



The Reason for Suffering

**WHY ALMIGHTY GOD
PERMITS
PAIN AND ANGUISH**

THE QUESTION OF SUFFERING has often exercised the minds of thinking men and women, when they examine the anomalies in life. The real answer is not understood by most people. Some see suffering as the unjust punishments of a disinterested God, who allows His creation to experience unspeakable traumas without reason — and therefore turn from religion to seek their own solutions to life. Others believe in fatalism, assuming that every circumstance in life is pre-determined, and cannot be altered; that we are the unhappy victims of a vengeful Deity. Others again refuse to seek for reasons, and prefer to indulge in an endless pursuit of personal happiness, hoping that nothing untoward will happen to them. A few look seriously at the facts, and discover the real meaning of life.

In this booklet, we set out the divine solution to the question of suffering. We show that God cares about His creation, and desires that men and women understand the purpose of suffering, and take steps to put themselves under His guidance. Such a wise decision may not avoid suffering, but it will show the reason for it, and the way that we can spiritual benefit thereby.

Please carefully consider these issues. The editor would be pleased to receive any questions or comments on the matter presented — and these can be forwarded to the address below. If you find this booklet helpful, please hand it to your friends, so that others may benefit by the true Bible teaching on this issue.

HERALD OF THE COMING AGE

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The Reason

For

Suffering

and why Almighty God
Permits Pain and
Anguish

WE FACE many anomalies in life. The Bible teaches that an all-wise, almighty Creator formed the marvellous universe in which we live by His infinite skills of wisdom, foresight and care. Yet humanity experiences continual difficulties, stresses and troubles. Families suffer through disease, disabilities or death. Often, through no fault of their own, individuals face times of trauma, as they try to grapple with the question as to why they suffer.

There is a reason for the suffering that is indigestible to human life. It is part of the present state of things, not caused by the design or purpose of God, but by the folly of mankind in the very beginning of history — and perpetuated, in many cases, by the foolish actions of an ignorant and disobedient world.

Yet, out of trying circumstances that might pressure our life, there is great benefit in suffering, pain and difficulty, if we are prepared to understand its cause and effect. The article herein is designed to provide a knowledge of the divine plan and to explain some of the perplexing questions of life.

IN the beginning, when God created man He provided ideal conditions, unmarred by the terrible incidents of disease, injury and disaster that plague society today. Adam and Eve were in an environment in which the evils of pollution and crime were unknown, and where violence and death were not experienced. It was a paradise, called “the Garden in Eden” (Genesis 2:8), in which were found all the joys of an ideal habitat, the opportunity for personal enjoyment, and the blessings of a life free from concern or anxiety. The Bible says that “God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

It was not long before that idyllic scene changed. The wife whom God formed for Adam was tempted by the suggestions of a vocal serpent (ch. 3:1) to disobey the clear instructions of Almighty God, and to taste the fruit of a forbidden tree in the midst of that delightful garden. God had given a commandment concerning that tree in order to test the obedience and fidelity of the human pair — as to whether they would remain faithful and loyal to His law, or whether they would introduce disobedience and sin into their experience. The failure to respect that law would result in death (Genesis 2:16-17).

Adam and Eve failed to challenge and refute the suggestion of the serpent. They took the fruit, ate it, and brought upon themselves and their progeny the consequences of their sin.

Why Sin Brought Suffering

God’s righteousness required that the sinful pair be punished, and they were thereafter to experience difficulty and distress in life. They had to learn that none can reject the clear instructions of God with impunity. None can act as though God’s law might be ignored or disobeyed — without experiencing the results of their actions and the judgment that inevitably follows.

Adam and Eve had to learn that God requires obedience; that only when His ways are followed, joy and happiness can be enjoyed. The pleasure they experienced from partaking of the forbidden fruit was only momentary. The excitement of sin was soon dimmed by the

realisation of its result.

The angel that met them in the Garden revealed the judgment of God against the man, woman and serpent.

The serpent, whose advice had caused the sin, was told: "Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field: upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life" (Genesis 3:14). The woman was told: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception: in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (verse 16). Finally, the man was told: "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (verses 17-19).

A change occurred in the condition of creation. No longer was it "very good" (Genesis 1:31), with all creatures dwelling in harmony with God's laws, enjoying the wonderful benefits of Paradise, with the human pair finding pleasure in doing God's will. Now creation was marred by the effects of sin. Affliction, anguish, hurt and decay was to be the experience of mankind.

But who caused this change of condition? It was the decision of Almighty God, but He did not cause it. He had earlier told Adam that if he were to disobey the clear instructions of the divine law, he would suffer. Adam and Eve had brought upon themselves the awful results of transgression. Their own foolishness brought sin, suffering, disease and death into existence. There was no one else whom they could rightfully blame for the difficult situation in which they were now found.

And the whole of creation suffered with them, for their sinful action affected everything about them. The earth no longer brought forth abundantly the fruitful blessings of choice harvests. Instead, "thorns and thistles" replaced the beneficial produce of Paradise, and disease and death entered into the story of humanity.

Thus, man's disobedience had introduced into the arena of God's work the cause of all the suffering, evil, bloodshed, disease, anger, impediments, and inequities that the long and sad history of the world ever since has witnessed. It was all the result of human failure in the beginning.

A World in Chaos

Today, the result of six thousand years of wilful rebellion against God is clearly evident. Instead of improving his condition, by the careful observance of God's instructions, mankind has wantonly continued in the sinful path of his forefather. It is not God's fault that so many terrible and sad incidents occur. He does not force us to act against His will, displeasing His righteous character. In fact, the Scriptures indicate that mankind generally is determined to oppose the wisdom of God: "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Ecclesiastes 8:11). Again: "There is one event unto all; yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead" (ch. 9:3). The wise man Solomon, who wrote those words, observed that, notwithstanding the presence of God's laws found in His Scriptures, mankind chooses to perpetrate evil, and to indulge in continuing wickedness. He does that, not only to his own hurt, but to that of all who are affected by his actions.

The world is full of evil-doers. Even those who think that they are morally good, who endeavor to benefit their fellowman and are prepared to sacrifice their own pleasure that others might profit, do not please God if they refuse to heed His Word, the Bible, or seek to change the meaning of the divine instructions. Should we wonder at the presence of evil and suffering when humanity despises the very means of its solution?

So the story of suffering continues to mar the pages of history. Ignoring the advice of God, the nations persist in warfare, driven by the lust for power, inflicting bloodshed, injury and death, with misery, homelessness, devastation and disease following in its path. The mental and emotional conflict in the hearts of those affected continues for generations, and so history repeats itself.

Then there is the incident of disease: terrible blights can move through the cities and towns of nations. The *Black Death* swept through Europe from AD1347 to 1349, ravaging families with a combination of bubonic and pneumonic plague — which was followed over the next fifty years or so by repeated outbreaks, making rapid recovery almost impossible, and further exhausting a population already on the verge of starvation.

What caused this devastation? It was caused by the bite of an infected rat flea, and was aggravated by the lack of sanitation and

cleanliness. The careless and inadequate hygiene of the people during those times and the unhealthy conditions of life caused the effects of the plague to continue long afterwards, and extended the sickness through Europe and Asia.

Modern diseases are just as devastating. Stress, heartfailure, cancer, the increase in mental illnesses, respiratory ailments due to pollution, and such curses upon humanity as AIDS, brings trauma and distress even to innocent families and communities. God did not cause the *Black Death*, nor does He infuse AIDS upon the present generation. It results from the waywardness of man, suffering the consequences of sin.

Then there is the incident of severe disabilities that can occur at birth. Why should some innocent babies be inflicted with terrible deformities, and face a life of tragedy, bringing distress to their parents and difficulty to themselves? Is it God's fault that such abnormalities occur from time to time? Certainly not. There are hereditary laws which govern our physical condition, and which can be upset by abuses such as alcohol and drugs; internal injuries may affect the unborn — accidents can happen to any one at any time under the present conditions of sin, disease and death; thus, "time and chance which happeneth to all" (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

Why Does Not God Intervene?

But, say some, God could remove all these dreadful circumstances. Certainly, He could. But if He did so without reason and purpose, providing sinful mankind with every blessing and benefit without restriction, He would never accomplish His ultimate purpose which is to produce a people "for His Name" (Acts 15:14), and to teach mankind the wisdom of His ways.

Without an understanding of God's Word, men do not acknowledge divine instruction, and are not prepared to accept God's teaching. They will not naturally follow the way of righteousness. The prophet Jeremiah declared: "The heart is *deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked*: who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). Jesus declared: "For *from within, out of the heart of men*, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man" (Mark 7:21-23). These evil characteristics are the cause of much of humanity's suffering. A society that throws off the restraint of the Scriptures, causes the glaring injustices against their fellows

which are so evident today. If God were to remove all the causes of suffering from society, He would open the floodgates for personal gratification, complete ruthlessness and selfishness, threatening the destruction of all His creation by those who see no need to honor God, and His ways. It would be a self-centred, spiritually-shallow civilisation.

The Bible invites us to separate from such a society; to recognise the evil condition of life about us; to acknowledge that we are no longer “*very good*”, but inherently “*desperately wicked*”, and therefore to seek for the means to raise ourselves above the slough of sin, and seek for righteousness.

The Bible is the key to such a positive attitude. It clearly shows the way in which men and women can find real satisfaction in life, and obtain answers to the perplexing questions that otherwise seem to have no solution.

The Benefits of Faithful Suffering

Notwithstanding what has already been said, it is a sad fact of life that the righteous suffer. Men and women, who endeavor to worship God in the right attitude and in truth, often find themselves subjected to the opposition of others, or to circumstances of great trial. Why should God permit even His own beloved people, who wish to do good, to suffer the hurtful effects of evil? It is for their personal spiritual development, and to help others to understand the reason for suffering.

The Scriptures tell of a man of great wisdom and righteousness. His name is synonymous with suffering, even today. The phrase, *a Job's comforter*, describes one who aggravates a person's distress under the pretext of comforting him. Job, the Bible says, was a servant of God, and “there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil” (Job 1:8). One would imagine that he, at least, would be protected by the God he served, from the evil experience of suffering. But it was not to be.

The sincerity of Job was challenged by an antagonist called “Satan” (verse 6). The Hebrew word simply means *an adversary, opponent, or antagonist*. It often describes an enemy, such as was the apostle Peter to the Lord Jesus on one occasion (see Matthew 16:23), or to the ruling powers of mankind (Luke 10:18), or to disease (ch. 13:16), evil thoughts (John 13:27), difficult circumstances (1Corinthians 5:5), or society itself (1Timothy 1:20).

In the case of Job, the *Satan* was obviously a jealous member of

the community of the faithful who had associated together for worship (Job 1:6). He claimed that Job's righteousness was only the result of the blessings that he had received from God; that if Job were to suffer privation and distress, he would turn from God and "curse Thee to Thy face" (verse 11). This was a false accusation, both against Job, the faithful servant of God, and against the Almighty Himself — as though God was unjust in the blessings He gave.

God saw that there would be benefits gained by Job personally, and by those like him in every age, if the matter was put to the test. God gave authority to the antagonist to put Job to any test except that of death: "Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand" (Job 1:12). The angels of God were permitted to follow the instructions of the antagonist, for angels are "ministering spirits sent forth to minister to those who are heirs of salvation" (Hebrews 1:14). It was to be part of the development of Job that he experience acute suffering, and therefore the angels were employed to that end.

The great test began. Would anguish, extreme trial and distress cause the faithful Job to turn from his worship of God? Would his outstanding obedience be forgotten under the pressure of extreme suffering? Job was to experience severe affliction at the hand of his opponent.

Job chapter 1 records what happened. His oxen and asses were stolen, his servants slain by the sword, his sheep destroyed by fire, his camels were taken by enemies. Finally a great whirlwind struck his house, and killed his sons and daughters. Such experiences might surely turn anyone from belief in God! Sometimes those who have suffered severe trials complain that God has left them destitute, and they turn from Him in bitterness. But Job was not of that character. Even in the face of such terrible devastation, he "arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, and said, "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the Name of the LORD". The Bible comments: "***In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly***" (Job. 1:20-22).

Wisely, Job did not condemn God for the losses he endured because he realised that all he possessed came from God and belonged to Him. We must avoid condemning God for any trouble that might come our way, which may, in fact, be His means of per-

fecting our character, preparing us for the greater purpose He has in store for faithful worshippers.

The following chapters in the Book of Job describe the additional trials that he had to face. Not only were his possessions and family affected, he was overcome by a most painful affliction. He suffered "sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown" (ch. 2:7). He had excruciating itches as the boils burst all over his body. He scraped himself with a potsherd to seek some relief, but in vain. Absolutely destitute of children, rejected by his contemporaries, he sought for solace on an ash-heap outside the city. Friends came from afar to commiserate with him, but could offer only their own immature and wrong conclusions. For, ignorant of the test of faithfulness that was the cause of Job's misfortune, they condemned him for unrighteousness. They suggested that he was a great sinner, and that the trials he faced were divine punishment for some unrepented crimes. But that was not so; the experiences were the result of the jealousy of the Satan-member of Job's community. Indeed, both at the commencement of the story, and at its conclusion, God declared His pleasure at the upright character and consistent behavior of "His servant Job" (see ch. 1:8; 42:7-8).

All the same, Job was perplexed at the reason for his suffering. He did not have the benefit of knowing the end from the beginning, and was unaware of the accusation made by the Adversary. We now have the story of his life to read and ponder — and thereby come to realise the purpose of God in suffering. Job did not have this advantage; his experiences were recorded as an example for the benefit of others. His patience shows that suffering does not have to destroy a man's faith; in fact it can strengthen it, by directing him to the source of true comfort: Almighty God.

But, for a time, Job felt that he was estranged from God: "Oh that I knew where I might find Him! that I might come even to His seat" (ch. 23:3). His cry to God for relief seemed to go unheeded. He did not realise that a certain time was to elapse before God would answer, and reveal the true purpose of the matter. The same situation can face us, when we have to wait for God to solve our problems — seemingly praying in vain. This is not so, for God will answer prayers in His own time and according to His infallible wisdom.

Ultimately, when it was established that Job would remain faithful to God, even though he was subjected to intense anguish, perplexity and personal discomfort, the test concluded.

For his faithful endurance in the light of such suffering, Job was greatly rewarded: "So the LORD *blessed the latter end* of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses" (ch. 42:12). The complaint of the jealous adversary (*Satan*) was answered in the divine goodness that was granted to the patient Job. Job was vindicated and his opponent was discredited.

Job's example sets the pattern from which later generations would learn. Realising that there is a purpose in suffering, and that the "latter end" of life will greatly compensate any present disability, faithful men and women are encouraged to continue patiently under the trials of the present. So James later declared: "Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an *example of suffering affliction, and of patience*. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have *heard of the patience of Job*, and have *seen the end of the Lord*; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy" (James 5:10-11). He explains that though, for various reasons, a faithful man might have to endure difficulty and suffering, the ultimate destiny is glorious.

Job's "Latter End" a Splendid Hope Beyond Suffering

God has promised that faithful men and women will be granted immortality and inherit glory and honor at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter speaks of "*great and precious promises*" contained in the Bible for those who diligently seek them (2Peter 1:4), stating that "by these ye might be *partakers of the divine nature*, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust". It was for that reason that Job submitted to the indignities and bitterness of his trials. Even in the midst of his great sufferings, he prophesied of better days ahead: "For I know that *my redeemer liveth*, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet *in my flesh shall I see God*" (Job. 19:25-26). His belief was in a physical resurrection from the grave. Though he might die, and "worms destroy his body", yet he anticipated a literal, corporeal resurrection: "in my flesh shall I see God". Job expressed confidence in the divine reward that would be his at some time in the future, when "the redeemer" would come.

That same reward is offered to those today who are prepared to worship God, notwithstanding whatever difficulties come their way in life. Paul says: "It is a faithful saying: For if we be *dead with him*, we shall also *live with him*; If we *suffer*, we shall also *reign* with

him" (2Timothy 2:11-12). To be "dead" with Jesus Christ, is to be baptised into his name. Baptism performed by total immersion into water, as taught by Scripture, is a symbolic death; an identification with the crucifixion of Christ (see Romans 6:3). It is the means by which a believer is introduced to a Christ-like way of life, and stands in hope of eternal life at the coming of the Lord.

Paul refers to the possibility of suffering that would follow baptism — and a faithful life in Christ represents a challenge to the attitude of society generally. The suffering that comes from discipleship might include physical persecution, as was occasioned against believers in times past, or it might be in the form of antagonism, ridicule or rejection from one's contemporaries, as sometimes occurs today. Whatever form it might take, it strengthens faith and conviction, and identifies a believer with his Master.

Jesus Christ: The Supreme Example of Suffering

Though he did no sin, nor cause injury to any, Jesus Christ suffered greatly at the hands of evil men. It was prophesied of him that "he is despised and rejected of men; a *man of sorrows*, and *acquainted with grief*, and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:3-4).

As the Son of God on earth, Jesus went about "doing good" to all, healing sickness and teaching truth (John 18:20). But, driven by jealousy and bitterness (like the *Satan* in the days of Job), the leaders of his nation brought him to an illegal trial and had him convicted on false charges. He was scourged, beaten savagely, and ignominiously crowned with a band of thorns roughly thrust on his head (John 19:1-2). He suffered at the hands of godless men who hated him because his righteousness was a living rebuke to their wickedness.

Why should a sinless man be subjected to such unwarranted suffering and persecution?

His death was according to the "determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). He had to die to show that God was righteous imposing the death sentence upon mankind for sin, and, being himself morally sinless, Jesus rose from the grave, opening the way for us to follow his example, in hope of eternal life at his return from heaven (Acts 1:11).

The crucifixion of Jesus revealed the wickedness of men on the one hand, and the willing obedience of the Son of God on the other. The Lord refused to conform to the way of life about him, and there-

fore provides a wonderful example for those who are prepared to stand aside from society, even though it may result in difficulties and opposition.

Consequently, out of the sufferings of the Lord great benefits have come for those who would seek God in truth.

Through his sufferings Jesus developed a fellow-feeling with those he came to save. Thereby he could understand the effect of suffering on his disciples, and identify with their difficulties and feelings. Paul explains that Christ's work as a faithful high priest, achieving reconciliation for the sins of the people, is based upon his experience of agony: "For in that he himself *hath suffered* being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted" (Hebrews 2:18). Again, he has "compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that *he himself also is compassed with infirmity*" (ch. 5:2).

In our moments of suffering, we are taught that others have experienced similar, and sometimes even greater, trials. Such experiences develop in the human character the important priestly qualities of empathy and compassion, by which we are strengthened to triumph over difficulties, and can encourage others likewise.

Is Suffering Necessary?

The qualities that Almighty God seeks in His creatures, are summed up in Galatians 5:22-23, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance". These characteristics are not natural to us; they only come by development. Instead, we are born with the selfish desires of flesh. These are uppermost in our consideration, and in most people remain the prime force of their lives.

But God wants to change that, and the means employed are often *trial and suffering*. A person becomes more thoughtful, considerate and understanding as a result. Paul says: "they that are Christ's have *crucified the flesh* with the affections and lusts" (Galatians 5:24). The apostle speaks not of physical crucifixion — an agonising death — such as that to which the Lord Jesus was subjected. However, symbolical crucifixion is required of faithful believers. In rejecting the ways of the flesh, and the inordinate will of personal desire, they, in effect, bring their feelings and emotions under control, and restrict them to conform to the will of God. Therefore, the Bible exhorts us: "Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another... but if we *live in the Spirit*, let us also *walk in the*

Spirit" (Galatians 5:26, 25). To "live in the Spirit" is to believe the precepts found in the Word of God, which is the Spirit of God (1John 5:6); therefore to "walk in the Spirit" is to put those principles into practical application.

It might bring opposition and ridicule from others, but the Bible encourages us to remember that "if ye *suffer for righteousness' sake*, happy are ye". To suffer for Christ is to live in conformity to his laws, and to await the day when he will reward those who have faithfully obeyed him.

Indeed, the apostle Paul taught that it is "through much tribulation" that believers will "enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). God does not exempt His servants from suffering and trials, for it is by such means that they are able to prove their courage and conviction for the things they believe. Not only so, but it is through difficulties that a person is made stronger in character, more understanding and compassionate, and more faithful in disposition.

These are the characteristics with which God is well-pleased.

Suffering is Often Self-Inflicted

Unfortunately, however, many bring unnecessary suffering upon themselves because of foolish actions. Though God knows what is best for us, we often neglect to seek His direction, choosing to make our own decisions in life. This often results in suffering and confusion. Peter said: "For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted *for your faults*, ye take it patiently?" (1Peter 2:20). It is foolish thinking that such suffering is a trial from God, when, in fact, it is our own doing!

In his parable of *The Prodigal Son* Jesus told of a son who chose to disobey his father's wishes, and spent his inheritance in wayward and wasteful actions. He ignored the wisdom of his father's experience, and set out to follow a program of wilful indulgence. As a result the foolish son soon lost his money, his position, and his dignity. He fell into disrepute, squandered his father's inheritance, and ultimately found himself so hungry that he desired swine-food (see Luke 15:11-32). Who was responsible for the suffering this son endured? His own! Certainly his father could not be accused of the adversity into which the son's deviant life led him.

Neither can God be blamed for many of the conditions of suffering endured by civilisation. Devastating floods, famines and economic hardships, the diseases that blight this present generation, the bloodshed and wars that bring immeasurable ruin and death in their train — are often the product of man's greed and insatiable lust for

power. Should God be accused of such suffering? Of course not.

It is true that man's suffering began with Adam's sin and the sentence God pronounced against him, but individuals can attain to a better way of life by applying themselves to the wisdom of God's Word. This might not exempt them from troubles — for even faithful Job and the righteous Jesus experienced them — but it will certainly open their eyes to the reasons and benefits of trial.

A child is a better person in society when he has been disciplined by understanding and wise parents. The little suffering that might be experienced through appropriate discipline, will be ultimately to the advantage of the child's personal development. The wise man advises: "chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying" (Proverbs 19:18). Thus, to "spare the rod is to spoil the child". The wise application of instruction and discipline will make for a selfless, obedient and respectful individual. In such cases, suffering results in the building of character.

This is the purpose of suffering in the divine scheme of redemption. God, who knows best, allows us to undergo such discipline that we might eventually be trained for His greater purpose to come.

God's Offer of Redemption

Civilisation groans under the burden of its own folly. Even people who achieve a comfortable living do not find real and lasting contentment. The prophet Isaiah questions those who put unrelenting energy and meticulous endeavor into obtaining material benefits, pleasures or positions of power. He asks: "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labor for that which satisfieth not?" (Isaiah 55:2). People expend all their energy to achieve but meagre benefits, only at last to die, leaving their achievements to others. Of what value is all the agony of labor, the strivings of flesh, unless there are greater and more lasting rewards to be achieved?

Habakkuk describes the agony of humanity that is evident today: "Is it not of the Lord that the people labor in the very fire, and weary themselves for very vanity" (ch. 2:13). People "labor in the fire" by putting all their energies to building up their own little empire; they "weary themselves for nothing", because there is no lasting, permanent value in such work. Disaster might come upon them from many directions; death will certainly put an end to such ambitions.

God has a plan of redemption in store, and offers participation to those who see the fruitlessness of seeking for present advancements. His plan is something that we can joyfully anticipate. In the next

verse of Habakkuk's prophecy he declares: "***The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea***" (ch. 2:14). This is God's ultimate purpose, and it will bring an end to the sorrow and suffering of mankind. It will conclude the limited benefits of the futile labor of today and introduce a time of grand fulfilment and lasting satisfaction in life.

Suffering Will Introduce the Joy

God's coming kingdom and glory will only be accomplished through national discipline on a world that largely ignores and rejects Him. Mankind is not naturally righteous, nor does it willingly turn to the wisdom of God's way. The nations might cry to God in times of crisis, when wars or famine face their countries, but when times of prosperity come, there is little response in thanksgiving to the Creator. Instead men eagerly grasp for any advantages as though they deserved them, expecting them to continue without expressing thankfulness nor regard for the Creator who provides them. So Isaiah says: "Let favor be shewed to the wicked, ***yet will he not learn righteousness***: in the land of uprightness will he deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the Lord" (Isaiah 26:10).

If God were to show favor to the wicked, it would only confirm them in their wickedness. Therefore, it is essential for the future benefit of humanity that God brings a day of judgment, that His will and goodness might ultimately be respected and revered throughout the earth.

That is what God has planned for humanity. For centuries He has permitted mankind to work out its own destiny. The result has been a terrible story of crime, evil, warfare, disease, ecological disasters and a society without character. This will soon end. Paul says that during the past "times of ignorance God winked at (*tolerated*); but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because He hath ***appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness***" (Acts 17:30-31). That "day" will see the Lord Jesus Christ return to the earth in power and great glory, in order to reverse the condition of society, and to introduce a divine, political kingdom. This was clearly the intention of God when His Son ascended into heaven over 1900 years ago. As the Lord ascended, angels told his disciples who witnessed the event: "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall ***so come in like manner*** as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

The gross immorality and wickedness that characterises this pre-

sent age is the cause of great concern to thinking men and women, who see a terrible deterioration in morals, values and standards of life. But the reason for the seeming delay in the return of Jesus Christ, is that some might still be saved from the catastrophe ahead. God has determined the time when He will intervene in human affairs to fulfil His purpose (see Hebrews 11:3; Psalm 102:13; Acts 17:31). Before this occurs there remains an opportunity for thinking men and women to seek for salvation and to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ. Peter explains that "the Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is *longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish*, but that all should come to repentance" (2Peter 3:9).

God's offer of salvation is still open to men and women. It is available to those who are prepared to understand the Gospel message (Romans 1:16), and to "believe and be baptised" (Mark 16:16).

If we neglect so great a salvation, then "the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (2Peter 3:10). In these words Peter describes the change to society that is impending. He does not speak of a literal destruction of the earth, for that is to last forever (compare Psalm 48:2; 125:1; Jeremiah 3:17). But there is going to be a complete rejuvenation of the way of life upon the earth: of the governments (*heavens*) attitudes (*elements*) and society (*earth*). Out of international suffering that is yet to occur through the wars of judgment that are necessary to cleanse and purge society of its present evil, there will come a day of grand joy and happiness.

The End to Suffering

Then no longer will the followers of Jesus Christ experience the troubles of the present. To those who "by *patient continuance in well doing* seek for glory and honor and immortality" they will be granted "eternal life" (Romans 2:7) — the promise of "divine nature" (2Peter 1:4), and the privilege of reigning as "kings and priests" with Jesus Christ (Revelation 5:10). No more will the weaknesses of human nature be felt; no longer the diseases, distresses, vagaries and frustrations of life; no longer the realisation of increasing age, with all its weaknesses and concerns.

The joy of immortality is beautifully expressed in the vibrant words of the prophet Isaiah: "They that wait upon the Lord shall

renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (ch. 40:31). In the power of endless life they will enjoy complete freedom from the anxieties and weaknesses of the present, and find absolute enjoyment in performing the joyous instructions of Almighty God.

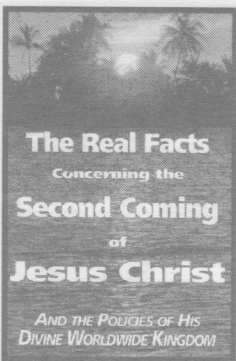
Then: "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be *no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain*: for the former things are passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

Can anything offered by the world in this present life compare with such a glorious hope? Is a little present suffering not worth the grand opportunity of such a glorious future? In the midst of a time of trouble the Psalmist confidently asserted: "One thing have I desired of the Lord, *that will I seek after*; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in His temple. For *in the time of trouble* He shall hide me in His pavilion: in the secret of His tabernacle shall He hide me; He shall set me up upon a rock" (Psalm 27:4-5). David knew that whatever trials he was required to face, God would protect him, so that ultimately he might achieve his heart's desire. So he tells us: "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart: Wait, I say, on the Lord" (verse 14).

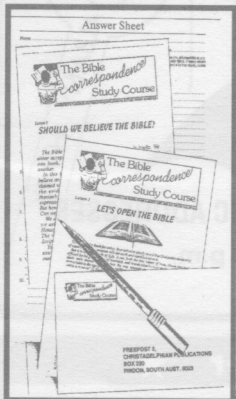
That opportunity is still available to those who are prepared to seek the way of God now. Do not be discouraged by the incident of suffering; instead accept it as a means of building faith and try to understand the reason for it. The answer to the question is in the Word of God. The lasting benefit of suffering will be seen in the future Kingdom of Jesus Christ upon the earth.

Take hold of the strength to be found in faith and express it in action, and very soon, all suffering will be turned to the joy of success and victory — in the new day that will be introduced at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. For, "*weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning*" (Psalm 30:5).

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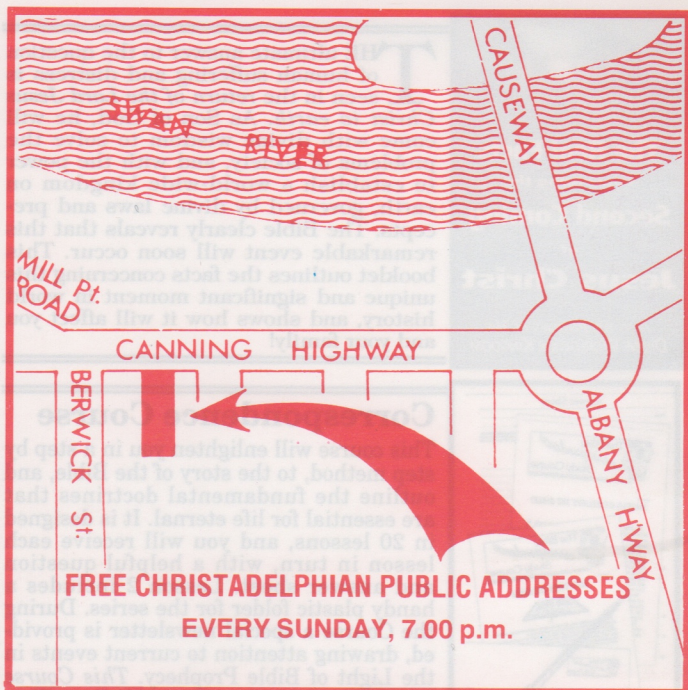
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