

Why I Am Not An Agnostic

IMPORTANT: This lesson is the fourth part of an ongoing “chapter” on why I am not an agnostic. The earlier lessons are available in written, video, or podcast form at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. Those earlier lessons contain important information on different kinds of evidence, different kinds of arguments, as well as the paradigm used for analyzing the issues. That information is not repeated here, so those who are new to this series may want to go back and consider those lessons when evaluating my thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

I was in about fourth grade when I decided I wanted to make some brownies. I asked my mom if it was okay and whether she would help. Mom was tied up taking care of our baby sister Hollie, and was unable to help at the moment, but told me to go ahead and get started. I hadn't cooked before, at least not beyond making a sandwich, but I had seen mom cook plenty, and figured I could do it.

Mom certainly thought I could, and she told me not to worry. She explained, “The instructions are on the box. All you need to do is follow them very carefully.” I think she also told me to preheat the oven.

I got out the box, found a mixing bowl, carefully measured the oil, adding the egg, and just the right amount of water. I then began mixing.

I was in the middle of mixing when mom came in. She had a look of bemused horror on her face as she found me standing over the bowl of brownie mix, with both of my hands deep in the liquid mixture, squeezing raw brownie goo between my fingers.

Mom exclaimed, “What are you doing?”

I explained I was mixing up the batter. She asked, “Why are you doing it that way? Why aren't you using a spatula?”

With great earnestness, and wanting her to know how carefully I was following directions, I nodded toward the box and said, “It says to mix by hand!” I had seen my mom make meatloaf, and she did it with hands in the mixture. I thought that was what was meant by the instruction to “Mix by hand.”

Mom started laughing, and hasn't really quit almost fifty years later.

We always tend to interpret things based on our experiences and understanding. It is the way the human mind works. We develop thought patterns and when faced with new ideas,

we tend to think of them in light of past experiences. It underlies the maxim, “To one whose only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.”

I see this over and over in courtrooms as witnesses and lawyers all see through the glasses they have been wearing through their lives. If an expert is a scientist, they see things scientifically. If the witness is a wordsmith, they examine things through language. If the lawyer is distrusting, she or he tends to disbelieve every witness. It is our nature to see things through our own history.

This can make it tough to look objectively, especially at some of the issues or evidence from life that we consider at this point.

6. Why do my actions fail to meet my standards?

The Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History teaches that,

Early humans first migrated out of Africa into Asia probably between 2 million and 1.8 million years ago. They entered Europe somewhat later, between 1.5 million and 1 million years.¹

If this is so, then I have a major beef with my historical relatives. They have had 2,000,000 years, or if the average adult has children at age 25, well over 75,000 generations to naturally select people who do not overeat! I know, there is likely an argument that high-caloric food stuff was not so readily available that all generations had an obesity issue, but I know it’s been a problem for recorded history!

There are those who can eat anything they want, and they stay fit as a fiddle. I know. I have seen them. Then there are those who can smell the brownies in the oven, and add five pounds before they come out. Yes, some will say, and I can see the logic that the ability to put on weight might have its advantages in history when we need to fatten during years of plenty to be able to sustain the years of famine. But it isn’t only the body’s reaction to food that concerns me. The real concern is something a bit deeper. It is the body’s enslavement to, in some cases, overeating. It is the failure to develop the self-discipline so that one can readily choose whether it is a season to add pounds.

This is not simply a “digestion of the food” issue. Why haven’t we developed the self-control that would allow us to make conscious decisions about what is best and then follow them? That is the real beef (pun intended) of my complaint.

¹ See, “What does it mean to be a human” at <http://humanorigins.si.edu/education/introduction-human-evolution>.

With 75,000 generations, it seems that the human race would have naturally selected those individuals who have the best self-control. Those are the ones who will live more successfully, who will be able to follow through on their decisions, who will be able to modify their behavior to meet the circumstances in a well thought out manner.

Self-control and discipline seem to be traits that would surface fast through natural selection. It means we would be creatures who make decisions and find ourselves able to follow through.

Now some have more self-control than others; that is without a doubt. Most everyone sees self-control as a virtue, an admirable trait that helps in life. Yet, even those few with great self-control are not successful at doing all they want, at refraining from things they don't want, at controlling the urges of a baser nature. Why is that?

I weigh this issue in the scales we are using and consider the explanations for this reality in light of there being no God versus the ideas of the Judeo-Christian God. My considerations here tilt the scales with the Judeo Christian God being the better explanation, but only for some of the ideas. Let me explain.

On the issue of eating, as already explained, I can see the historical advantages in different cultures and ages to having bodies that put on weight more readily than others. Having that trait, and the inability to control eating, could easily be a vestige of natural selection in that regard.² Those who were able to put on weight, intentionally or not, made it through times of famine and inadequate food sources to continue breeding and continue life.

Similarly, consider those who are unable to control their hormones shouting "REPRODUCE!," even though their minds are saying, "Not supposed to happen right now!" That might be the solution in a god-less nature that has seen human beings continue to propagate.

But there are other issues of self-control that don't so readily meet the mold. There are times where I don't measure up to being the kind of worker I want or need to be. There are times where my parenting is less than it should be. There are times where I am not the kind of husband I would like. There are times where I would like to be a better friend. Sometimes I say things I don't want to say. Sometimes I fail to say or do things that I should say or do. Sometimes I lose my cool.

² A word of warning about "natural selection." I am not suggesting that natural selection is not a reality. Judeo-Christian scriptures teach that animals were made to propagate after their kind. They are self-sustaining in that regard just as people are. In the earliest story of Adam and Eve, we see natural selection taking place in the sense that Adam chose the most fit mate for him, not finding one suitable among the animal world until Eve came along. Here, and in other places where I am weighing evidence, my analysis is based on a natural selection that is devoid of any God.

Can I imagine ways that these traits *might* have a better result than the trait of self-control? Of course! But those are the exceptions. In the main, these are traits that should have been weeded out thousands of generations ago! It doesn't make sense to me in weighing the scales that poor self-control would be explained by the absence of God.

What is the Judeo-Christian explanation for this reality of life? Does the Judeo-Christian explanation make sense of our experience in the arena of poor self-control?

The Biblical account that explains the condition of humanity is best told in the story of the Garden of Eden. God had two perfectly formed humans in the Garden, able to make real choices (what to eat and whom to obey), create from their imaginations (naming animals), work toward goals (tend the garden), and relate harmoniously in personal and real terms (to God and with each other).

God instructed and warned both of these two that if they made a certain choice to disobey God, and to eat of a certain forbidden tree, the consequences would be devastating. Ultimately the results would be the death penalty. The two people, Adam and Eve, lived for some unknown period of time in the harmony and opportunity afforded by God's bountiful paradise. Then something changed.

An enemy of God and of people, slithered into Eve's presence and got her to question God's instructions. The enemy was able to persuade her to defy God, and chose to make her own rules. She made the deliberate choice to eat the forbidden fruit, and then got her husband to do the same.

The consequences were, literally and figuratively, of Biblical proportions. There was an immediate displacement in the relationship between Adam, Eve, and God. The harmony was gone. Adam and Eve hid from God. When confronted, Adam blamed Eve, then blamed God (for providing Eve). There was shame and awareness of violating God's instructions (aka "sin"). Death set in. In part this was a physical degradation process that would pass on to all generations proceeding from Adam and Eve, but it was also a death "inside." It meant that Adam and Eve were darkened in their ability to discern right and wrong, to do right and wrong, to be who they were made to be, doing what they were made to do. It put enmity between them and each other, them and God, and them and the earth. They were no longer in a paradise, but would have to find a way to live among thorns and thistles.

God explained this condition of "death" as they were expelled from his presence in the garden of perfection,

Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat

the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Gen. 3:17-19).

Adam and Eve's actions brought this about. It left them less than they were made to be. They longed for relationships that were not marred or destroyed. They had to sweat to make things work, when those things had previously come as gifts. It took the pleasures of work and turned them into sweat and toil.

There are many other places where the Bible expands on this teaching, with the Christian/Jewish rabbi Paul writing,

Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned . . . because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man (Rom. 5:12, 17).

According to the Biblical account, we are made for something greater than we are, as discussed previously. We are made to be in a moral relationship with a moral God. Yet we are unable to do so. We were born into the condition of "sin" where we are marred in our ability to live perfectly. Try as we might, we don't have the mind for it, the self-control for it, or the emotional drive for it. We fall short of what we want. We are sinners, living out the death sentence promised beforehand to our progenitors.

So we want to do right, but with every generation, we will not find any who can live as they want. We have yet to have a child who needs lessons in how to "disobey." All children come by that naturally. We have to teach them obedience. We have to teach them to do right.

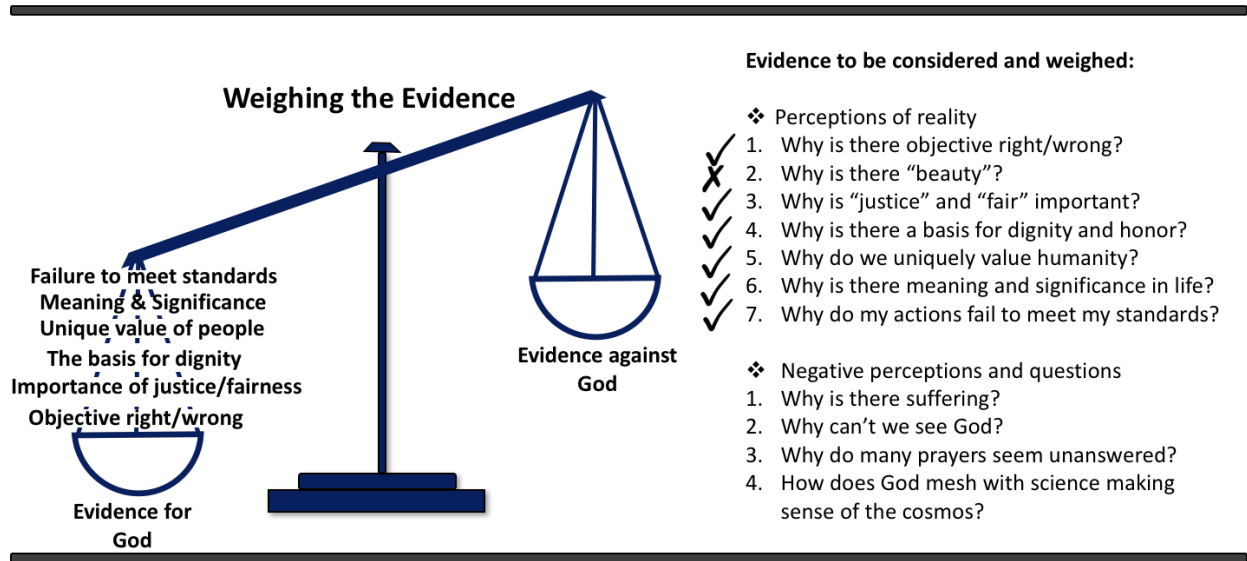
Admittedly this is a personal issue with people, but as I experience this reality, the Biblical account gives a very reasonable explanation to me for how I am, and also how you are!

Before we proceed to the next piece of evidence, we need to account for another aspect of people not measuring up to the standards we expect or desire. To this point, I have considered the majority of us who are "inadequate" and lacking in self-control. But there is a whole other set of people whose actions do not measure up to standards. These are the evil people that haunt our world. They are the kidnappers, rapists, murders. The generals who lead armies to destroy people groups. The Mao Zedongs, Hitlers, and Stalins in our world who oversee the deaths of tens of millions of people.

Why do these people still find power and support in this world? Why are they able to live and perpetrate their evil? The examination given above actually applies to these people as well. I suspect most have either lost self-control (rapists, for example), or they have become so deluded that they have justified their atrocities somehow in their minds. Of

course, the Christian explanation makes great sense, both for the lack of self-control and for the delusion of zealotry that accompanies warped standards of behavior. But beyond that, about these who are evil, we must ask the hard question, why does God, if he exists and if he is a good God, allow such evil to exist?

I consider this in the next issue/piece of evidence, but first, I add to my scales the evidence of failing to meet my standards.



Negative perceptions and questions

1. Why is there suffering?

At this point, I am shifting to those pieces of evidence I have grouped under "Negative perceptions and questions." These are areas and arguments set out by many who have abdicated any faith in God (or gods). These are people like Bart Ehrman, who has set out many popular best-sellers challenging the authenticity of the Christian faith and the validity of the Bible as an authoritative text. Ehrman wrote,

If there is an all-powerful and loving God in this world, why is there so much excruciating pain and unspeakable suffering? The problem of suffering has haunted me for a very long time... Ultimately, it was the reason I lost my faith.³

³ Ehrman, Bart, *God's Problem*, (HarperOne 2009), at 1.

Ehrman wrote in his book of a Christmas Eve service he attended where he was moved by this issue, not toward faith, but away. The service's prayer was for the God who came into the darkness of the world bringing light through the life of the divine Christ child to come into the world of darkness again today.

Ehrman explained,

Where is this God now? If he came into the darkness and made a difference, why is there still no difference? Why are the sick still wracked with unspeakable pain? Why are babies still born with birth defects? Why are young children kidnapped, raped, and murdered? Why are there droughts that leave millions starving, suffering horrible and excruciating lives that lead to horrible and excruciating deaths? If God intervened to deliver the armies of Israel from its enemies, why doesn't he intervene now when the armies of sadistic tyrants savagely attack and destroy entire villages, towns, and even countries? If God is at work in the darkness, feeding the hungry with the miraculous multiplication of loaves, why is it that one child—a mere child!—dies every five seconds of hunger? Every five seconds.⁴

This is a common view, and a piece of evidence we should take very seriously. I have considered it for forty years, and as I turn over the evidence, and consider the implications, I keep returning to the same conclusion. This is actually evidence that supports the Judeo-Christian view of God, not evidence against it. Here is my reasoning.

Suffering is real. Suffering is horrible. Suffering is brutal and makes me angry and frustrated. It can bring tears to my eyes. I have seen sweet and innocent young people die. Does this mean there is no God? Of course not! There might be an evil and malevolent God. There might be a callous God. There might be a God who ignores earth. There might be a God who is not all-powerful. The presence of suffering doesn't indicate there is no God, *but* it might indicate that the loving and all-powerful Judeo-Christian God is not real! That is where this examination turns.

We need to consider what *kind* of God would exist to explain suffering, what *kind* of world would explain suffering, and what *kind* of humanity would explain suffering.

IMPORTANT SIDE NOTE: Before examining the questions above, I think one thing should be underscored, although it was already mentioned in an earlier analysis. Suffering bothers us, especially when it is deemed “unfair.” We might be okay with soldiers being killed in a just war, but the collateral damage of a school house full of children being killed causes great consternation.

⁴ *Ibid.*, at 21-22 of ibook edition.

That the suffering of others bothers people so much must be considered as possible evidence for God's existence. This is the point of our earlier analysis on "Why are concepts of justice and fairness important?" This also calls into play our considerations of why there is a basis for dignity and honor as well as why we value humanity and find meaning and significance in life. At the end of the day, the mere fact that suffering is so bothersome is a strong indication that we are something more than human chemical sacks. If we weren't wired somehow to understand and appreciate justice, we wouldn't be so concerned over the suffering of others.

What kind of God could explain the suffering?

For some reason I can't understand, people think their concept of God must be what or who God really is. We often hear of people saying God is "omnipotent," meaning "all-powerful." Whether or not that is true, however, depends upon what someone means by "all-powerful." Like the brownie instructions to mix-by-hand, "omnipotent" might mean one thing to one while another thing to another. The Bible refers to God as "all-powerful" or "almighty" in both the Hebrew Scriptures ("Old Testament") and the New Testament Scriptures of the Christian faith. The Hebrew used a word "*shadai*," which was considered a name of God, from an Arabic root that speaks of "strength." Indeed, God is "strong." In the New Testament, the word used is *pantokrator*, which conveys the idea of "all-powerful," but that's not the whole story. Here is where we can make some mistakes in our understanding.

The early Jewish Christians that were writing the New Testament often used a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. This Greek translation (called "the Septuagint") had already been made before the coming of Christ. The Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures did NOT use the word "*pantokrator*" or "all-powerful" to translate the Hebrew for "*shadai*" or strong. The Greek "all-powerful" translated the Hebrew "*ts'v'ot*, referring to "hosts" or "armies." God is "all-powerful" in the Biblical sense that he reigns over all the hosts. The Latin church took this Greek idea and turned it into the Latin word *omnipotens*, from which we derive "omnipotent."

What is the point of this language discussion? The meaning behind words! We must understand that there may be a difference between what we think God is and what God actually is. There might also be a difference between what we *want* God to be and what God is.

So on the issue of God being all-powerful, we do an injustice to the concept of the Judeo-Christian God if we think that means, for example, that God can make $2 + 2$ equal 15. That is not what all-powerful means. All-powerful places God above the hosts. It makes him the strong one who can do as he pleases. But it doesn't mean he can be something he's not. He can't make a rock he can't lift.

Similarly, we might want God to be something God isn't. We might want God to be always making sure people are happy. We might want God to make people puppets, and strip them of their free choice. (For example, don't allow people to get drunk and drive. Be the cosmic breathalyzer or "Intoxilock.") We might want God to make the world Harry Potter-esque, stopping the laws of nature when they might cause a hurricane or flood. In that regard, we might want God to stop any human influence on global warming, which itself, according to most models of science, leads to extremes of weather occurrences. Maybe we want God to be a cosmic prophylactic to stop the spread of disease. Or perhaps we expect God to be cosmic birth control, stopping all sperm from people who will be bad dads from entering the ova of people who will be bad mothers. Or should God be the cosmic bullet-proof vest, to stop the laws of nature that allow gunshot wounds?

Taken to an extreme, maybe we want God to stop anyone from dying, so we can live forever on this earth, restoring Eden. In the end, maybe we want a God who wouldn't make people at all, if it meant that some people would be bad and choose to work against God instead of for him.

Could God do these things? Technically, I guess he could, but not in this world he has made. That would not be a real world with real choices. It would be a puppet world where all choices are dictated by God. No one can exist in such a world with freedom to make choices. It is as illogical as two plus two equaling fifteen.

So this is not a reasonable explanation of God. It certainly isn't the Biblical God. I believe it is a naïve view that is not fully thought through. Not wanting to offend anyone who speaks like this, I will explain why it seems to me that the reasoning used is typically quite superficial. The reasoning sounds like a high school debate class: "If God is God, then God can do anything. If God can do anything, then God can make a world where this doesn't happen." Or "If God can do anything, then God can intervene whenever anything bad is going to happen." That may sound logical, but it isn't. It makes no more sense than, "God can't exist, because if he did, then he could make a rock he couldn't lift. But then if he couldn't lift it, he wouldn't be all-powerful. So there must not be a God."

No, God cannot make a rock he cannot lift. That simply isn't possible or logical. There are lots of things that are illogical and impossible for God. God's character is that of a consistent and unchanging God. He can't become inconsistent. He can't become sinful. He can't "die." He can't get sick. He can't have accidents. There is a lot that is not in the realm of "possible" for God. That doesn't make him less God.

The Biblical God exists as a specific being, united as one, though finding expression in what we can best understand as "three persons." This Biblical God was and is able to make people with actual abilities to make their own moral choices. People can choose to live; people can choose to die. People can choose to treat others with kindness and charity; people can choose to treat others contemptuously or with cruelty. People can choose to

help those who need help; people can choose to take advantage of others. People can choose to live destructively; people can choose to live constructively. People can choose to rely upon God; people can choose to deny God. People can choose to slaughter innocents; people can choose to protect others. People can choose to live in greed, satisfying their own desires at the expense of others; people can choose to live altruistically, seeking the good of others, even at personal expense.

These are real choices. People have them. People can exercise them. People are responsible for them. God isn't. God should not be blamed for the poor or wicked choices of others. Do we want God to be the "don't let anything bad happen" police officer? Cruising around in a supernatural squad car patrolling for crimes about to be committed, and then bending the laws of nature to prevent them? That is not God, and that is not this world.

The Biblical God is one who made the world, placed all sorts of living beings here (this is still not the time yet to discuss how he did so – evolution, intelligent design, or creation out of nothing), and among all the beings, had two that were specially endowed to be in his image. These two were given clear directions and told of consequences for bad choices. They made a choice and those consequences have happened. They are tragic. There is no disputing that.

The story after Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise illustrates this. Adam and Eve were injected into the world of thorns, thistles, pain, and other results from rebellion against God and his goodness. Into this world, they gave birth to two sons, Cain and Abel. As they got older, Cain and Abel were interfacing with God and Cain's attitudes were wrong. God warned Cain that "sin was crouching" at his door. Cain was warned that he was close to doing some very wrong things that would have wrong consequences. After the experience of his parents, this should have put Cain on high alert. But no, it didn't. Instead, in a fit of envy and rage, Cain killed Abel, an innocent.

Did Abel deserve it? No. Did Abel commit the sin? No. This was Cain's sin, and both Cain and Abel suffered for it. Abel, we may assume in the Biblical story suffered only momentarily. The Bible teaches that he was heaven bound, and that death to one in God's care is a graduation, not an end. Cain's suffering was much longer. It lasted his life.

This story readily shows that God's charge to people to tend to the earth is a real charge (Gen. 2:15). We humans have an ability to make choices that have real consequences. We can do good or do evil, and the effects take place. This does not mean God is evil. God is not the one doing the bad thing. God warns and teaches people what is right to do. Cain had no excuse. God warned him. Adam and Eve had no excuse. God warned them. But they had choices, and those choices had real consequences. How dare we blame God for our actions?

There is a redemptive side of the story that will be discussed later, but it is worthy of a brief discussion here because it is important to this analysis. It illustrates the loving nature of God and how his love is manifested in the midst of the evilness in this world.

Even with the wicked choices of people, choices that bring death, God has promised and planned a route of redemption for people. There is a way that the just consequence of sin and disobedience can be met, where it is not white-washed, where God doesn't excuse it *sua sponte*, where people can come back into a restored relationship with God based on justice as well as mercy. God doesn't roll back the consequences of sin, but he meets them head on in a personal manner and takes the effects of sin to his own detriment, so that others will not have to bear them.

So in spite of the suffering of sin, the ultimate consequence (the death sentence) is removed, as that debt is/was paid by God himself, as I discuss in later chapters.

Shall we shake our fist to the skies and say, "How dare you God? How dare you let this or that bad thing happen?" Well, we can, but we must remember the Judeo-Christian teaching that God didn't make this world for suffering. He had a much grander purpose. Humanity's choices have brought forth the suffering. (Natural disasters are dealt with below.).

God is at work trying to alleviate suffering. He has taught any who would listen to him that our job, our Christian responsibility, is to be his vessel for reaching the world in his love and compassion. We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend to the sick, fellowship the lonely, and more. See the sternness of this teaching from Jesus who said,

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord,

when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ (Mt. 25:34-45).

Now should God not choose to use humans? Should he have made this earth his paint canvas, simply grabbing some food paint to add where there are hungry people? Should he retract his instructions to his people and instead insert, “Hey, I want you to help those suffering, but no big deal if you don’t. I will do it all myself.” Again, that is not God making a world of autonomy with laws of nature and rules of life.

Then what of the argument that Ehrman and others make about God at times intervening? The Bible does say that God (Jesus) used a few loaves and fishes to feed thousands. The Hebrew celebration of *Pesach* (“Passover”) is based on the Biblical story of God intervening in laws of nature to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, miraculously parting the Reed Sea in the process. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead certainly violated more than a few laws of nature.

Certainly God can, and does alter nature at times to effectuate his will. The Biblical teaching recognizes that such things occur, but they happen rarely. More often we see God working his will through the laws of nature, through the choices and actions of people, not apart from them.

In the law there is a doctrine of “constitutional avoidance.” This doctrine says that when courts are ruling on matters, they should refuse to rule on a constitutional issue if the issue can be resolved on a non-constitutional basis. Is this because courts don’t have the ability or authority to rule on constitutional issues? Of course not. They absolutely have that ability and authority. They are the only branch of government that can.

This judicial minimalism is important. Judicial review of the constitution is a potent tool that addresses not only the matter at hand, but also can affect any future matter that might come along on any related subject. Courts recognize that the fallout from their decisions on other matters increases significantly with the breadth of judicial interference. For example, if a court is faced with a singular issue about whether one who is developmentally disabled with an IQ below 70 can be given the death penalty, if the court finds the trial was not conducted fairly, the court will refrain from writing on the entire issue of whether the death penalty violates the constitutional rights of one with that mental deficit. To quote the current Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court when explaining a limited ruling,

This is a sufficient ground for deciding this case, and the cardinal principle of judicial restraint — if it is not necessary to decide more, it is necessary not to decide more — counsels us to go no further.⁵

Here we have a good sound reasoning behind God’s restraint as well. If we think of this world like a Sudoku puzzle, tampering with one number will affect all others. Could God rid the world of disease with a snap of his supernatural fingers? Of course. Yet the impact would be profound. It could result in populations with insufficient food, inadequate housing, fighting over property and possessions, unemployment ramifications when jobs never come open.

If one hasn’t spent much time studying the science of economics, this might seem trivial, if even notable at all. It isn’t. Economist Edwin Dolan makes the point forcefully in his book *TANSTAAFL (There Ain’t No Such Thing as a Free Lunch)*. After pointing out that ecology studies the relationships between living beings and the environment, it is based on the broad premise that “everything depends on everything else.” Dolan then explains in economic terms,

The theory of general economic equilibrium teaches us that a change in the price or quantity produced of any good or service will affect the price and quantity produced of all other goods and services. A decline in the production of cattle will result in a decreased supply of leather. Up will go the price of leather, and hence of leather shoes. Consumers will buy fewer leather and more synthetic shoes. Workers will be laid off in the tanneries and taken on in plastics mills. Real estate values will fall in the neighborhood of the former and rise in the neighborhood of the latter. Eventually – according to economic science this is a literal certainty limited only by our ability to measure – the impact will be felt upon the price of eggs in China.⁶

God has made a world for humans to negotiate and work. Adam and Eve were instructed to tend to the Garden, to name the animals, etc. This is the way the world is set up, and God’s supernatural interventions come, but they come rarely. God exercises “judicial restraint.” For God to do otherwise, would strip the truth of the human role in life. It would make this world a charade, not a real world.

Yes, God could have made a lightning bolt strike Hitler right before he was elected. But the ramifications of that no one knows. Instead God worked through the efforts of valent men and women, many of whom gave up their lives, to strip the world of the Third Reich and its devastating evil deeds, bringing Hitler to naught, and keeping this world on the

⁵ *PDK Laboratories, Inc. v. U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration*, 362 F.3d 786, 799 (D.C. Ct. App. 2004).

⁶ Dolan, Edwin G., *TANSTAAFL (There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch)* - (Kindle Edition), at 190.

course to seal up destiny within God's will. Does that mean there is no God for no God would have done so? No. It means that the Biblical God worked in the manner of the Biblical God. Is that the way we would do it if we were God? I suggest no one can answer that question. No one can say what would have happened to the world in the event Hitler was hit by lightning. There were plenty of evil people making evil choices in the Third Reich and elsewhere. Replace Hitler with another Führer, and Germany might have won the war!

Yes, Jesus fed thousands with a few loaves and fishes. Should Jesus have done so daily, no doubt he would have alleviated hunger. He would also have put all the fishermen and bakers out of jobs. Then there would have been inadequate money for them to buy clothes and shelter. So maybe Jesus then clothes everyone and does supernatural carpentry to work on their homes? That then puts out of work those in the clothing industry and home building/repair. Of course without people in the clothing industry, the wool needed from sheep is no longer purchased, and those reliant upon shepherding face a bleak future.

Or maybe God snaps his divine fingers at 8 p.m. tonight and cures cancer worldwide. Then all the oncologists tomorrow can be looking for new jobs, all those working as technicians, all the related pharmaceutical workers, and other affiliated industries shut down. These people then quit spending their money which they are no longer earning, and the economy begins to drag. Homes loans are defaulted, bank loans go unpaid, spending declines. Affiliated stock prices become worthless, and on and on, all creating more suffering that God is supposed to then snap his fingers and fix?

This is why I call this viewpoint naïve. It fails to think through real implications, and is more of a high school debate proposition.

What kind of world would explain the suffering?

If we change our focus from the kind of God that would explain suffering and narrow it to the world's suffering of famine, hurricanes, and the like, we still weigh two models, one of no God and one of the Judeo-Christian God. If there is no God, what explains the suffering of this world? Are we on a cosmic dirt-clod that is subject to harsh uncaring laws of nature? That would certainly be possible. That might make sense in and of itself. The area where it doesn't make sense is how we react to the suffering brought on by the inanimate world.

We are in a predicament because of the way we react to the suffering and how significantly it weighs on us. We might understand our repulsion for our own suffering. That is a mechanism that natural selection would want to ensure we have a good and full life, but the tragic nature of others suffering is altogether different.

What reason would we have for caring if famine caused other people continents away to hurt with hunger or be treated unfairly? In fact, to the extent that others are shorted in this

life, it might provide more for others. If there is a zero-sum of food available, then maybe having a smorgasbord available to me as a result of others going hungry might seem good. That part of us that declares, “No, this is not right. No one should suffer needlessly!” is something that makes most sense to me under the Judeo-Christian understanding of God having made us to reflect his care, compassion, and sense of justice.

If we consider the Judeo-Christian concept of God, we have a ready understanding of the world-induced suffering as well as our reaction to it.

There is a world with its order, and it is not part of God. It is an independent creation of God. Humanity began that world in a paradisiac Garden prepared by God. Humanity was built and endowed with a charge to tend the garden, and the abilities to accomplish that task. While Adam and Eve walked in fellowship with God, all was good. There was no suffering. The world did not operate in a way that hurt them in the Utopia of Eden. Then a corner was turned.

Adam and Eve made the deliberate choice to be their own God, setting up their own boundaries and defining their own right and wrong. The temptation set before them was to disobey God with the assurance that their “eyes will be opened,” and they would be like God” (Gen. 3:5). As discussed above, Adam and Eve were not puppets. They were real people with real choices that would have real consequences. When Adam and Eve chose rebellion, they lost life in Paradise. They were ejected from Eden and sent into a fallen world to live the life they chose.

The changes are set out in Genesis 3:17-19.

Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Post-Eden, mankind finds itself in a war zone, not utopia. This is not rooted in God’s uncaring nature; it is the real result of sin. Notice the curse is given “because of you.” It came from the sins of Adam and Eve, not simply the hand of God.

Meanwhile, humanity still understands that the suffering is not good. God never made the world so that it would abuse people. This makes sense to me, not only because of its explanation of the world, but also for its explanation of why we care so much. I do care that others suffer in another continent, even though I will never know them. Furthermore, as the charge was given by Jesus to help those in need, the Christian understanding is that there are tools in the world that are at people’s disposal to try and alleviate some of the pain and suffering brought about by the world.

This is part of the Christian understanding of science and medicine. Science, medicine, and the laws of nature give people tools to combat the suffering brought about by sin and the world. We can use weather forecasting to move people out of the way of incoming hurricanes. We can work with fertilizers to make more food available. We can develop machinery that can plow a field most efficiently to produce crops. Of course the obverse is equally true. We can choose not to do so. We can choose instead to use the tools of this world for destructive ends. The instructions of Jesus set out earlier make clear God's charge to help others in need. That is the work of God through his people in this fallen world.

What kind of humanity would explain the suffering?

There are people who cause suffering. Some bring about suffering on a minor scale while others do so on a monstrous level. Earlier we quoted Ehrman's concern about "the armies of sadistic tyrants [that] savagely attack and destroy entire villages, towns, and even countries."

Where does this depth of depravity come from? How can people be so "inhumane"? As I consider the two sides of the scales, I first look at the evidence that this results from godless natural selection. Here I return to our earlier considerations of B.F. Skinner's hypothesis that we are seeing actions that are simply genetics and the internal chemistry of exposure to environmental actions. This would mean that those who cause suffering have a DNA makeup that, when exposed to the influences of their experiences in life, determined the resulting behavior. We remove this behavior from personal accountability; after all, no one chooses their DNA, and even if they did, that choice would likewise be dictated by the laws of physics and chemistry. This is a chain that would go back to the Big Bang.

This answer is fraught with the same concerns and problems I outlined earlier concerning Skinner's determinism. Additionally, though, it is also troubled by the ideas behind a view of natural selection that makes no room for God. As a species, if we are to procreate, reinforce, and refine ourselves based on the traits that make us most fit for the environment in which we are found, it seems against common sense that those who carry the sadistic and inhumane traits would still be around after a few million years of breeding. Surely we'd have gotten rid of those DNA traits by now.

It might make some sense that the DNA traits that enable people to win wars and exercise dominion over others will continue to flourish as part of natural selection. But there are people who are marvelous leaders, who command respect, who are models of virtue. The traits that make someone effective in battle or politics does not require degenerative behavior and evil.

It seems to me most reasonable to expect that these traits would be decreasing, if not fully eliminated by now. Yet look at the tyrants and wicked people in recent history. Saddam

Hussein, Mohamar Ghadaffi, Pol Pot, Kim John-il, the people behind the Kosovo and Bosnia “ethnic cleansings,” not to mention the child molesters, the Sandy Hook and Columbine tragedies, and more. We haven’t been able to naturally select our way out of this evil.

On the Judeo-Christian side of the scale, we have a much different calculus. The Judeo-Christian position is that there will always be evil. There are people who live in rebellion to God. People who aren’t in fellowship with God, even though hard-wired for morality, are able to delude themselves, rally others in support, and do unspeakable horrors. The Judeo-Christian teaching is that these people are encouraged, enabled, and prodded by a level of unseen evil that finds expression in Satan and his demonic hoards. These forces work in bringing about evil, and will never be eliminated by natural selection.

The Judeo-Christian explanation gives a source for the evil (fallen people influenced by evil forces), but also gives an answer for the evil. God has charged his followers to combat the evil on this earth. God has also promised fully and finally to vanquish and eliminate evil. Evil will be destroyed, as the world’s order comes to an end.

In vivid imagery, the New Testament book called Revelation recounts a vision given a man named John that included scenes of the final triumph of God over evil. The demonic forces are conquered⁷ and the evil doers are punished and destroyed.⁸

Some ask, if there is a God, why does he allow evil? Who made evil or where did it come from? The Christian faith explains evil as *the absence of or the marring of good*. So for example, sexuality expressed in a faithful marital relationship is a good thing. It is a gift from God. But that same sexuality forced on someone, or perpetrated on a child or animal, is wrong and evil. Evil will always exist when people who can make choices, choose evil. Evil is not “made” in the normal sense of the word. Evil is what happens when good is gone or mutilated. It is like turning off the light. When one turns off the light, there is darkness. The darkness wasn’t “made.” It was simply what happens when you remove light. In the same way, if you remove good, you are left with evil.

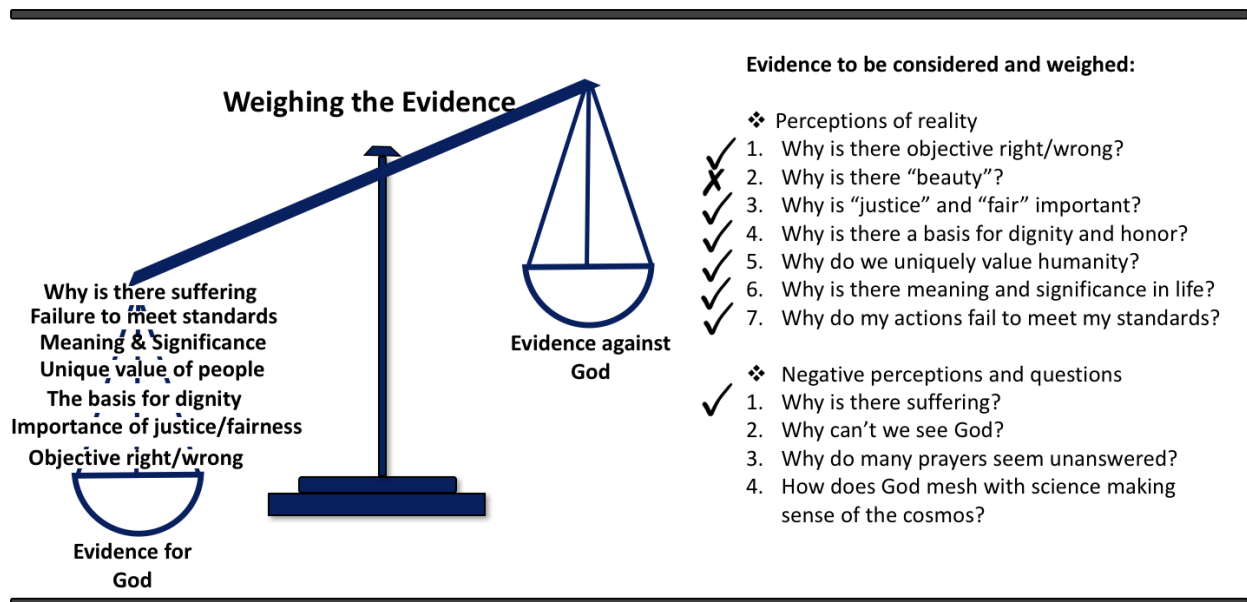
Evil deeds have evil consequences, even on good people. This is what stumps so many when they consider how that can be with a loving God. The Christian response is an important insight into reality. Unlike the non-God response that struggles with the reality of evil after millions of years of natural selection, the Christian response recognizes this world as a war zone, not a utopia. God wins the war, but we still must fight the battles. God calls on his followers to hate evil (Rom. 12:9); and to feed the hungry, clothe the

⁷ “the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10).

⁸ “This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” (Rev. 20:14-15).

naked, and aid the sick and imprisoned (Mt. 25:34-40). God wants his followers to invoke his power to defeat the forces of evil (Mt. 6:9-10), and to pray for those who are evil (Mt. 5:43-45).

The Judeo-Christian view of reality says that there is a God who finds evil appalling, who tells his followers to fight against it, and who promises to ultimately destroy it and its perpetrators. This explains to me why I abhor evil. This explains why our world wants to fight against it. I do not find the idea that there is a loving God to be invalid in light of a world filled with evil. I find that a loving God explains it. It explains why I know evil is wrong. It explains why evil hasn't been diluted from the gene pool, it explains why I want to try and stop evil. It explains reality. I don't consider the presence of suffering as proof there is no God. I think it proves there is a God, and it inspires me to fight as he has instructed me!



To be continued!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned"* (Rom. 5:12).

I am not perfect. Not even close. I am thankful for a God who knows that, and has taken the steps to restore my fellowship to him by making me righteous in spite of myself. I am going to be intentionally thankful for this.

2. *“I was hungry and you gave me food”* (Mt. 25:35).

I need to take suffering seriously, not only when it happens to me or those close to me. Our Lord takes it seriously and has called me to action! I am going to seek out the places where I can serve my God and his agenda of alleviating suffering!

3. *“Cursed is the ground because of you”* (Gen. 3:17).

I will make no pretext. This world is not paradise. It is my battleground as I fight evil within and without, waiting in hope of the world to come. I will gird up for battle!