

Why Does Yahweh Allow the Righteous to Suffer?

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This message is given in memory of many dear brothers and sisters who have died in the Faith. My prayer is that it will help those hurt by the loss of loved ones to cope, remain faithful to Yahweh, and successfully move on with their lives, in spite of the trials they have faced and will face in the days ahead.

Some very dear friends of ours recently lost their battles with cancer. Now another very dear sister in the faith has cancer. Nearly two years ago my mother-in-law, who had fought cancer for over twenty years, lost her battle. Nearly a year before that, my sister lost her battle. Other friends have succumbed, not only to cancer, but also to heart attacks and even fatal car accidents. Many of you have heard the news of a tragic car accident in which David Miller, of Michigan, was killed. Although June and I didn't really know David all that well, we do know his parents, who are very dedicated to the service of Yahweh. We know that tragedy has also broken the hearts of the Brown family here recently. I believe I should also mention that we've had several close friends who have recently lost their jobs. One common thread connecting each of these individuals is ... their faith in a Creator. The question that many of us ask ourselves at times like these is, "WHY?" The answer to that question is not easy to answer, but unless that answer is forthcoming, the faith of many can be shattered. Does the Bible provide any answers?

The answer, of course, is "Yes." The only problem is, many people, instead of turning to the Bible to find answers to help them resolve their questions, spiritually shake their fists at Yahweh and demand that He reveal to them, right then and there, why He couldn't have prevented the calamity in the first place. I am reminded of a woman who was devastated when her husband decided to leave her. All of a sudden, she was reminded of all the world suffering, including her own, and she asked, "How could a loving Creator allow all this suffering to happen? I *refuse* to believe in a Creator who allows the murder of innocent women and children!"

As much as I tried to console her and convince her of why the world is the way it is, I did not succeed, and to the best of my knowledge she abandoned her faith at that point in her life.

I believe we can find the answers to life's puzzles in the Bible, but sometimes, if we look in the wrong places, we can come up with the *wrong answers*. Let's open our Bibles to a few passages so I can show you what I mean. Let's turn to the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 10:27

"The reverence of Yahweh prolongeth days: but the years of the wicked shall be shortened."

I don't know about *you*, but when I read this verse, I come away with the impression that those who worship Yahweh are supposed to outlive those who do *not* worship Yahweh!

Let's turn to Exodus 20:12. This passage finds us in the middle of the ten commandments. In fact, this is the fifth commandment:

Exodus 20:12

"Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which Yahweh thy Almighty giveth thee."

According to what we have just read, if we honor our parents, we will live long lives. Conversely, however, if we do **not** honor our parents, we will **not** live long lives. That is the understanding I glean from reading this verse. The Apostle Paul makes reference to this very commandment in the book of Ephesians, chapter 6.

Ephesians 6:1-3

“Children, obey your parents, for this is right. Honour thy father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.”

When I read this verse, I can definitely see how a person could come away with the understanding that if we honor our parents, we will live long lives, whereas if we don't, our lives will be cut short. Certainly, then, anyone who dies before reaching old age *must* have dishonored their parents, and everyone who only passes away after having lived a long life must have **honored** their parents. Perhaps we should use “longevity of years” to determine whether or not a person honored his or her parents??!! As we are about to see, such is **not** the case.

One day Yeshua and his disciples happened to pass by a man who had been blind since birth. Clearly, since he was blind, either he or his parents must have committed a **grievous sin**, and this blind man was bearing the consequences of that sin. Yeshua's disciples were certain that either the blind man or his parents **must** have done something terribly bad for him to merit this punishment from Yahweh, and they were curious as to who committed the sin. They reasoned that Yeshua, of all people, would know the answer, so they inquired of Him, “Master, who sinned ... this man or his parents that he was born blind?”

The answer they were given was not what they expected. Yeshua replied, **“Neither this man nor his parents sinned. He was born blind so that Yahweh's works might be revealed in him.”**

The record of this event can be found in the ninth chapter of John. A man named Philip Yancey, in his book *Where is God When it Hurts?*, addressed the mentality of many people who lived in Yeshua's day, including Yeshua's disciples, as it relates to the incident involving this blind man. Here's what he wrote, only I will henceforth render the proper names, both for Yeshua and for Yahweh:

“In John 9, Yeshua refutes the traditional explanation of suffering. His followers point to a man born blind. Clucking with pity, they ask, ‘Who sinned, this man or his parents?’ In other words, why did he deserve blindness? Yeshua answers bluntly, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of Yahweh might be displayed in his life.

“The disciples wanted to look backward, to find out ‘Why?’ Yeshua redirected their attention. Consistently, He points forward, answering a different question: ‘To what end?’ And that, I believe, offers a neat summary of the Bible's approach to the problem of pain. To backward-looking questions of cause, to the ‘Why’ questions, it gives no definitive answer. But it does hold out hope for the future, that even suffering can be transformed or ‘redeemed.’ A human tragedy, like blindness, can be used to display Yahweh's work.

“Sometimes, as with the man born blind, the work of Yahweh is manifest through dramatic miracle. Sometimes it is not. But in every case, suffering offers an opportunity for us to display Yahweh’s work.”

There is no question but what the prevailing mentality during Yeshua’s time here on earth was that all forms of suffering, all the way from poverty to premature death, reflected the consequences of living a life that must have been displeasing to Yahweh. After all, we are plainly told in Galatians 6:7 that a man “reaps what he sows.”

Perhaps Lazarus reaped what *he* sowed, too. Lazarus was a brother to Mary and Martha, and we read in John chapter 11 that he became very seriously ill. In fact, he *died* from his illness. There is nothing in the account of Lazarus to indicate that he had committed a grievous sin that caused his illness, yet he passed away.

Let’s read a portion of the account of Lazarus to see if it can help us to reconcile what the Bible teaches us about suffering as a consequence of sinning *versus* suffering in spite of living a righteous life. In the first part of John chapter 11, Mary and Martha send Yeshua a message that their brother Lazarus is ill. In fact, as the message is worded, “*He whom you love is ill.*” Surely, in light of how Yeshua is portrayed as having loved Lazarus, one cannot conclude that Lazarus must have sinned some grievous sins to have become so ill. Anyway, let’s begin reading with verse 1:

John 11:1-6

“Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Master with perfume and wiped His feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Yeshua. ‘Master, he whom You love is ill.’ But when Yeshua heard it, He said, ‘This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for Yahweh’s glory, so that the Son of Yahweh may be glorified through it.’ Accordingly, though Yeshua loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, He stayed two days longer in the place where He was.”

Okay, let’s skip on down to verse 17 to see what happens when Yeshua finally reaches Bethany:

“When Yeshua arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Yeshua was coming, she went and met Him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Yeshua, “Master, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that Yahweh will give you whatever you ask of Him.” Yeshua said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Yeshua said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in Me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to Him, “Yes, Master, I believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of Yahweh, the One coming into the world.”

“When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, ‘The Teacher is here and is calling for you.’ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to Him. Now Yeshua had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met Him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Yeshua was and saw Him, she knelt at His feet and said to Him, ‘Master, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.’ When Yeshua saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to Him, ‘Master, come and see.’ Yeshua began to weep. So the Jews said, ‘See how He loved him!’” But some of them said, ‘Could not He Who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’

“Then Yeshua, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Yeshua said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to Him, “Master, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.’ Yeshua said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of Yahweh?’ So they took away the stone. And Yeshua looked upward and said, ‘Father, I thank You for having heard Me. I knew that You always hear Me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that You sent Me.’” When He had said this, He cried with a loud voice, ‘LAZARUS, COME OUT!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Yeshua said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go!’”

You know, Yeshua had plenty of opportunities to tell Mary and Martha the reason why their brother had become ill to the point of death ... He could have explained the lesson that when we sin, our sin will eventually catch up with us, and then we will pay one way or another, and in Lazarus’ case, he paid with his life. He “reaped what he sowed”! Certainly, if Yeshua had issued such an explanation and warning, many would have nodded in agreement. However, if you examine the account we just read, you will find no such warning and no such explanation. Instead, we find Yeshua basically getting caught up in the moment with those who were mourning Lazarus’ death, as He Himself could not hold back the tears.

Finally, the great miracle occurred. Lazarus was raised from the dead! Certainly, if Lazarus’ death had been caused by some grievous sin, Yeshua had a perfect opportunity to pull Lazarus aside and privately explain to him that if he didn’t shape up, then Yeshua wouldn’t be around to bring him back to life next time this happened. Instead, there is no such record. The silence regarding any such warning can be properly construed as to mean that no such warning was given. In other words, Lazarus had done *nothing* to deserve becoming ill, suffering to the point of death, yet this is what happened to him. I believe it is safe to say that Lazarus was not the only person who, for no apparent reason, became ill and died during that period of history, *and the same holds true today*.

Elsewhere in the Bible Yeshua plainly explains that just because something bad happens to someone, this doesn’t mean he “had it coming” or that he deserved what happened. For example, let’s take a look at Luke chapter 13:

Luke 13:1-5

“At that time there were some present who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, ‘Do you think that because those Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? NO, I TELL YOU!! But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them -- do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?! NO, I TELL YOU!! But ... unless you repent, you will all perish ... just as they did!’”

How many of us have wept and continue to weep at the very thought of the tragedy that occurred back on September 11th? Thousands of people were killed in an act of terrorism that has become known as the greatest tragedy to ever take place on American soil. If Yeshua were here today speaking, I believe He would have much the same thing to say about *that* tragedy as He said about the 18 who died when the tower of Siloam fell. He might say, “Those thousands who perished in the attack of September 11th -- do you think they were worse sinners than anyone else in New York?! NO, I TELL YOU!! But unless you repent, you will ALL PERISH ... just as they did.”

Yeshua doesn't tell us anything more about the tower of Siloam tragedy. Perhaps it simply fell because it was poorly constructed. Regardless of how it fell, Yeshua makes it clear that the victims had done nothing unusual to deserve their fates.

A man named Harold Kushner wrote a best-selling book entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Although I disagree with several of Kushner's conclusions, he still makes some very good points. In his book he mentions a novel that he had read entitled *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. In that novel, a rope bridge over a chasm in Peru suddenly breaks and the five people who are crossing the bridge fall to their deaths. A young Catholic priest happens to be watching, and is troubled by the event. Was it sheer accident or was it somehow Yahweh's will that those five people should die that way? He investigates their life stories, and comes to the enigmatic conclusion that all five had recently resolved a problematic situation in their lives and were now about to enter a new phase. Perhaps it was an appropriate time for each of them to die, thinks the priest.

Kushner, in relating this story in his book, goes on to make an excellent case for how the Catholic priest's investigation was built on a faulty premise, and he arrived at a *faulty conclusion* as a result. Here's what Kushner wrote,

“I confess that I find the priest's answer ultimately unsatisfying. For those five pedestrians on a rope bridge, let us substitute two hundred and fifty passengers on an airplane that crashes. It strains the imagination to claim that every single one of them had just passed a point of resolution in his life. The human-interest stories in the newspapers after a plane crash seem to indicate the opposite -- that many of the victims were in the middle of important work, that many left young families and unfulfilled plans. In a novel, where the author's imagination can control the facts, sudden tragedies can happen to people when the plot calls for it. But experience has taught me that real life is *not* all that neat.”

Author Philip Yancey, in his book *Where is God When it Hurts?*, quotes a report from *Time* magazine about a tragedy on a school bus. Here's the story:

“Flanked by weeping relatives, a Spanish-American couple sat in the shimmering heat of Sutter Cemetery, holding hands and staring dully at the bronze coffin that held the remains of their 17 year-old son Bobby. Six of Bobby’s classmates placed their white carnation boutonnieres on the coffin. Bobby’s young niece threw herself on the coffin and sobbed brokenly. Several in the large crowd also cried. Bobby’s father silently shook his head a couple of times as though he had been struck, then moved woodenly with his wife toward the green limousine at the head of the long cortege.

“In the same cemetery, Mrs. Harry Rosebrough watched dry-eyed as her son was buried. He had died on his 16th birthday. Pamela Engstrom, wearing a blue-and-white gingham dress -- a gift from her mother-- had died the day after her 18th birthday. The victims also included twins Carlene and Sharlene Engle, 18, who loved to sing songs composed by their mother, such as “Wake and Smile in the Sunshine” and “Take Pride in America.” After the funeral, Sharlene’s dusty Ford station wagon was parked across the street from her home. A FOR SALE sign was in the window.

“So it was as 15,000 citizens mourned their dead. A bus bearing 53 members of the local high school choir and chaperone Christina Estabrook had ripped through 72 feet of guardrail as it turned onto an exit ramp. The bus plunged 21½ feet to the ground. It landed on its top, wheels still spinning and roof crushed down to the seats.

“Blood dripped on scattered sheets of choir music. According to survivor Perry Martin, 18, the choir’s chief tenor, ‘Everything was a tangle of weeping and moaning and of scattered arms and legs.’ The final toll: 29 dead and 25 injured.

The boys and girls had gone through junior high school together. They had all performed together in *Fiddler on the Roof* earlier this year. Only three weeks from graduation, many of them had gone to their prom on the previous Saturday. Now their friends dazedly shuffled through Yuba City High School, pausing disconsolately from time to time at the principal’s window to read the daily notice that listed the condition of the injured. Said Karen Hess, 18, president of the student body: “This is the first time most of us have ever had close friends die.”

In relating this story from *Time* magazine, author Philip Yancey goes on to ask, “Why Yuba City? Why not Salina, Kansas? Or Clarkston, Georgia? Or Ridgewood, New Jersey?”

He also asks, “Why did those 29 kids deserve a grisly mass highway death? Was the Almighty trying to tell them something? Or was He sending a warning to their parents and friends? If you were a teenager in Yuba City High School, you couldn’t avoid those questions. And if you survived the bus accident as a passenger, the rest of your life you would wonder why you had lived when so many friends died.”

“Does Yahweh reach down, slightly twist the wheels of school buses, and watch them careen through guardrails? Does He draw a red pencil line though a map of Indiana to plot the exact path of a tornado? *There, hit that house, kill that six-year-old, but skip over this next house.* Does Yahweh program the earth like a video game, constantly experimenting with tidal waves, seismic temblors, and hurricanes? Is that how He rewards and punishes us, His helpless victims?”

Okay, still quoting from Yancey's book: He writes:

“Posing these questions so brazenly may sound sacrilegious. But they've haunted me, and in various forms have been tossed at me like spears by agnostic friends. Wondering about Yahweh is an almost universal part of the experience of suffering. I have a book on my shelf, *Theories of Illness*, that surveys 139 tribal groups from around the world; all but four of them perceive illness as a sign of the Almighty's disapproval.”

Yancey goes on to contrast the bus accident tragedy with another man's death. Here's what he writes:

“I once watched a television interview with a famous Hollywood actress whose lover had drowned in a harbor near Los Angeles. The police investigation revealed he had rolled off a yacht in a drunken stupor. The actress looked at the camera, her beautiful features contorted by grief, and asked, bizarrely, ‘How could a loving God let this happen?’ That actress probably had not thought about the Almighty for months, or years. But suddenly, faced with suffering, she lashed out in anger against Him. For her and for nearly everyone, doubt follows pain quickly and surely, like a reflex action.”

The author then summed up a truth that all of us must accept sooner or later: Faith in Yahweh offers no insurance against tragedy.

Yeshua may as well have said the very same thing in the passage we read from Luke 13. Those people who died when the tower of Siloam fell weren't “marked by Yahweh.” They hadn't reached any period of resolution in their lives that defined the moment that they were all now ready to die together. The blind man Yeshua healed -- neither he nor his parents had done anything to merit his being blind -- yet he was blind. Lazarus had done nothing to merit an illness so severe that it would take his life -- yet this is what happened to him. The only thing that sets him apart from most everyone else is the fact that Yeshua brought him back to life!

There are many other examples of righteous people in the Bible who suffered -- yet none of them is recorded as shaking their fists at Yahweh -- demanding what they had done to deserve their fate.

Consider the case of Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth was the son of Jonathan, who in turn was the son of King Saul. We can read about Mephibosheth in the book of Second Samuel, chapter four.

II Samuel 4:4

And Jonathan, Saul's son, had a son that was lame of his feet. He was five years old when the tidings came of Saul and Jonathan out of Jezreel, and his nurse took him up, and fled; and it came to pass, as she made haste to flee, that he fell, and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth.

All because of a freak accident, Mephibosheth became crippled for life. We also read about Mephibosheth in II Samuel chapter 9, where he meets up with King David:

II Samuel 9:6-7

Now when Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, was come unto David, he fell on his face, and did reverence. And David said, Mephibosheth. And he answered, “Behold thy servant!”

And David said unto him, “Fear not: for I will surely show thee kindness for Jonathan thy father’s sake, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father; and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually!”

Certainly Mephibosheth suffered as a result of his being crippled, yet we do not read of his blaming Yahweh or questioning, “Why me?” He accepted his fate and moved on with his life. Yeshua was not there to heal his condition, nor was there anyone else who was either capable or willing to heal him.

We could certainly cite other examples from Scripture of people who suffered, yet did not blame Yahweh. The most memorable example, of course, comes from the story of Job. Philip Yancey, in his book, provides what I feel is an excellent summary of the lesson we all need to learn from the book of Job. Here’s what he writes:

“As for Job, he had only ONE THING to worry about: his response to suffering. Yahweh never explained the origin of Job’s suffering, but rather moved the focus to the future. Once the tragedy has happened -- *now what* will you do? Casting about for blame would get him nowhere; he needed to exercise responsibility in his response, the one area he, and not Yahweh, had control over. This biblical pattern is so consistent that I must conclude the important issue facing believers who suffer is not ‘Is Yahweh responsible?’, but ‘How should I react now that this terrible thing has happened?’”

I have seen people suffer, and I have seen how various ones have reacted to suffering. We must all suffer before we breathe our last breath in this life, so we must all deal with suffering the best way we can. I hope that when my time comes, I will follow the examples of those people who, in spite of their suffering, never flinched when it came to expressing their trust in the Almighty. I hope that in my time of weakness, I can be **strong** in my Faith.

I am reminded of a young man whose wife was diagnosed as having stage four cancer. There was virtually no hope for her, yet they fought all the way, and they fought together. As she went through the chemotherapy treatments, the day came when her hair began to come out in clumps, and she had to ask her husband to shave her head. Not only did he shave *her* head, but he shaved his own as well, as a show of support. As he shaved her head, he thought back to the day they were married, the day when he took her as his wife for ***better or for worse***. He thought to himself that when he took that vow, the expression ***for worse*** meant getting her some lozenges whenever she had a sore throat or something. He never would have imagined the day would come when he would shave his wife’s head as a result of her having to undergo chemotherapy treatments for cancer.

These are real things that happen to real people, it doesn’t matter whether you are a believer or not. What does matter is how we ***respond*** to the situation. One minister said, “Every time a non-believer gets cancer, Yahweh allows a believer to get cancer as well, so the world can see the difference.” Of course, he was speaking tongue-in-cheek, but the message is what is most important. If we truly trust in Yahweh, nothing will reveal the degree of that trust more than how we respond to suffering.

One thing I personally try to do is this: Whenever something bad happens, I refuse to blame it on Yahweh. After all, Yahweh warned us of all the evil that would be unleashed on this planet if mankind turned from serving Him. If you don't believe me, then just read Deuteronomy chapter 28. I believe all the evil and suffering we experience represents the consequences of mankind's rebellion against Yahweh. It is not Yahweh inflicting pain upon His children, as some people like to think. Anyway, whenever something bad happens, I refuse to blame it on Yahweh. I *try* deal with it the best I can and hope that I emerge a better person as a result. However, whenever something *good* happens, I think that is a perfect opportunity for us to give the praise to Yahweh.

No matter what ... whenever something bad happens, we should turn to Yahweh for help. I like the advice that James gives us:

James 5:13-18

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the assembly and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Master. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Master will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

The Greek word for "prayer" is #1162 in *Strong's*. It is pronounced "deh'ay-sis", and it simply means a "petition." The Hebrew word for "prayer" is #8605 in *Strong's*, and is pronounced "Tephillah." It means an "intercession" or "supplication." One of the best definitions of the word "pray" I have ever heard came from a man named Ambrose Bierce. Over a hundred years ago, here is how he defined the word "pray":

"To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled on behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy."

When we pray, then, we are *making a petition* to Yahweh. We are petitioning Him to intervene, for example, when we pray for someone to be healed. Will Yahweh intervene when someone is suffering in order to bring an end to the suffering? Yes, there are many examples of this very thing in Scripture. But there are other times when Yahweh did not intervene, and there are times when however fervently we pray, the desired result does not come.

I think it helps sometimes for us to put suffering in the proper perspective. I think Philip Yancey accomplished this in his book. Notice what Mr. Yancey wrote with regard to how suffering ties in with the order of things in this world as designed by Yahweh:

"Much of the suffering on our planet has come about because of two principles that Yahweh built into creation: A physical world that runs according to consistent natural laws, *and* human freedom. By committing Himself to those two principles, both good principles in themselves, Yahweh allowed for the possibility of their abuse. For example, water proves useful to us and all creation because of its 'softness,' its liquid state, and its specific gravity. Yet those very properties open up its rather disagreeable capacity to drown us -- or the even more alarming possibility that we might drown someone else.

“Take another example, from wood. It bears the fruit of trees, supports leaves to provide shade, and shelters birds and squirrels. Even when taken from the tree, wood is valuable. We use it as fuel to warm ourselves, and as construction material to build houses and furniture. The essential properties of wood -- hardness, unpliability, flammability -- make possible these useful functions.

“But as soon as you plant a tree with those properties in a world peopled by free human beings, you introduce the possibility of abuse. A free man may pick up a chunk of wood and take advantage of its firmness by bashing the head of another man. Yahweh *could*, I suppose, reach down each time and transform the properties of wood into those of a sponge, so that the club would bounce off lightly. But that is not what He is about in the world. He has set into motion fixed laws that can be perverted to evil by our misguided freedom. *Is* Yahweh somehow responsible for the suffering of this world? In this indirect way, yes. But giving a child a pair of ice skates, knowing that he may fall, is a very different matter from knocking him down on the ice!”

When we put things in their proper perspective, I believe we will, as Philip Yancey has suggested, turn our focus *away* from looking backwards and asking *Why?* -- and instead we will turn our faces to the future and do all we can to make the best of whatever situation we find ourselves in. This is certainly how the Apostle Paul reacted to adversity. In the book of Philippians, he makes it clear that he has learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. I would like to quote the New International Version’s rendering of Philippians 4, verse 12:

Philippians 4:12

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him Who gives me strength!”

If we can somehow program ourselves to adopt this mentality ... this perspective on life, I believe we will truly reflect the servant of Yahweh in this world.

Philip Yancey, in his book, quotes a man named John Hick, who wrote a book entitled *Philosophy of Religion*. Hick’s book offers a very unique perspective on what this world would be like if Yahweh were to completely remove all manner of suffering. I would like to read a portion of his perspective to you, and hopefully you will realize that suffering is just part of what we *have to experience* until we await Yahweh’s Kingdom! Here’s what Mr. Hick wrote:

“Suppose, contrary to fact, that this world were a paradise from which all possibility of pain and suffering were excluded. The consequences would be very far-reaching. For example, no one could ever injure anyone else: the murderer’s knife would turn to paper or his bullets to thin air; the bank safe, robbed of a million dollars, would miraculously become filled with another million dollars (without this device, on however large a scale, proving inflationary); fraud, deceit, conspiracy, and treason would somehow always leave the fabric of society undamaged. Again, no one would ever be injured by accident: the mountain climber, steeple-jack, or playing child falling from a height would float unharmed to the ground; the reckless driver would never meet with disaster. There would be

no need to work; there would be no call to be concerned for others in time of need or danger, for in such a world there could be no real needs or dangers.

“To make possible this continual series of individual adjustments, nature would have to work ‘special providences’ instead of running according to general laws which men must learn to respect on penalty of pain and death. The laws of nature would have to be extremely flexible: sometimes an object would be hard and solid, sometimes soft....

“One can at least begin to imagine such a world. It is evident that our present ethical concepts would have no meaning in it. If, for example, the notion of harming someone is an essential element in the concept of wrong action, in our hedonistic paradise, there could be no wrong actions—nor any right actions in distinction from wrong. Courage and fortitude would have no point in an environment in which there is, by definition, no danger or difficulty. Generosity, kindness, the *agape* aspect of love, prudence, unselfishness, and all other ethical notions which presuppose life in a stable environment, could not even be formed. Consequently, such a world, however well it might promote pleasure, would be very ill adapted for the development of the moral qualities of human personality. In relation to this purpose it would be the worst of all possible worlds.

“It would seem, then, that an environment intended to make possible the growth in free beings of the finest characteristics of personal life, must have a good deal in common with our present world. It must operate according to general and dependable laws; and it must involve real dangers, difficulties, problems, obstacles, and possibilities of pain, failure, sorrow, frustration, and defeat. If it did not contain the particular trials and peril which—subtracting man’s own very considerable contribution—our world contains, it would have to contain others instead.

“To realize this is ... to understand that this world, with all its ‘heartaches and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to,’ an environment so manifestly not designed for the maximization of human pleasure and the minimization of human pain, may be rather well adapted to the quite different purpose of ‘soul-making.’”

In many ways, it would seem so much easier if Yahweh could step in and come to our rescue whenever we call upon Him. I know I’ve thought of how wonderful it would be if Yahweh would simply answer every prayer of those who faithfully keep His commandments and call upon His name. But then it would become all too obvious to the rest of the world as to what type of faith we should have, and yes, many would turn to Yahweh ... but not out of the fervent desire to serve and worship Him in spirit and in truth. Instead, it would be because of the miracles He performed for a certain group of people. Their motives would not be pure, but selfish ... so maybe that wouldn’t be such a good thing after all.

In the meantime, we are left to live out our lives here on this earth. All of us are destined to suffer, if we haven’t done so already. The question is not so much why does it have to happen as it is *what are we going to do about it?* How do we react?

As we ponder our commitment to remain faithful to Yahweh in the face of our trials, tribulations, and sufferings, I think we can learn a lesson from the book of Malachi. In Malachi chapter three, some of the faithful were *losing faith*. They were barely making ends meet, while those outside the faith were literally living “high on the hog,” to coin a phrase. That doesn’t seem fair, does it? You live a life of

faithful obedience to Yahweh, and you *should* be blessed accordingly, right? Well, let's read Malachi 3:13:

Malachi 3:13 - 4:4

You have spoken harsh words against me, says Yahweh! Yet you say, "How have we spoken against You?" You have said, "It is vain to serve the Almighty. What do we profit by keeping His command or by going about as mourners before Yahweh of hosts. Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put the Almighty to the test, they escape!"

THEN those who revered Yahweh spoke with one another. Yahweh took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before Him of those who revered Yahweh and thought on His name. THEY SHALL BE MINE!, says Yahweh of hosts, My special possession on the day when I ACT! And I will SPARE them as parents spare their children who serve them. Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves the Almighty and one who does not serve Him!

For BEHOLD! The day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says Yahweh of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. BUT ... for you who revere My name ... the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in his wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall!! And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says Yahweh of hosts. Remember the law of My servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of Yahweh comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse!"

I hope you get the point of Yahweh's message here: In the here and now, it may seem like there is no "real merit" in serving Yahweh. Are we *really* any better off than those who don't give a hoot? Well, I know June and I certainly aren't, materially speaking. So what's the point in serving Him if there are no material rewards for doing so? Well, as so eloquently expressed in the book of Malachi, a day of reckoning is coming. It hasn't come yet, but it *will* come. Until that time, we are subject to the same universal laws as everyone else. Yahweh may not block us from infections or disease, nor is He going to necessarily save our homes from burning down if they catch fire. Yet, as we know from James, the prayer of a righteous man availeth much. I think if we lead humble lives, punctuated by faithful service to Yahweh, including prayer, we will if nothing else, come out with the attitude that Yahweh expects His children to have, and great will our reward be in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Speaking of rewards, Yeshua clearly established that we should not be seeking earthly rewards. In Matthew chapter 6, Yeshua showed us the difference between the types of rewards we should be seeking.

Matthew 6:1-5

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them: for then you have no reward from your Father in Heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you!

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Yeshua is speaking of a future reward here that we should all focus on. Many, however, focus on the rewards they receive from men in the here and now. We should not be looking for such rewards in the present. Our focus should be on things which are *not* seen, which are eternal.

Another example of the type of perspective we should exhibit in times of adversity can be found in the book of Daniel. I think most of us know the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and how they refused to bow down to the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. The punishment for anyone refusing to bow down was to be thrown into a fiery furnace, and sure enough, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego got caught not bowing down. King Nebuchadnezzar seemed as puzzled as he was angry over their disobedience to his decree, so he explained the procedure to them one more time in Daniel chapter 3. He gave them one more chance. Let's read it: (NIV)

Daniel 3:13-18

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my idols or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute zither, lyre harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what mighty one will be able to rescue you from my hand??

Okay, did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego crumble at the prospect of what was apparently about to befall them? Did their lives suddenly flash before their eyes, causing them to decide that it simply wasn't their time to go yet ... so they might as well bow down to the image? No, they did not. They knew that Yahweh could save them. But what is so interesting about their response is the fact that they *also* recognized that Yahweh might *not* save them. Let's read:

“Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the Mighty One we serve is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if He does NOT, we want you to know, O king, that we will NOT SERVE YOUR IDOLS or worship the image of gold you have set up!”

This story has a happy ending, for we know that indeed Yahweh DID spare Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the flames and heat of the fiery furnace. He temporarily annulled one of the laws of the universe in disabling the natural effects of fire and heat in order to spare the lives of those three men. But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew full well that that Yahweh *might not* have spared them. They knew full well that they *might* be burned alive. Despite recognizing this possibility, they boldly told Nebuchadnezzar that they would NOT comply with his decree.

I would like to think that all of us can come away with the same reasoning. We don't know what is about to befall us. None of us is guaranteed tomorrow. But let's don't let *anything* come between us and our faith in Yahweh. Let's focus on the future, on what Yahweh has in store for those who endure to the end.

I have one more brief passage I want to turn to. In the book of Revelation we are given a glimpse of what awaits the faithful servants of Yahweh. One of the most comforting passages in all of Scripture can be found in Revelation 21:1-4, and I would like to read it before we close our study today.

Revelation 21:1-4

Then I saw a NEW HEAVEN and a NEW EARTH: for the first heaven and the first earth had passed way, and the sea was no more! And I saw the holy city, the NEW JERUSALEM, coming down out of heaven from Yahweh, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a LOUD VOICE from the throne saying:

“Behold! the home of Yahweh is among men! He will dwell with them! They will be His people, and Yahweh will be with them! He will wipe away every tear from their eyes! Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be NO MORE!!”

As we all know, this is a description of a time yet future. We aren't there yet. Since the future is not now, we have to deal with the fact that there *will be* tears in our eyes. Death *will* be a part of our current existence that we have to accept whether we like it or not. We *will* continue to mourn for loved ones who passed away before their time, and we *will* continue to live with pain. We cannot deny the facts that confront us pertaining to our temporary existence here. What we *can* do is approach the hurts of life with the proper perspective as we await a better reward to come from above.

May Yahweh bless all.