

## CHAPTER 13

# BUT WHAT ABOUT . . . ?

## QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK REGARDING THE GOODNESS AND FALL OF CREATION

**A**mong the many views on origins presented in this book and on this website, none are free of theological or scientific challenges. All face certain difficult questions that must be pondered. To help you think through some of the key issues, we've put together a list of questions that Christians often ask about origins. Some of the questions have no simple answers, and we know that the answers we suggest won't satisfy everyone. In some cases, we ourselves aren't completely satisfied with the answers we suggest, but they offer ideas that we've found helpful as we've worked through these issues. They represent the best we can offer at this time.

*15. An old earth would mean millions of years of animal pain and species extinction. Didn't God create the world perfect at the beginning?*

Genesis 1 and 2 don't say much about the conditions on the earth when humans were first created. The Bible does say that God declared them to be "very good." This leads some Christians to picture the earth at the time of Genesis 1 and 2 as a place where everything was as perfect as one can imagine.

It's tempting to say that everything in the world that annoys or hurts us is a result of humanity's fall into sin and the Curse. For instance, we might be frequently annoyed by a puddle in our garage. When snow melts off our car, it drains to a low spot and makes a big puddle that just happens to be exactly between our car and the door into the house, right where we want to walk. Why is this low spot in our garage right in that most annoying of places? Is it because of the Fall? Probably not. Maybe the person who poured the concrete was lazy, but more likely the ground underneath that particular spot was a bit softer, and it sunk a little more than the surrounding dirt after the concrete was poured. It's just part of the natural operation of creation. The puddle itself isn't really a result of the Fall. More likely, the results of the Fall are seen in the fact that the puddle annoys us so much.

Astronomy and geology give us clear evidence that the fundamental laws of nature have remained unchanged since the beginning of creation. Whatever the effects of the Fall, they do not seem to have changed the basic laws of physics.

Quite apart from any evidence in nature, some features in the biblical text itself suggest that God's original creation was not free of pain and difficulty. For example, in Genesis 3 after Adam and Eve sinned God said to Eve, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children" (v.16). The word increase implies that Adam and Eve already understood what pain was.

In Genesis 1 God does not declare the world “perfect”; he declares it “good.” And this good may not necessarily mean completely safe. Also in Genesis 1 God commands human beings to “fill the earth and subdue it.” Biblical scholars tell us that the word subdue is not a “wimpy” word. D. C. Spanner writes,

... the mandate given to man in Genesis 1:28 which reads, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion . . . over every living thing . . .” charged man with “subduing” the earth. The Hebrew word for “subdue” is *kabas*, and in all its other occurrences in Scripture (about twelve in all) it is used as a term indicating strong action in the face of opposition, enmity or evil. Thus, the land of Canaan was “subdued” before Israel, though the Canaanites had chariots of iron (Josh. 17:8; 18:1); weapons of war are “subdued,” so are iniquities (Zech. 9:15; Micah 7:19). The word is never used in a mild sense. It indicates, I believe, that Adam was sent into a world where all was not sweetness and light, for in such a world what would there be to subdue? The animals, it suggests, included some that were wild and ferocious, and Adam was charged to exercise a genuinely civilizing role and to promote harmony among them.

—D. C. Spanner, *Biblical Creation and the Theory of Evolution*, Paternoster, 1987.

To get a sense of how the word *subdue* is used elsewhere in Scripture, we can survey how it is translated in other passages. The Hebrew *kabas* is translated as bondage (Neh. 5:5), force (Esther 7:8), subdue (Gen. 1:28; Micah 7:19; Zech. 9:15), subdued (Num. 32:22, 29; Joshua 18:1; 2 Sam. 8:11; 1 Chron. 22:18), subjection (Jer. 34:11, 16), under (2 Chron. 28:10). (See [www.htmlbible.com/sacrednamebiblecom/kjvstrongs/CONHEB353.htm#S3540](http://www.htmlbible.com/sacrednamebiblecom/kjvstrongs/CONHEB353.htm#S3540).)

Genesis 2 speaks of a garden. Today we think of gardens as open places, but in the Near East at the time of the Old Testament, gardens were usually walled enclosures, places of refuge from the outside world. If the original creation did not include some danger, what need would there be for a walled refuge? While this is different than our human picture of “perfect,” it doesn’t necessarily conflict with the teaching that God created it good. God made a world that is a good and fitting home for humanity and commissioned us as stewards over it. This commission involves challenges subdue as well as providing stewardly care.

To read more on these ideas, see the following:

Munday, John C. “Animal Pain: Beyond the Threshold?” *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*. Keith B. Miller, ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003.

Snoke, David. “Why Were Dangerous Animals Created?” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, Vol. 56, June 2004.

Yancey, Philip. *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1977, 1990, 2002.

#### 16. How could God call creation good if it included destruction, pain, and extinction?

Genesis 1 doesn’t say, but the book of nature provides some insights. Negative things like destruction, pain, and extinction appear differently when considered as part of a bigger picture. For example, the explosion of a star (a supernova) is extremely powerful and destructive. Yet in its death the supernova scatters through the galaxy the carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen atoms necessary for life. Without the supernova these atoms would be trapped in the core of the star and would never be available to build new stars, planets, or living creatures. God uses the destruction of stars to create and distribute the ingredients for life.

Consider the second law of thermodynamics that says that entropy is always increasing. *Entropy* is a technical term used to measure the disorder of a system. The fact that disorder is always increasing sounds like something that might have been caused by the Fall. But a study of physics and chemistry tells us that it is actually an inevitable consequence of all the other laws of nature plus the fact that the universe has many, many atoms in it.

When we look at the larger system, we see that this increase of entropy is built into all sorts of good processes that God has created. Entropy increases when

- ▶ the sun converts nuclear energy into light.
- ▶ ice melts.
- ▶ a flower opens up, and its scent diffuses into the air so that the whole area around the flower is perfumed and bees can be guided to the blossom.
- ▶ winds blow.
- ▶ rain falls.
- ▶ we breathe, and oxygen passes from the lungs into our bloodstream.
- ▶ we see and hear things and store memories in our brains.

So on closer examination the second law of thermodynamics also appears to be part of God's good creation and not a consequence of the Fall.

Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are some of the most violent natural disasters on earth. Yet earthquakes are an inevitable consequence of plate tectonics. (The earth's continental plates slowly move and grind against each other.) In turn, plate tectonics is an inevitable result of the motion of magma under the earth's crust. And the motion of magma is an inevitable result of the fundamental laws of nature. As plates collide, they are pushed into high mountains, and as they separate, they create ocean depths. Over time, this system creates a variety of environments like rolling hills, flat plains, watersheds, and ocean shoals. These environments provide a wide range of habitats for life to fill, promoting a diversity of living things. In addition, the motion of the continental plates brings nutrients up to the surface from deep within the earth, nutrients on which all life depends. Without plate motion to replenish these resources, rain and wind would erode all nutrients into the ocean, and life could not exist on land. Thus, while earthquakes and volcanoes are destructive, they are a natural side effect of the important system of plate tectonics.

Mosquitoes annoy us. But consider how well they are adapted to their ecological niche. They live and adapt just like butterflies and ladybugs. Similarly, weeds that grow through cracks in sidewalks annoy us and make our property look ugly. But consider lichen and moss clinging bravely to bare rock on cliffs where nothing else will grow. By living on that bare rock, they slowly turn barren soil into fertile ground. Whenever we see lichen living on bare rock, we celebrate how robust and hearty life is. Crabgrass sprouting up through narrow cracks in the sidewalk displays that same heartiness and robustness of life, all of it operating by the same laws of nature.

The symbiosis between flowering plants and pollinating insects seems beautiful to us—each provides the other with something it needs. On the other hand, parasites, like wasps that lay their eggs inside other animals so that their larvae eat the host animal, seem nasty to us. But exactly the same laws of nature make both possible. Barring some miraculous interventions into natural processes, if we're going to have symbiosis, we're going to have parasites.

Genetic mutations can be harmful and cause painful disease, but they can also be beneficial and increase the diversity of life forms. Genetic mutations are an inevitable consequence of the laws of physics and chemistry acting on DNA molecules. It looks like a package deal. Simply because the laws of nature are what they are, if we're going to have DNA, we're going to have mutations, including both beneficial and harmful mutations.

The author Philip Yancey has written about pain as a good and necessary system that God created. In his book *Where is God When It Hurts* Yancey describes how pain alerts us to parts of our bodies that are in danger or need attention. Animals and humans who can't feel pain (for example, patients suffering from certain forms of Hansen's disease) injure themselves and are not aware of the injuries, leading to further medical complications. Yancey and others who study pain conclude that pain was created as part of a finely crafted system to help us avoid injury and treat illness. The following is an excerpt from an article Yancy wrote for *Christianity Today*:

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Pain is good. Pain is bad. Pain can be redeemed. . . . My work with leprosy specialist Dr. Paul Brand has convinced me beyond doubt that the pain system is one of the most remarkable engineering feats in the human body. Take away its exquisitely tuned warnings, and you get people who destroy themselves—the problem of leprosy, precisely. Yet pain is also bad, or “fallen.” Working in a hospice, my wife sees daily the ravaging effects of pain that no longer has a useful purpose; to the dying patient, pain warnings may seem like the jeers of a cosmic sadist. Even so, pain can be redeemed. The dying, individual leprosy patients, and people like Joni Eareckson Tada who live with permanent afflictions have demonstrated to me that out of the worst that life offers, great good may come.

What shall we make of all this? We need to be cautious about what things in nature we attribute to the Fall. It’s too easy for us to take our conception of how we would make a good creation and assume that’s how God made it. By studying God’s creation, we might learn that some of our ideas are wrong. A careful study of nature shows us abundant evidence that supernovas, plate tectonics, and the mechanisms of evolution were in place long before humans existed. These things have a destructive side, but they are part of a bigger system that is beautiful, complex, and fruitful. One way to interpret all of this is to see that God has made and used natural systems that are good and productive on the whole, but these systems contain elements that are painful or destructive. And part of what it means for us, as humans, to subdue the earth is to be stewards of these good systems while overcoming the challenges that they present.

#### *17. Does evolution reward selfishness?*

Creatures who out-compete other members of their own species —getting more food or more territory—are more likely to survive and reproduce. While it can look like those creatures are rewarded for being selfish, that is only part of the story.

Plants and lower animals are not motivated by anything resembling what we call selfishness. It is simply the case that those that are better adapted to the environment will tend to produce more offspring. And that seems like a good thing.

Higher animals do exhibit some behaviors that look selfish, such as when a stronger chimp drives a weaker chimp away from a source of food. But there are also situations where evolution seems to reward care and cooperation. In most species, parents who provide better care for their offspring are rewarded with more offspring that can survive to reproduce. Mammals such as wolves, chimps, and dolphins live in social groups, and cooperation in these social groups is vital for the success of the group. Cooperation is rewarded because every member of the group is more likely to survive and reproduce than they would be without the group. In groups, selfish individuals are sometimes punished or excluded. The mechanisms of evolution appear to favor care and cooperation, not just selfishness, especially in higher animals.

#### *18. Did death exist before the Fall?*

Theologians debated the question of animal death long before modern science. Several biblical passages (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:19, 22; 1 Cor. 15; Rom. 5:12-21) discuss human death as a consequence of sin, but the Bible is ambiguous whether these verses also refer to animals. Certain prophetic passages in Isaiah (11:6-7 and 65:25) refer to predatory animals like bears and lions living peacefully with cows and lambs, but these passages point to the new heaven and the new earth; it’s unclear whether they are supposed to refer to this earth. Other Scripture passages such as Job 38: 39-40 and Psalm 104:21 refer to God providing prey for predatory animals. Scripture seems to allow multiple interpretations on the subject of animal death.

The testimony from God’s revelation in nature is clear. Animals lived and died long before humans existed. Nature also testifies that animal death is part of a larger system. If plants and animals didn’t die, new generations

wouldn't have room to grow and thrive. Reproduction would have to stop or the earth would soon be over-full. Without death and new generations, ecosystems could never change. Even the extinction of an entire species can open new ecological niches for new species to fill. It appears that God has created plants and animals to be finite in time, not eternal. Thus, plant and animal death plays a role in a system in which one generation gives way to another; species adapt, and ecosystems can become more complex and filled with a greater variety of creatures over time.

Theologians have also debated the question of human death. Some have suggested that the Fall caused spiritual death only, not physical death. Others argue that the Fall caused both spiritual and physical death. Theologians still discuss whether humans before the Fall were naturally immortal, in which case they would have had bodies that operated very differently from our own, or whether humans before the Fall were naturally mortal, with bodies very much like our own, but potentially immortal through a miraculous act of God's grace. (This is discussed in more detail in chapter 11 of the book.)

*19. Does believing that Adam and Eve were not literal people deny important doctrines about original sin and salvation?*

In chapter 11 of the book, we discussed several theological and scientific issues surrounding human origins, and in chapter 12 we presented five different scenarios for the origin of Adam and Eve. In some of these scenarios Adam and Eve are literal people; in other scenarios Adam and Eve are symbols of one group or multiple groups of early human beings.

These scenarios have theological differences, but they are all in agreement about original sin—that humans are sinful and in a broken relationship with God. None of us can be righteous on our own. Only Christ's death can redeem us. Only the work of the Holy Spirit can sanctify us. Salvation is only by God's grace. All of the scenarios we presented, even those that see Adam and Eve as symbolic people, agree on those points.

The different scenarios do disagree on how humanity fell into sin and the spiritual status of the earliest humans living before the first sin. (This is discussed in detail in chapters 10 and 11 in the book.) While these questions are very important, they are not necessarily central to the gospel. Lutheran theologian George Murphy wrote,

None of the gospels uses the story in Genesis 3 to speak of Christ's significance. In Romans, Paul develops an indictment of the human race as sinful and then presents Christ as God's solution to this problem in Chapters 1-3 before mentioning Adam's sin in Chapter 5.

—“Roads to Paradise and Perdition: Christ, Evolution, and Original Sin,” *Perspectives in Science and Christian Faith*, June 2006.