

JOURNEY 2

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# THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

[LifeHopeandTruth.com](http://LifeHopeandTruth.com)

How can a loving, all-powerful God exist in a world filled with evil? In this seven-day Journey, you'll discover exactly why God allows evil—and what He intends to do about it.

*Life Hope & Truth*

## GETTING STARTED

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# HOW TO USE THIS JOURNEY

Dear Reader,

With the first Journey behind you, it's time to deal with one of the most important questions in all of Christianity:

Why does a loving God allow evil?

In “The Problem of Evil,” you’ll discover exactly what the Bible has to say on the subject of evil—and the reason God hasn’t ended it yet. Each day’s content will consist of the following:

- That day’s reading.
- Recommended verses and chapters from the Bible relating to that day’s subject.
- Supplemental material from Life, Hope & Truth for digging deeper into that day’s subject.

If you haven’t yet read “Knowing God,” our first Journey, we strongly recommend you take the time to go back and take a look at it. “The Problem of Evil” is going to build on concepts we presented in “Knowing God,” so understanding those first will help this Journey make more sense. By the end of this Journey, you’ll know why God allows evil—and more important, you’ll know what He intends to do about it.

Let’s begin!

All the best,

Your friends at [LifeHope&Truth](http://LifeHopeandTruth.com)

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## DAY 1

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# WHY DOES GOD ALLOW EVIL?

Our world is in pain.

There's no denying it. The proof is everywhere—in the news, in our own lives, in the lives of the people we care about. This is a world where suffering exists—and all too often runs rampant.

What if there was a way to fix it—and not just *fix* it, but *end* it? What if there was a way to end the suffering and evil that plagues our world and our lives?

Would you be interested?

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In our “Knowing God” Journey, we spent seven days exploring the character traits of the God who created the universe—but at the end of it all, we had to face a difficult question:

If God is truly all-powerful, and if He truly loves us, *why does evil exist in the first place?* Surely such a being would have it in His power to end evil, to end suffering, to protect His creation from all the pain and hurt it experiences on a daily basis. Why doesn't He?

It's not a new question. Here's a quote commonly attributed to a Greek philosopher from the third and fourth centuries B.C.:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?

And there, in four simple lines, is one of the biggest hurdles to believing in God. Common sense dictates that if evil still exists in the world (and it does), then God is either unable or unwilling to end it. If He is unable, then He is not all powerful. If He is unwilling, then He is not loving. Neither possibility is appealing, and both give us reason to wonder whether there's any point in seeking a relationship with such a God—or more importantly, whether He exists at all.

Sometimes common sense isn't all it's cracked up to be.

## DAY 1

### WHY DOES GOD ALLOW EVIL?

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The question our philosopher failed to ask (and the question we *must* ask) is whether an all-powerful, loving God might have a reason for declining to end evil in this very moment. It's a question most people fail to ask because it doesn't make *sense*. If you or I had unlimited power and a kind heart, wouldn't our immediate response to suffering be to end evil as quickly as possible? To do anything less would be cruel and heartless.

Wouldn't it?

If we want to unravel this puzzle, we have to start by acknowledging a single scripture. It's not an easy one to come to terms with, but if we want to wrap our heads around the problem of evil, then it's where we need to begin: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9).

When it comes to the things God does (or doesn't do), our instinct is often to judge according to what *we* would do (or wouldn't do). But that's a mistake. We're not talking about the actions of another human being. We're talking about the actions of the God who created the universe—a God unbound by time and space, positioned to see and understand things we can't even begin to imagine.

Think about it—we've been puzzling over the mysteries of quantum physics for more than half a century, whereas God understands the subject perfectly because *He invented it*. He designed the rules for things like quarks and gluons and quantum entanglement—concepts that the best and brightest of our world are only just beginning to understand.

If we go into this Journey expecting God to adhere to our standards and to our concept of right and wrong, we're only going to find a God who doesn't make any sense to us. But if we go in willing to accept that His thoughts are higher than our own—if we allow Him to teach us and explain His ways to us—then we're going to discover that the problem of evil isn't actually much of a problem at all. We're going to discover that it all makes perfect sense—and that God knows exactly what He's doing.

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This Journey begins with the question our philosopher didn't ask: What reason would a loving, all-powerful God have for choosing to allow evil? As we set out to answer that question, we're going to have to tackle a few other questions along the way—questions like:

- What causes suffering?
- How do we define evil?
- What would God have to do to actually end evil?

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### THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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## DAY 1

### WHY DOES GOD ALLOW EVIL?

- Why do we make bad decisions?
- What do we stand to gain from suffering?
- What does God ultimately intend to do about evil?

These questions are important. If we can't address the problem of evil, *the entire Christian religion falls to pieces.*

We'd better get started, then.

## FURTHER READING

### Scriptures

- [Isaiah 55:6-11](#)
- [1 Corinthians 1:18-31](#)

### LifeHopeandTruth.com

- [Reading the Mind of God](#)

## DAY 2

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# CAUSE AND EFFECT

*For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.*

That's a fundamental law of the world we live in. As a fish makes its way through the ocean, it pushes against the water with its fins—and the water pushes right back, allowing the fish to swim. The only reason a basketball player can dribble is because after he pushes the ball toward the ground, the ground pushes the ball back up to him. And if we make the mistake of running into a wall, the pain we feel comes from the fact that the wall pushes back.

It's cause and effect in action. If  $x$  happens, you can count on  $y$  happening in response. If you put a plate of food in front of a hungry teenager (cause), you can count on the food disappearing (effect). If you spend two months drinking five cups of coffee every day and then suddenly stop (cause), you can count on experiencing one incredible headache (effect). And if your friends find out you know how to work on cars (cause), you can count on a lot of people asking you for favors (effect).

None of that is particularly surprising. It's how the world works. We know, instinctively, that things typically don't just "happen." They're caused. Now, there might be multiple causes, or the cause might be a subtle one, but it's still a matter of cause and effect.  $Y$  happens because of  $x$ .

When tragedy strikes—when we're left reeling from the news of another kidnapping, another shooting, another terrorist attack, another casualty of war, the obvious, easy question to ask is, "Why is God allowing this to happen?"

The less obvious, more difficult question is, "What caused this?"

Suffering doesn't exist on its own. Suffering is *caused*. And if we want to understand why God allows it to happen, we need to start by understanding the cause behind the effect.

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Thousands of years ago, nestled away in an idyllic garden, a husband and wife lived a perfect, peaceful life. They had food, they had safety, and they had a close relationship with God. Theirs was a world without suffering.

## DAY 2

### CAUSE AND EFFECT

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Until ...

Until they ruined it.

It's a story you've probably heard already—the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, as told in the first three chapters of the Bible. But it's more than just a story. It's a powerful piece of history, preserved for us through the ages to help us find the answers to many of the questions we've been asking on this Journey.

Created to inhabit a garden planted by God Himself, Adam and Eve lived in a literal paradise. The garden was filled with “every tree ... that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Genesis 2:9). Within the bounds of the garden, there was no lack of any good thing—but there was a rule.

“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’” (Genesis 2:16-17).

One tree. Out of the whole garden, God placed one single tree off limits, giving the newly created human race unfettered access to everything else. But the tree proved to be too great a temptation. A cunning serpent, later revealed to be Satan the devil (Revelation 12:9), convinced Eve to eat of the tree, promising, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4). Falling for Satan's sales pitch, Eve ate from the tree, and Adam followed her lead, forever impacting the course of human history.

Eating from that tree represented a choice. By disobeying God, Adam and Eve decided that it was within their power to define good and evil—and if you know the story, then you know that things went from bad to worse in record time.

Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden—from paradise—to a world that would prove far less gentle. Without God's blessings, the ground would be less willing to yield its crop (Genesis 3:17). There would be thorns and thistles to contend with (verse 18). Childbirth would be a painful ordeal, and without following God's standards, marriage would become a battle of wills (verse 16). Then, at the very end of it all, Adam and Eve would die, returning to the dust from which they had been formed (verse 19).

And they did die—but not before their firstborn son murdered his younger brother out of jealousy and rage (Genesis 4:8). As generations came and went, things continued to decline until at last “the



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### CAUSE AND EFFECT

wickedness of man was great in the earth, and ... every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5).

Suffering came with that wickedness. Humanity was so corrupt that God looked down and saw that “the earth was filled with violence. ... Indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth” (Genesis 6:11-12).

Within generations, the earth transitioned from a peace-filled paradise to a place filled with violence and suffering. And what caused it?

People.

People cause suffering.

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Suffering is an effect. It doesn’t happen without a cause, and almost across the board, *that cause is us*. Adam and Eve started the ball rolling by disobeying God, and the human race has been following suit for thousands of years. The first humans decided they knew better than God, and all too often, *we do the same thing today*. The desire to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—to define and redefine what’s right and wrong—is a desire that’s never really gone away. It’s always so tempting to decide that we know better than God—to decide for ourselves what’s best for us and how to go about getting it.

When we decide that, we suffer. We suffer because we *don’t* know what’s best, and we don’t know the best way to get it. The Bible warns, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12), and it’s as true today as the day it was written.

The apostle James explains: “Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:1-3).

Suffering comes when we—or those around us—pursue evil, knowingly or unknowingly. It’s what God wants to steer us away from, even though we often fail to listen.

But that raises another equally important question. If the primary cause of suffering is people committing evil, then we have to ask the obvious:

What exactly makes evil ... evil?

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## FURTHER READING

### Scriptures

- Colossians 3:23-25 [↗](#)
- Galatians 6:7-10 [↗](#)
- James 1:12-18 [↗](#)

### LifeHopeandTruth.com

- Why Does God Allow Suffering? [↗](#)

## DAY 3

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# A STANDARD FOR EVIL

What does evil look like? Can you describe it? Can you define it? Can you draw boundaries and identify exactly where it begins and ends?

That's a tall order—but if we're going to talk about ending evil, we ought to have some kind of working definition. It's not enough to say, "I know it when I see it." That's vague. That's messy. If 100 people were asked to identify evil, would they all agree? Not likely. If we're going to assert that a loving, all-powerful God is obligated to end evil, then whose definition of evil is He obligated to end? Mine? Yours? A stranger's on the other end of the world? What makes one definition any better than another?

We need a standard, and it needs to be founded on something more solid than opinions and feelings.

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Suppose for a minute that you had the ability to step back and see the bigger picture—to see every decision made by every human being in the world, and then to comprehend the exact impact made by each of those choices. Go one step further and imagine that you could know precisely what every individual was thinking and feeling when he or she made any given decision.

Just imagine it—seeing every detail of every decision ever made, along with how those decisions would pan out in both the short term and the long term. What do you think you'd find?

It's hard to say. The human mind isn't equipped to handle that kind of mental processing at that kind of scale. But supposing it could, you'd probably start to notice some patterns. You'd probably notice that some decisions produce good results, while others immediately backfire. You'd notice that some decisions *seem* like good ideas at first, but over time prove themselves to be disastrous. You'd notice that some decisions hurt the decision maker, while some hurt the people nearby. You'd watch the effects of some decisions resolve themselves immediately, while the effects of others might linger for generations.

After a while, you'd probably start to notice some similarities—some traits common to good decisions or an approach that kept resurfacing in bad ones. If you were very clever, you could probably start to

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## A STANDARD FOR EVIL

put together a set of rules that would keep people from making bad decisions and steer them toward good ones—rules that would minimize suffering and consistently produce good results.

If you did all that, you would end up with a set of instructions that might resemble the ones already established in the Bible.

At the end of his life, after 40 years of leading God’s people through the wilderness, Moses walked the nation of Israel through God’s commandments one last time—and then gave them a warning:

“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess” (Deuteronomy 30:15-16).

That’s the key to all of this. In summarizing God’s commandments, Moses was inspired to explain the decision to obey or disobey God as a choice between “life and good, death and evil.” He later urged Israel to “choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

Life and death. Good and evil. Earlier, we talked about what it would be like if we could know in advance the ramifications of every decision. Well, God *does* know. As the all-knowing Creator of the human race, He knows the decisions that are necessary for a meaningful, fulfilling life—and He knows what decisions will ruin us, harm us or leave us empty and broken, and He calls those decisions “sin.”

The laws established by God are far from arbitrary. As Paul writes, “I would not have known sin except through the law,” adding, “The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Romans 7:7, 12). *The law of God defines sin*. It defines all the decisions God knows will be self-destructive and harmful to others. It defines, in other words, the line between good and evil.

A common misconception holds that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ “did away with” the law, but does that really make any sense? That would mean doing away with the guardrails established to protect us from damaging decisions. Why would God do that—especially since He was the One who established them in the first place?

When we disobey God’s law, *we hurt ourselves and those around us*. Christ was emphatic: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For

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assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Matthew 5:17-18).

Evil isn’t something we can define by opinion or majority vote. None of us has the perspective or insight necessary to draw the line between good and evil—God and God alone has the wisdom to do that. And He *does* do that through the pages of the Bible, warning us against life choices that will ultimately bring pain and suffering—choices He defines as sin (Ezekiel 18:30-32). When obeyed, His commandments build a protective wall between ourselves and sin, for “sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4, King James Version).

When we step beyond the boundaries of God’s law, we sin. And when we sin, we introduce more evil into the world. It might be as unassuming as a little white lie, or it might be as appalling as murder—no matter the action, *sin produces evil*. It might seem obvious, but it’s a point worth stressing:

Evil comes from *us*. It’s generated by the collective actions of the human race, all of whom have been influenced by the devil. Suffering doesn’t just happen, and neither does evil. They’re both caused—and that cause is us. There’s no getting around it: Suffering exists because people do evil things, whether they realize it or not.

Knowing that, we can finally begin to tackle the question we’ve been dancing around this entire time:

Why *does* God allow evil?

## FURTHER READING

### Scriptures

- Psalm 19:7-14 [↗](#)
- 1 Timothy 1:5-11 [↗](#)

### LifeHopeandTruth.com

- The 10 Commandments for Today [↗](#)
- Why Does God Allow Natural Disasters? [↗](#)

## DAY 4

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# THE COST OF ENDING EVIL

It's all well and good to talk about the need for ending evil, but it's just as important to ask what that would look like. If God stepped in right at this moment and ended evil, what would that require?

Here are some possibilities. He could intervene by physically restraining anyone attempting to commit sin—literally stopping everyone from performing any evil act. That's one option.

Another would be to rewrite the character of everyone on the planet—to take away the desire to sin in one fell swoop by altering who we are, what we believe and how we think, creating a world of living robots, each of us incapable of doing wrong.

Another, far less complicated option would be to simply put an end to the entire human race—to wipe us all out in a single instant and never give us the chance to sin again.

Can God step in, right now, and end evil? Absolutely. But is that really what we want? Are those the solutions we'd prefer? The first two would strip us of our free will; the last one would end our existence entirely. But what are the alternatives? Can you think of a way God could immediately end evil without doing at least one of those things?

The truth is, God is entirely capable of ending evil—and what's more, He *wants* to end it. But not like that. Not at the cost of turning us all into mindless drones unable to think and act for ourselves, and not at the cost of blotting out His creation forever. God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4), and the total obliteration of the human race would make it considerably more difficult to achieve that goal.

He has a much better plan in mind.

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In the previous Journey, we learned that God is a family—and not just any family, but a *growing* family that the whole world has the potential to join. But we also learned that the God family operates in unison, with the same goals, the same perspective and the same values.

## DAY 4

### THE COST OF ENDING EVIL

What do you think would happen if a sinful human being became part of the God family? Would that family still operate in unity, or would there be division, disagreement and strife? God wants us in His family, but as long as we choose sin over His perfect law, we can have no place in that family. It would go against the very nature of God to allow it.

The penalty for sin is death. Not eternal torment in some fiery underworld, but death. Nonexistence. The Bible makes this clear, reminding us, “The soul who sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4) and “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). The most merciful thing a loving God can do for someone who refuses to change and follow His laws—whose life produces evil and suffering—is to *end* that life.

But we’ve got a problem. If we sin by breaking God’s law, we forfeit our lives. Despite our best efforts, there’s nothing you and I can do to undo a sin. Once the law of God is broken, it’s broken, and no amount of good intentions can change that. “Whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder’” (James 2:10-11). Paul tells us, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Not one of us can stand before God and claim a sinless life—which means not one of us is qualified to join His family. We’ve each earned the eternal death penalty, and paying that penalty means the end of our existence. That’s a problem for us, but it’s also a problem for God, who, as we’ve already discussed, “desires all men to be saved.”

So what’s the solution?

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We’ll get to that—because there *is* a solution, and what’s more, it’s already in place. We’ll talk about that in the final day of this Journey, where we’ll discover that the solution to our problem is only the first step in God’s master plan to end all evil forever—a plan we’ll examine in depth during our third Journey, “The Plan of God.”

Tomorrow, though, we need to deal with another question entirely:

If sin is such a terrible thing, *why do we keep choosing it?*

### THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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## DAY 4

### THE COST OF ENDING EVIL

## FURTHER READING

#### Scriptures

Ezekiel 18 [↗](#)

#### LifeHopeandTruth.com

Why Am I Suffering? [↗](#)

### THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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## DAY 5

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# WHY WE CHOOSE SIN

If sin is such a terrible thing—if it causes pain, if God places it off limits for our own good and if it cuts us off from our Creator—then why is there so much of it in the world? If it's truly bad for us, why do human beings consistently choose sin over God's way of life?

We could probably brainstorm a thousand different reasons someone might break God's law, but in reality, all those reasons boil down to a single root cause:

We're shortsighted.

That's it. That's the problem.

On the third day of this Journey, we talked about God's ability to see the bigger picture. From His perspective, He can survey the whole of creation and see all things exactly as they are.

We can't.

There's a wonderful old Indian story about six blind men who are tasked with describing an elephant. Together, they surround the elephant, each of them reaching out and touching the animal. The man touching the elephant's leg is certain that the elephant is like a pillar, the man touching the tail is sure that the elephant is like a rope, the man touching the trunk is convinced that the elephant must be like a tree branch, and so on, each man believing himself to be in possession of all the facts.

They weren't, of course. Anyone with eyes can see that an elephant is a combination of all those features—but the point of the story is to remind us of our limited perceptions. We're the blind men—and we're wrong about the elephant.

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We often sin by default, sometimes without thinking. But underlying all our habits and split-second decisions are choices. We choose sin because on some level it makes sense to us. We can come at it with a thousand different motivations—maybe we're acting out of generosity, or self-preservation, or pragmatism, or selfishness, or selflessness, or who knows what else—but in the end, we're going to pick the course of action that makes the most sense to us.

## DAY 5

### WHY WE CHOOSE SIN

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That’s a problem, of course. We’re blind men, trying our best to comprehend the elephant in front of us—and failing spectacularly. Relying on our limited perspective and attempting to do what makes the most sense to us can be (and often is) disastrous.

It’s why the Bible warns, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12). Just because something *seems* right has no real bearing on whether it really *is* right—and it’s certainly no indication of where we’re likely to end up.

Paul expands on that thought, explaining that “the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be” (Romans 8:7), adding, “the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

That complicates things. Not only are we unable to see the bigger picture from our vantage point, *the bigger picture looks absolutely foolish to us*. From our flawed perspective, parts of God’s way of life make little to no sense. In many instances, God prescribes a course of action that flies in the face of human reasoning: things like turning the other cheek, even when our instinct is to get even (Matthew 5:39). Or keeping the Sabbath, even when we don’t feel we have the time for it (Leviticus 23:3). Or spending a day without food and water, even when it’s hard to see what we could possibly gain from it (Matthew 6:17-18).

Sin, on the other hand, often looks completely logical. It makes sense. Knowing what we know about the elephant, sin can easily appear to be the only reasonable course of action. If I need more money and can’t find a job, who’s going to blame me for stealing? If my neighbor has more than me, what right does he have to hold on to his wealth? If the truth would only make people uncomfortable, what’s the harm in a little white lie? There’s always a rationale, always an explanation, always a justification.

But it’s always wrong. God, who can see the elephant in a way we never can, has set the boundaries of sin for a reason. We can ignore them, we can explain them away, but we can’t change the fact that they exist any more than a blind man’s opinion can change the fact that an elephant’s tusks exist.

But there’s another problem too. While the human race is perfectly capable of making bad decisions without any help, the unsettling truth is that we do have help. Ever since the Garden of Eden, a malevolent force has been heavily involved in guiding and influencing the human race.

His name is Satan, and he wants you dead.

Forever.

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### THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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## DAY 5

### WHY WE CHOOSE SIN

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Satan is a deceiver, and he's good at it. He's had thousands of years to practice on human beings, and he excels at dressing up sin and making it look good and appealing. Paul warns, "Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness" (2 Corinthians 11:14-15).

In the Garden of Eden, it was "that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan" (Revelation 12:9) who convinced Eve to take another look at the tree placed off-limits by God. It was Satan who muddied the waters and told her, "You will not surely die" (Genesis 3:4). It was Satan who promised the tree would make her "like God, knowing good and evil" (verse 5).

Would the forbidden tree still have been a temptation without Satan's influence? Quite probably. But would it have been *as* tempting? Not likely. Satan took a sin, dressed it up in a collection of lies and half-truths, and presented it as something reasonable—something *good*.

That's his game—and he hasn't stopped playing it, not for eons. It worked in the Garden and it works today, because we keep falling for the same tricks.

We're shortsighted. We can't see the whole elephant, and Satan uses that to his advantage. When God tries to warn us, we don't listen because obviously—*obviously*—an elephant is like a pillar. Or a rope. Or a tree branch. How could it be anything else?

There's a lot more to say about Satan, and we'll talk about him more in our third Journey, "The Plan of God," but today we're talking about sin and why we choose it. Hopefully by now it's clear that the human race chooses sin because from where we stand, *sin makes sense*. Pick your injustice—social inequality, slavery, abortion, murder, theft, genocide—whatever the issue, it happens because someone, on some level, sees it as reasonable. As logical. As justifiable. And Satan is doing his level best to ensure we *keep* seeing it that way.

And that, right there, is the painful truth. The human race will continue to choose sin—continue to choose suffering—until we're willing to admit that we can't see the whole elephant.

The next step requires accepting that *God can*.

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## DAY 5

### WHY WE CHOOSE SIN

## FURTHER READING

#### Scriptures

- [1 Peter 5:5-11](#)
- [James 4:1-10](#)
- [Ecclesiastes 11](#)

#### LifeHopeandTruth.com

- [What Is Sin?](#)

### THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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## DAY 6

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# WHAT WE GAIN FROM SUFFERING

When we talk about suffering, there's one angle we tend to forget to talk about, and that's the theme for today's reading:

What, if anything, do we stand to *gain* from suffering?

It's easy to look at suffering as an exclusively negative thing—so to answer that question, we're going to need to draw on everything we've covered so far, both on this Journey and the one before it.

Let's recap: Suffering is caused when humans step outside the boundaries of God's law. God can't directly stop that from happening without stripping away our free will, and He won't do that because He is a loving God who is building a family and wants us all to be part of it. By the same token, He will not allow sin or sinful mind-sets into that family, which disqualifies all of us from joining it.

So here we are in a world shaped by thousands of years of poor decision making and a general rejection of God's law, plagued by a cunning spiritual enemy who takes pleasure in convincing us to dig ourselves in even deeper. Every day, we heap new suffering on ourselves, and we're not showing any indication of stopping.

“Bleak” would be an understatement. And yet, even in that bleakness, there's hope. It turns out that suffering isn't just a result—it's also a tool. To really understand what suffering is capable of accomplishing, though, we'll have to take a look at the story of a man named Joseph.

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In a single moment, Joseph's entire life had been turned on its head. He was the favored son of his father (something his 10 older brothers failed to find endearing). God had given him two prophetic dreams that promised his family would one day bow before him. His future looked bright, to say the least.

And now, here he was—trapped in a pit.

Joseph's brothers hated him. They hated him so much, the Bible says they “could not speak peaceably to him” (Genesis 37:4). They were jealous of his dreams and of their father's obvious favoritism, and

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they decided to do something about it. When the opportunity presented itself, they staged Joseph's death, throwing him in a pit to die along with his arrogant dreams.

But Joseph didn't die. Not long after throwing him in the pit, the brothers spotted a caravan of traders heading toward Egypt, and they decided to make a quick profit by selling Joseph into slavery. And just like that, Joseph, the favored son, the dreamer of incredible dreams, found himself trundling off to a life of captivity in a foreign land.

Joseph's story is full of these moments—low blows coming out of nowhere, continual setbacks and undeserved misfortune. For a while, it looked like Joseph was doomed to forever suffer at the hands of others. After making a name for himself as a loyal and capable servant, Joseph refused the sexual advances of his master's wife—only to have her publicly accuse him of assault, earning Joseph a one-way ticket to the royal prison.

After some time in prison, Joseph accurately interpreted the dreams of two of Pharaoh's imprisoned servants—one of whom, Joseph predicted, would be executed in three days' time, while the other would be restored to Pharaoh's service. When the prediction came true on both counts, the restored servant promptly forgot to mention Joseph's innocence to Pharaoh—for *two whole years*. Joseph had to face two more years of imprisonment for a crime he didn't commit in a land where, thanks to his brothers, he was nothing more than a common slave.

On the surface, it would look like God abandoned Joseph, leaving him to suffer unjustly and for no good reason—but it would be a mistake to stop there. Let's go a little deeper and see what we can find.

When Joseph was a slave, something incredible happened (Genesis 39:2-6):

“The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority. So it was, from the time that he had made him overseer of his house and all that he had, that the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; and the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had in the house and in the field. Thus he left all that he had in Joseph's hand, and he did not know what he had except for the bread which he ate.”

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God didn't abandon Joseph. Even as a captive in a foreign land, God was with Joseph, blessing the work of his hands and giving him favor in the eyes of his master.

But what about prison? Didn't God abandon Joseph when He allowed him to go to prison for something he didn't do?

“But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing. The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper” (Genesis 39:21-23).

God never left Joseph. Even though Joseph found himself in some terrible situations, God was there, working something out behind the scenes.

But what?

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As the story progresses, God's plan for Joseph becomes crystal clear. When Pharaoh had two unsettling dreams and tried to discover their meaning, one of his servants conveniently remembered a man in prison who could interpret dreams. Joseph was brought before Pharaoh and revealed that Pharaoh's dreams were a warning from God: Egypt would have seven years of prosperity, followed by seven years of crushing famine. If Pharaoh didn't take action soon, all of Egypt would starve to death within a decade.

In response, Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of preparing for the coming famine. Joseph, the unjustly enslaved—Joseph, the wrongfully imprisoned—suddenly, that same Joseph found himself in charge of all of Egypt, second in rank only to Pharaoh himself.

To make a long story short, Joseph saved Egypt. Through careful planning and stockpiling during the years of plenty, the whole nation was able to survive an otherwise crippling famine. In fact, men from *other* nations affected by the famine came to Joseph to buy food—which is how, in a surprising twist of fate, Joseph's brothers found themselves traveling to Egypt in search of bread.

Believing their brother to be dead, the 10 brothers failed to recognize Joseph as they bowed before this great Egyptian leader—unwittingly fulfilling the prophetic dreams that caused them to sell Joseph into slavery in the first place. And just like that, the truth becomes impossibly clear to Joseph and to us:

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God had a reason for everything.

Joseph's story isn't just a tale of setbacks and misfortune. God had a purpose for Joseph from the very beginning—a purpose that wasn't clear to anyone but God Himself. All the terrible things that happened to Joseph along the way—the kidnapping, the enslavement, the imprisonment—all those things were conveyor belts moving him closer and closer to his role as second in command over all of Egypt.

Not only that, but God was *training* Joseph. As a slave and as a prisoner, Joseph was given the opportunity to oversee and manage large-scale operations. God was with him in both instances, causing all his work to prosper. When it came time to oversee and manage the entire nation of Egypt, Joseph was qualified. His experience and track record made him the man for the job.

When the 10 brothers learned of Joseph's true identity, they were understandably terrified. Would Joseph retaliate against them? Would he leave them to rot in prison? Cart them off as slaves? Execute them all? Here's Joseph's response:

“Joseph said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them” (Genesis 50:19-21).

Sometimes our suffering is a direct result of our own sin. Sometimes it isn't. But it always, *always* serves a purpose, and the story of Joseph sheds some light on what that purpose is.

Suffering refines us—if we let it. It broadens our understanding of ourselves and of God, and it shows us the path to self-improvement. It moves us away from where we are and closer toward where we need to be. It's not God's preferred method of working with us, but sometimes it's the only method we'll respond to. As a loving God who wants us in His family, He chooses to allow His people to experience suffering so that they can *learn* and *grow* from it.

God is described “as a refiner and a purifier of silver” (Malachi 3:3). Refining silver requires heating the silver until it melts, causing the impurities to rise to the top, where they can be scraped away and removed. Peter writes, “May the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you” (1 Peter 5:10).

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Solomon adds, “For whom the LORD loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights” (Proverbs 3:12). James ties it all together, reminding us to “count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (James 1:2-4).

Is it pleasant? No. Is it something most of us would choose, given the chance? Probably not. But God has big plans for you and me—plans “to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11)—and sometimes, the path to that eternal future requires moments of temporary suffering.

Once we learn to look beyond that suffering, though, we begin to catch a glimpse of something incredible:

God’s plan to end evil.

## FURTHER READING

### Scriptures

- [Romans 5:1-5](#)
- [1 Peter 4:12-19](#)
- [Hebrews 12:1-11](#)

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- [4 Ways to Find Joy in Trials](#)

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# A WORLD WITHOUT EVIL

Our world is in pain.

There's no denying it. The proof is everywhere—and now we know why. We started this Journey by asking why a loving, all-powerful God would choose to allow evil to exist, and along the way we discovered that suffering exists because people do evil things.

When we sin—when we step outside the boundaries God established for our good—the result is evil. Suffering. Pain. It doesn't always happen immediately, and it isn't always obvious, but it *will* happen. Sin produces suffering, and the law of God stands as the sole dividing line between “life and good, death and evil” (Deuteronomy 30:15). Multiply that by the number of people who are either ignorant or uninterested in the law of God, then multiply *that* by the entire span of human history, and we'll start to paint a picture of why the world is the way it is.

But the world isn't going to *stay* the way that it is. Far from it—God might be presently *allowing* evil, but that doesn't mean He isn't actively working out a plan to end it. Ending evil right now, in this moment, would require God to either a) remove our free will or b) eradicate the human race altogether.

Thankfully for us, God has a far more elegant plan in motion.

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The Bible is filled with glimpses of God's plan for the future of the world—and what we're shown in that plan isn't a world in pain. Micah 4:2-4 says:

Many nations shall come and say,  
“Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
To the house of the God of Jacob;  
He will teach us His ways,  
And we shall walk in His paths.”  
For out of Zion the law shall go forth,  
And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between many peoples,  
And rebuke strong nations afar off;  
They shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
And their spears into pruning hooks;  
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
Neither shall they learn war anymore.

But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree,  
And no one shall make them afraid;  
For the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

That's not the world we live in today. Isaiah 11:6-9 expands on that theme, adding:

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb,  
The leopard shall lie down with the young goat,  
The calf and the young lion and the fatling together;  
And a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze;  
Their young ones shall lie down together;  
And the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole,  
And the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den.  
They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain,  
For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
As the waters cover the sea.

What we're seeing in these verses is a world where even the nature of animals is different—where formerly ravenous wolves live peacefully with sheep, lions rest with cows and a little child can play fearlessly near a den of snakes. Today, these scenes are unthinkable—but God promises that one day, they'll be commonplace.

What really stands out in both of these prophecies, though, is what's happening behind the scenes. Micah talks about people eager to come to God and walk in His way of life. Isaiah mentions a worldwide knowledge of God and His law. The world we're seeing is different because the people *living in it* are different. They're seeking God. They're obeying His laws.

The book of Revelation goes one step further into the future and paints us this picture: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there

shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:3-4).

That’s different. That’s something new. That’s a world without pain, without sorrow, without death. What we’re seeing in this prophecy is a world without evil—a world without *sin*.

So how do we get from this world to that one?

That’s the real question, isn’t it? All this time, we’ve been asking why God allows evil to exist, but what we really want to know is how He plans to end it—because He *does* plan to end it. In fact, that plan is already in motion. It’s been in motion for over 6,000 years—a plan designed to offer *hope* to every man, woman and child who has ever lived.

We know now that God has a reason for allowing evil, and we know that He has a plan to ultimately end it. We also know that His plan is going to have to address a number of significant hurdles. Here are a few:

- All human beings have sinned (Romans 3:23).
- Sins costs us our lives (Romans 6:23).
- Sin bars us from the family of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).
- A supernatural enemy is deceiving the human race and actively promoting sin (Revelation 12:9).
- Billions and billions have died without truly knowing God or understanding His Word (1 Corinthians 2:14).

And yet, despite all that, we’re told that God is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9), and that He intends to bring “many sons to glory” (Hebrews 2:10).

How? How is that possible? The entire human population has disqualified itself from joining the family of God, and literal billions have perished without coming to repentance. The whole thing seems pretty hopeless.

But it’s *not* hopeless. In the next Journey, we’re going to spend seven days exploring the plan of God, and as we do, we’re going to see that God doesn’t just acknowledge the hurdles to His plan—He systematically knocks them down, clearing a path heading directly toward the incredible future that Micah and Isaiah wrote about.

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### A WORLD WITHOUT EVIL

The plan of God is a plan of hope. Are you ready to discover where you belong in it?

## FURTHER READING

### Scriptures

- [Isaiah 40:10-31](#)
- [Joel 2:21-32](#)
- [Acts 3:17-21](#)

### LifeHopeandTruth.com

- [Hope for the Future](#)

## WHAT NEXT?

Continue your studies with **“Journey 3: The Plan of God,”** available from the Life, Hope & Truth Learning Center.

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