

Suffering as Proof There is No God

Many people seem shocked by the fact that good people suffer unjustly. They feel that this suffering reflects poorly on God, as if it was His fault that it happens. Or they feel that it reflects poorly on themselves, as if they were being punished for something they didn't do. Or they openly declare that there is no God, as if that explained the injustice. They say that if there was a God and He was good and in complete control of things, then we should expect good to triumph over evil in this world. But because it is usually just the opposite they say there is no God. Does God's existence or integrity depend on a fair system of punishments and rewards? Just what kind of evidence are we asking for to prove God's existence?

The first thing we are asking for is that God behave as if He was a man with a man's sense of fairness. We say that if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, in control and loving, and if He makes known His desire for men to do good, then surely He would see to it that good is rewarded and evil is punished. Otherwise he would not be demonstrating his love for those who tried to obey His will by doing good. Those who disobeyed His will would seem to be beyond His control. What kind of God would that be if He really wasn't in control and if He didn't have the sense to reward those who were on His side?

Well, before we condemn this god of our own making, we should recognize some of the things we also assumed about man's nature when we decided how we wanted God to behave Himself.

First, we assumed that men with the freedom to choose to do either good or evil, would choose to do good rather than evil if they were offered a superior reward for doing good. The reward in matters like these typically includes the Big Two: eternal life rather than death, and (for those with a taste for something a bit more concrete) prosperity gained through God's favor. Secondly, we assumed that if men with the freedom to choose decided to do evil, then God would ensure that what they did would have *no effect* on the world around them; even the good men that the evildoers tried to dominate in their lust for power and control would be unaffected by the evil men's actions. If there was no effect created by the actions of evil men, then other men could not be thwarted in their own efforts to do good and thus gain God's favor.

Only one of these two assumptions needs to be true to prove that God exists. If the first is true, then there are no evil men because all men would choose to do good. All men do not choose to do good, therefore it is false. If the second assumption is true (the one which requires God to over-ride the will of men and the effect of their actions), then evil men have no visible effect on our world. That, of course, is not the case. Evil men affect us every day; therefore the second assumption is also false. The two assumptions that are necessary before we can say that the suffering of good people means that there is no God are both false. We can only conclude that they have no bearing at all on the question of God's existence. Maybe we overlooked something.

If the first assumption was false, then evil men have rejected the superior rewards of inheriting eternal life and enjoying God's favor. Perhaps they have some other reward in mind, like short-term wealth and power wrested forcibly from others to provide themselves with the sort of prideful satisfaction they need to feed their ego; they may prefer this tyrannical behavior to a long-term fellowship with God that would leave them humbled and submissive to Him. We might say that, to them, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, or that reigning in hell is preferable to serving in heaven. Maybe they have a good reason for choosing to behave selfishly. Maybe we have held out the wrong reward. It may also be that for some physical or psychological reason, they are incapable of reasoning. So choosing to do good is not only beyond their ability, but the question itself might seem absurd and irrelevant to them.

Let's ignore the mentally aberrant and mentally deficient just for the sake of argument. If evil men choose worldly rewards over spiritual ones, then the value to them of those rewards must far exceed the value of some unknown relationship with God, or of something called 'eternal life.' Even the threat of future punishment at the Judgment doesn't dissuade them from their evil ways. These worldly rewards must surely give them great pleasure and happiness in this life. Yet I have never known a truly happy criminal or a truly happy man who became 'successful' at someone else's expense. If not guilt-ridden, these people feel trapped by their own compulsion for crime or power.

Look closely at those assumptions we made about man's nature. Compare them to what you have experienced in life yourself. What proof would change the mind of a person who doubts that God exists because good people suffer in this life? I would have to prove both that God rewards good and punishes evil in this life, and that men would react rationally to such an offer of a reward for behavior that benefits others. It should be clear from your own experience that this proposition is indeed false. Men do not choose to do good, even when it will benefit them in the long run by providing peace, harmony, and self-esteem. Good is not rewarded and evil reigns.

What would it take to make such a proposition true? We would have to find that man is basically good or that he could be taught to be good if we could get him to respond to the proper reward. But why should we expect that proper training will overcome this basic flaw of selfishness? Despite the most extensive, structured, and extravagant educational program in the history of the world, our children turn out to be more self-centered than ever. Man is not basically good. He has never responded to any reward that might encourage him to do good other than the reward of getting what he wants when he wants it – which is the very behavior we want to get rid of. If man continues to be just as abusive as ever, then it would appear that man will never succeed in changing himself by artificial means. Therefore evil will continue to reign in the absence of God.

If the world were actually to favor good people, and be a just place in which to live, then most people would have to be willing to set aside what they want for themselves, and instead strive for things that would benefit others. That goes against what they are doing now. Remaining as they are, people simply could not produce a just world.

God would have to impose His will on them and actually force them to obey, like robots. That might in many ways be a world worse than the one we have now, one that we would hate to live in just as much. Should we continue a preoccupation with some fantasy world of how we would like things to be, how we would like men to behave, how we would like God to behave (which is idolatry), or are we mature enough to accept things as they are?

This same reality of a corrupt and degenerate world that we have been discussing is also revealed in the Bible. It describes the world as men know it, not as some pie-in-the-sky fairy tale where knights in shining armor always rescue the oppressed from the evil tyrant. There is a story of rescue, but not the normal one that men expect. We are not robots. We do have free will in this world. It's an observable fact. The Bible says that God gave us free will, but the consequence of that free will has been sin: setting ourselves up as our own masters or gods by seeking to please only ourselves through self-gratification. This is the root of all evil and the basis of every sin imaginable. It results in the kind of pride that says there is no God, and in the kind of world that teaches us to take what we can get without regard to the consequences for others. On the other hand, I do know many people who are joyful in every circumstance, good or bad, because they trust in God, and try to obey His will by doing good to others. They are self-sacrificing.

You should have noticed a bothersome inconsistency in my line of reasoning in that last sentence:

1. If man is basically self-seeking, how can I say there are those who are self-sacrificing? Why are they different, and what do they gain by it?
2. If man is basically evil, how can I say there are those who appear to be 'good'? Why should they be willing to suffer for it?

What I have shown up to now is that we are not led to the conclusion that there is no God merely because 'good' people suffer, nor because there is evil in the world. The only thing we learn from these facts is that man has a unique capacity to make life miserable for his fellow man. The fact that good people suffer has no bearing on the existence of God. I could also show that we are not led to the conclusion that God is either evil or indifferent. But I can settle the issue by showing that the Truth of God is revealed in the Bible. Therefore the Bible provides us with the means to understand why the world is the way it is. It provides us with the means to understand the proper relationship between God and man; and it provides us with the means to prove God's existence. Let me add that the Bible itself is not the proof; it would be circular reasoning.

How can we determine that there must be a God, a Creator? Well, like any good scientist, we begin with the creation. In the same way that a watch lying on the ground in the forest would lead to the conclusion that there is an owner and a maker of the watch, we can scientifically examine the universe around us and conclude that it is beyond reasonable probability that chance progressions of "natural" processes would produce such an intricate and interdependent universe. Therefore some other force must be at work. I realize this is an old argument, but the math still holds true (for now at least).

Many philosophers and scientists claim that there was an “original cause” – the big bang – and everything that has happened ever since has depended on a series of chance events and favorable mutations. That *original cause* is their god. They refuse to look past that original cause to ask why the natural laws that exist should have been a consequence of that big bang; and they reject any assertion that God has ever involved himself in the affairs of men. These men say simply that existence *is* the way it *is*, and any alleged evidence of a Supernatural Being can be explained by purely natural causes. All other explanations are the result of legend, superstition, and ignorance. Unfortunately for them, the universe, though fascinating, is a cold, stark, impersonal, and ruthless place. Survival is the only known moral commandment.

Many other scientists, however, have looked at the question a little closer and have concluded that there has been an unseen sculpting hand at work. They don't say so out of blind faith, but out of the conviction that it is mathematically impossible for the complexity that we see around us to have followed from a series of random happenings (such as the evolution of higher life forms from the mere survival of favorably mutated lower forms). A book which demonstrates this approach is *Evolution from Space* by Fred Hoyle, a world renowned astronomer and mathematician. That doesn't mean that evolution is incorrect. It only means that it would have taken far longer than the four and one-half billion years we know about if it depended entirely on random events; and so they conclude that there has been a conscious design by some creative omnipotent force.

The question that presents itself next is whether this force is an intelligent being in the sense of having a will and a personality. Some men admit the existence of a Creator-God but say that He is disinterested in the world of men; it is as if, having made the watch I mentioned earlier, He wound it up, put it on the ground, and walked away. Other men say that there is a God and that He participates in the affairs of men, but we cannot know Him personally, nor can we directly know His will. These men are *deists*. Then there are the rest of us who say there is a God, He knows each one of us, and He wants us to know Him too. How can we know which one of these views is correct? Let's set up a test: If God has been active in the affairs of men, then men must surely have realized it and recorded such supernatural events for the benefit of future generations. Therefore,

1. If God is impersonal, then any religious literature which claims that God has a personality will be wrong if it describes God interacting with men, or men interacting with God, without objective proofs of such interaction both in the literature itself and in a study of history independent of the literature. It is not enough to merely declare that God is the author, or that God commanded someone to write down what He said.

2. If God cannot be known, then any religious literature which claims that God has revealed Himself to men will also be wrong; the nature of that revelation will be blatantly and demonstrably false. It will not square with reality. Like the exercise we went through with good people who suffer, there will be no cause-and-effect relationship between the revealed character of God (his expected behavior) and what we actually see in the world around us.

3. If God is personal, interactive with men, and reveals Himself, then there should be religious literature available that proves, both historically and by the testimony of reliable men, that such a God exists. The literature should be understandable and consistent with itself throughout (a supreme being surely wouldn't be fickle or scatter-brained); ordinary means will fail to account for the alleged interaction of God with the world; the probability of natural causes will be so low that it makes it effectively impossible (in other words, the literature shows supernatural intervention); the literature should contain dated prophecies of future events that could only be foretold or fulfilled by an all-knowing, all-powerful being; and finally, the literature should accurately reflect the world and men as we know them.

By examining all the available religious literature we should be able to find something that will resolve all three parts of the test, either positively or negatively for each one. If we find nothing, then there is no God or He is an impersonal force.

To the best of my knowledge and experience, there is only one known book that satisfies the test. It has been so well known throughout the world for thousands of years, that it has no title. It is simply called, "The Book" (that's what the Greek word 'Bible' means). If you would prefer not to rely on that statement alone, then may I suggest several books that will be very helpful: "All the Messianic Prophecies" by Herbert Lockyer; "The Bible as History" by Werner Keller; "Evidence that Demands a Verdict" by Josh McDowell; "More Evidence..." by Josh McDowell; "Answers to Tough Questions" by McDowell and Stewart; "Bible Difficulties" by Gleason Archer; and of course, "The Bible" – by God.

If you accept the conclusion that the Bible is a reliable text, and that it sufficiently reveals God (and you should not reject such conclusions without a personal examination), then we come to the final question: what is God's message to us as revealed in that book? The message will answer the other two difficulties I raised earlier,

1. If man is basically self-seeking, how can I say there are those who are self-sacrificing? Why are they different, and what do they gain by it?
2. If man is basically evil, how can I say there are those who appear to be 'good.' Why should they be willing to suffer for it?

The message of God is really quite simple. He declares that He is the Creator. We owe our very existence to Him and he demands our respect and obedience. He reveals that mankind was created by Him and our progenitor Adam lived at peace with him. But Adam chose to go his own way and be the lord of his own destiny. He rebelled against God and brought the curse of death, corruption, and bondage upon all mankind. We are dead in our trespasses and sin; every one of us is in violation of God's law as understood by all men in all times, and as given to Moses in the form of the Ten Commandments. Yet God had put a plan in place to restore mankind to Himself. Of course, being stiff-necked and rebellious by nature, man devised his own plan of salvation. He chose to

work his way back into God's favor by doing good deeds. That way he would not owe anything to God; he could stand on an equal footing with Him; he could demand that death's curse be removed from him by right and by debt. That's what every religion in the world teaches *except* Christianity.

God's plan was different than man's. He chose a people to call His own: the nation of Israel. He formed them, protected them, spoke to them through His prophets, and gave them His laws for their benefit and good. Yet they rebelled and worshipped other gods. God warned them to acknowledge their sin and repent, and He would forgive them. They refused; so He destroyed their nation. But His mercy was so great that He promised to send someone to bring back a remnant of the nation to Himself. This *suffering servant*, as he is called in Isa 53, would take the death penalty for our sins upon himself, standing in our place. His perfect obedience of the law would be considered ours; he would heal our wounds and restore us to God's favor. The remnant for whom he died is known as the elect. They would carry His good news of substitutionary atonement to the rest of the world. This expected savior from God was called the *Messiah*, or in Greek, the *Christ*. The historical record, his demonstration of miracles, and his physical resurrection from the dead, show that Jesus of Nazareth was and is that promised Christ.

God's provision in Jesus Christ is not an easy one to accept or comprehend. Heaven is held out to us as a free gift. Forgiveness of our sins is a free gift. Eternal life and fellowship with God is a free gift. We may accept this gift, and receive its benefits, by believing that Jesus is who he claims to be, that only his atonement and righteousness, provided for us by the grace of God alone, are the basis of God's favor. If we do, then we appear righteous in God's eyes, cloaked in Jesus Christ. The righteous requirements of His law have been satisfied by Christ. Through faith, they are considered by God to be our own. The benefits of Christ's atonement may then be applied to us. We must submit to Christ as the Lord of our lives each day, following in his footsteps in all we do. We are saved by faith alone, and not by anything we do; yet our faith is not alone. We must be sanctified, meaning we must be transformed into a godly and holy people by the power of Christ's Spirit who lives in us; we must be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

In other words, we can demonstrate in a tangible way, the extent of our faith in Christ by our obedience to God's law. Good deeds can never be the basis for renewing our relationship with God, or even maintaining our salvation once it has been granted; yet good deeds are the very foundation of our relationship with God once we receive His free gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. What kind of deeds are we talking about? Just one deed really, one thing that all by itself can satisfy all the requirements of the law of God: love; because love seeks no harm for its neighbor. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself.

Are all the benefits of God's provision for us to be found only in a life after death? Not at all. As the Way, the Truth, and the Life, Jesus Christ promises to give us an abundant life in this world. That means he gives us joy (even in unhappy times), peace (even in war), purpose (even in prison), and fulfillment (even in failure). That's why Christians can keep on smiling no matter what the circumstances. Jesus said, "No one

comes to the Father but by me.” Christ stands before you right now. He asks you to let him come in to you and to establish the throne of the Kingdom of God in your life today. Choose now whom you will serve: God or Satan. There is no middle ground. To accept Christ just say aloud, from a true desire,

1. Jesus, I believe that you are the Son of God, the Messiah, my Lord and Savior.
2. Lord I know that I’m a sinner and that death awaits me apart from you.
3. Lord I turn away from my sin, my pride, and my rebellion; I acknowledge you as my Savior and as the Lord of my life. Come now Lord. Show me your ways.
4. Lord I thank you for sacrificing yourself on the cross for me, and for providing the only way to return to a right relationship with God. Give me your strength.

There is a God and the Bible is His authoritative evidence; it is the revelation of who He is and what He is like – because it is His Word about man, not man’s word about Him. Its proof of authenticity is primarily found in the changed lives of the men and women who are living witnesses to its truth.