A close-up portrait of a woman with dark skin and hair, looking slightly to the right. A single tear is visible on her left cheek. The lighting is soft and focused on her face.

## 5 Questions About Suffering

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**ANSWERED**

# Awake!®

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## At some point, everyone is affected by tragedy—perhaps an illness, an accident, a natural disaster, or an act of violence.

People search for answers.

- Some attribute suffering to fate or in some other way feel that we have little control over what happens to us.
- Others believe in karma. They say that we suffer because of something bad that we did earlier in life or in a past life.

Tragedy often leaves  
people with more questions  
than answers.



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**1**

**Is God to blame  
for our suffering?**

**2**

**Are we to blame  
for our own suffering?**

**3**

**Why do good people  
suffer?**

**4**

**Were we meant  
to suffer?**

**5**

**Will suffering  
ever end?**



# WHAT SOME BELIEVE



## Hindus

view suffering as a consequence of a person's actions, committed in either this life or a past one. A person can reach moksha—a release from the cycle of rebirths—through achieving a state of mind that is detached from temporal things.

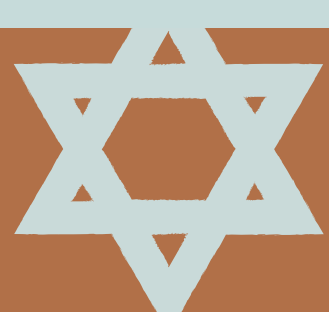
## Muslims

view suffering as both a punishment for sin and a test of faith. Tragedies are a reminder “to remain grateful to God for all our blessings and cognizant that we must support those in need,” says Dr. Sayyid Syeed, president of the Islamic Society of North America.



## Jewish tradition

holds that suffering results from one's own actions. Some Jews say that there will be a resurrection, after which justice will be rendered to the innocent who suffered. Kabbalistic (mystical) Judaism teaches reincarnation, which gives a person repeated opportunities to atone for his errors.



## Buddhists

believe that suffering is experienced over many lifetimes, a cycle of rebirths that continue until a person's negative actions, emotions, and cravings cease. By means of wisdom, virtuous works, and mental discipline, a person can reach nirvana—a state in which all suffering has ceased.



## Confucianists

attribute most suffering to “human failure and error,” says *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*. Confucian doctrine recognizes that while suffering can be reduced through virtuous living, much of it is caused by “spiritual agencies beyond man’s control. In such cases, man must stoically accept the decrees of Fate.”



## Some tribal religions

attribute suffering to witchcraft. According to these beliefs, witches can bring good luck or disaster and their activities can be tempered through various rituals. Thus, the rites and medicines of witch doctors are believed to counteract the work of witches when a person suffers from illness.



## Christians

trace suffering to the sin of the first two humans, as described in the Bible book of Genesis. However, many denominations have embellished that teaching. For example, some Catholics say that personal suffering can be ‘offered up to God’ to request that he benefit the church or that he apply that suffering toward the salvation of someone else.

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*Does God Accept All Forms  
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# 1

## IS GOD TO BLAME FOR OUR SUFFERING?

### Why It Matters

Many people reject God because they blame him for suffering.



### To Think About

Directly or indirectly, many religious leaders have taught that God is the cause of our suffering. For example, some say the following:

- Natural disasters are punishment from God.
- Children die because God needs more angels in heaven.
- God takes sides in wars—a cause of great suffering.

But is it possible that religious leaders have misrepresented God? What if God has rejected them?

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## What the Bible Says

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### God does not cause our suffering.

**If he did so, it would be contrary to his qualities as revealed in the Bible. For example:**

“All [God’s] ways are justice. . . . Righteous and upright is he.”—**DEUTERONOMY 32:4.**

“It is unthinkable for the true God to act wickedly, for the Almighty to do wrong!”—**JOB 34:10.**

“The Almighty does not pervert justice.”—**JOB 34:12.**

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### God rejects religion that misrepresents him.

**This includes religions that teach that God causes our suffering and those that are involved with warfare and violence.**

“The prophets are prophesying lies in my [God’s] name. I have not sent them or commanded them or spoken to them. A lying vision and . . . the deceit of their own heart is what they are prophesying to you.”—**JEREMIAH 14:14.**

### Jesus denounced religious hypocrisy.

“Not everyone saying to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the Kingdom of the heavens, but only the one doing the will of my Father who is in the heavens will. Many will say to me in that day: ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and expel demons in your name, and perform many powerful works in your name?’ And then I will declare to them: ‘I never knew you! Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness!’”

—**MATTHEW 7:21-23.**

### Is God to blame for our suffering?

Suppose a father raises his children and provides well for them. Later, one son rebels, moves out of the home, and chooses a self-destructive lifestyle. Would the father be responsible for his son’s conduct? Could the son blame his father for negative consequences that he experiences? In a similar way, we cannot blame God for our suffering.

**But does this mean that we are to blame for it?**

**See question 2.**

# 2

## ARE WE TO BLAME FOR OUR OWN SUFFERING?

### Why It Matters

If the answer is yes, then it may be in our power to reduce suffering.



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### To Think About

To what extent are humans responsible for the following causes of suffering?



#### Abuse.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 1 out of 4 adults suffered physical abuse at some point during childhood and that 1 out of 3 women experience physical or sexual assault (or both) at some point in their life.



#### Health Problems.

In an article published in the *National Geographic* magazine, writer Fran Smith notes: “More than a billion people smoke, and tobacco is implicated in the top five causes of death: heart disease, stroke, respiratory infections, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and lung cancer.”



#### Bereavement.

“An estimated 477,000 murders occurred globally in 2016,” states the *World Health Statistics 2018*, published by WHO. This is in addition to the 180,000 people thought to have been killed in wars and conflicts that year.



#### Social Inequality.

“Poverty, relative inequality, being subject to racism, sexism, displacement and a competitive culture all increase the likelihood of mental suffering,” comments psychologist Jay Watts.



## What the Bible Says

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### Humans bear a heavy responsibility for suffering.

Much of it has been caused by oppressive governments that have made life hard for the very people they claim to serve.

“Man has dominated man to his harm.”  
—ECCLESIASTES 8:9.

### Suffering can be reduced.

Bible principles promote better health and peaceful relationships with others.

“A calm heart gives life to the body, but jealousy is rotteness to the bones.”  
—PROVERBS 14:30.

“Put away from yourselves every kind of malicious bitterness, anger, wrath, screaming, and abusive speech, as well as everything injurious.” —EPHESIANS 4:31.



### Are we to blame for our own suffering?

The Bible says: “Whatever a person is sowing, this he will also reap.” (Galatians 6:7) Some suffering is brought on by our own choices. That is why doctors encourage people to eat nutritious food, get exercise, and avoid harmful practices such as smoking. Still, it would be simplistic to say that *all* suffering is man-made. Many people are innocent victims of accidents, disasters, and other tragedies.

**Why do good people suffer?**

**See question 3.**

# 3

## WHY DO GOOD PEOPLE SUFFER?

### Why It Matters

The fact that good people suffer goes against our sense of justice. It also suggests that there is little point in being good.



### To Think About

Some people believe that humans experience a cycle of death and rebirth. They say that those who committed good deeds are reborn into favorable circumstances, whereas those who committed bad deeds are reborn into a life of hardship. According to that belief, even a good person can suffer if he committed bad deeds in a “past life.” However . . .

- What purpose would such suffering serve, since the person supposedly reborn does not even recall his past life?
- Why do we work hard to stay healthy and avoid accidents if our well-being is largely determined by what we did in a past life?



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*Why Does God Allow  
Suffering?* on [jw.org](http://jw.org).

## What the Bible Says

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### Suffering is not punishment from God.

**On the contrary, much of it is random—often, a matter of someone being in the wrong place at the wrong time.**

“The swift do not always win the race, nor do the mighty win the battle, nor do the wise always have the food, nor do the intelligent always have the riches, nor do those with knowledge always have success, because time and unexpected events overtake them all.”

—**ECCLESIASTES 9:11.**

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### Our sinful nature contributes to suffering.

**People often use the word “sin” to refer to a bad act that someone commits. However, the Bible also uses it to describe a condition that all humans—good and bad—have inherited.**

“I was born guilty of error, and sinful from the moment my mother conceived me.”

—**PSALM 51:5, Footnote.**

### Sin has had a devastating effect on humans.

**It has not only damaged our relationship with our Creator but also put us out of harmony with the rest of God’s creation. That has resulted in enormous suffering, both to individuals and to the human race as a whole.**

“When I wish to do what is right, what is bad is present with me.”—**ROMANS 7:21.**

“All creation keeps on groaning together and being in pain together.”—**ROMANS 8:22.**

### Why do good people suffer?

Much of our suffering results from our sinful nature, which both good and bad people have inherited. That sinful nature contributes to physical and mental disorders as well as traits that cause people to harm one another.

**Is this what God intended?  
Were we meant to suffer?**

**See question 4.**

# 4

## WERE WE MEANT TO SUFFER?



### Why It Matters

The answer to this question affects our outlook on life.



### To Think About

Does it make sense that the God who created such beauty in the world would consign us to a life of suffering?

Secular-minded people view suffering as a reason to question God's motives—or even his existence. They believe that suffering shows that either (1) God is powerless to stop it, (2) God does not care to stop it, or (3) God does not exist.

Are those really the only options?

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the Bible Is True?*  
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## What the Bible Says

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### God did not create us to suffer.

He wants us to enjoy life.

“There is nothing better for [people] than to rejoice and to do good during their life, also that everyone should eat and drink and find enjoyment for all his hard work. It is the gift of God.”—**ECCLESIASTES 3:12, 13.**

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### God gave the first two humans a perfect start.

He did not mean for them—or their descendants—to suffer.

“God said to them: ‘Be fruitful and become many, fill the earth and subdue it.’”—**GENESIS 1:28.**

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### The first two humans chose independence from God.

As a result, they brought much suffering on themselves and all their descendants.

“Through one man sin entered into the world and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because they had all sinned.”—**ROMANS 5:12.\***

\* In the Bible, the word “sin” refers not only to wrong acts but also to a *condition* that all humans have inherited.

### God did not create us to live independent of his guidance.

We were no more created to rule ourselves than to live under water.

“It does not belong to man who is walking even to direct his step.”—**JEREMIAH 10:23.**

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### God does not want us to suffer.

He wants us to live in a way that, to the extent possible, we avoid problems.

“If only you would pay attention to my commandments! Then your peace would become just like a river.”—**ISAIAH 48:18.**

## Were we meant to suffer?

No. Suffering was never part of God’s purpose for humans. Suffering began when the first two humans chose a course of independence. But this does not mean that the human race is doomed to a cycle of endless suffering.

**Will our suffering ever end?**

**See question 5.**

# 5

## WILL SUFFERING EVER END?

### Why It Matters

If there is reason to believe that suffering will end, such a hope could improve our view of life and even our view of God.



### To Think About

Many people would like to eliminate suffering, but they are limited in their ability to do much about it. Note the following:

#### Despite advances in medicine . . .

- Heart disease remains the largest cause of death.
- Cancer kills millions each year.
- “The world continues to be confronted by longstanding, emerging, and reemerging infectious disease threats,” writes Dr. David Bloom in the journal *Frontiers in Immunology*.

#### Despite material prosperity in some lands . . .

- Each year, millions of children die, and those living in impoverished areas are the most likely to be affected.
- Billions of people live without access to adequate sanitation.
- Hundreds of millions have no access to safe water.

#### Despite increased awareness of human rights . . .

- Human trafficking continues in many lands, and countries that have not prosecuted any offenders are “blind to the problem, or they are ill-equipped to deal with it,” says a United Nations report.

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Watch the video *What Is God's Kingdom?* available on [jw.org](http://jw.org).





## What the Bible Says

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### God cares about us.

**He is not indifferent to our pain and sorrow.**

“[God] has not despised nor loathed the suffering of the oppressed one; he has not hidden his face from him. When he cried to him for help, he heard.”  
—**PSALM 22:24.**

“Throw all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”—**1 PETER 5:7.**

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### Suffering will not continue indefinitely.

**The Bible promises that God’s purpose for us will be realized.**

“God . . . will wipe out every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither will mourning nor outcry nor pain be anymore.”—**REVELATION 21:3, 4.**

### God will address the causes of human suffering.

**He will do this by means of his Kingdom, which the Bible describes as a real government.**

“The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed. And this kingdom will not be passed on to any other people. . . . It alone will stand forever.”—**DANIEL 2:44.**

### Will Suffering Ever End?

Yes, but not by human efforts. Man’s governments can only address the symptoms of our suffering, but God can address the causes. By means of his Kingdom, he will do so.





## HELP IS AVAILABLE

### Have you lost a loved one in death?

- Go to [jw.org](http://jw.org), and search “help for those who grieve.”

### Do you face economic hardship?

- Go to [jw.org](http://jw.org), and search “manage your money wisely.”

### Have you ever asked, ‘What is the point of living?’

- Go to [jw.org](http://jw.org), and search “why go on?” and “is life worth living?”


### Are you dealing with a chronic illness?


- Go to [jw.org](http://jw.org), and search “how families cope with chronic illness.”

The Bible contains the best guidance for sound living for each member of the family. Its principles can improve a person’s thinking ability and judgment.—**PROVERBS 1:1-4.**

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