe that the fossil layers



(containing billions of dead things) represent the history of life over millions of years, it's a very ugly record—full of death, disease, and suffering.

Sagan's phrase that the “secrets of evolution are time and death” encapsulates the most widely accepted history of death in our world.¹² According to this view, 1) death, suffering, and disease over millions of years led to man's emergence; 2) death, suffering, and disease exist in this present world; and 3) death, suffering, and disease will continue into the future. Death is a permanent part of history, and death is our evolutionary *ally* in the “creation” of life.

Implications about suffering, if you accept this view of history

If a person believes in millions of years, then our world has *always* been a deadly place. The question that should be naturally asked is: “Who caused the cancer, disease, and violence represented in the fossil record?” Christians who believe in millions of years of history have a serious problem. The Bible plainly says that God is the Creator, and he called

everything that he had made before the fall of Adam and Eve “very good” (Genesis 1:31).

This situation is represented by the following:



As soon as Christians allow for death, suffering, and disease before Adam’s sin (which they automatically *must* if they believe in millions of years), then they’ve raised a serious question about their precious gospel message.



The wrong view!