

## **The Great Controversy and Human Suffering**

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Why do we suffer? The question haunts humanity. The Bible gives six reasons for suffering, even though it's not easy (or sometimes even possible) to figure out which reason is at work in a given situation.

Many Christians shy away from what the Bible teaches about suffering. Sometimes when we're hurting it's easier to accept whatever comforts us, whether or not the Bible supports it. However, Prov. 3:5 says, "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." If we want to learn God's will for us, we need to understand the Bible's six reasons for suffering and make sense of them. Explaining them away—essentially saying the Bible as it reads is wrong—won't lead us to truth.

The Bible also reveals a framework into which we can place suffering and make some sense of it. We might call this framework a "warfare model" or a "battlefield paradigm." I prefer to call it "The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan."

Revelation 12 is a summary of this Great Controversy. In Isaiah 14:12–15 and 25–27 or Ezekiel 28:11–19 we can find out more about what led Satan to revolt and how he seduced a third of the angels. Rev. 12, though, is the best concise explanation of the war as we experience it and of God's strategy for winning the war and ending suffering.

Rev. 12:1–6 and 14–17 deal with Satan's war against God's people. Why is this war happening? Why are we suffering? We find the answer in Rev. 12:7–9 and 12–13. There was war in heaven between Christ and Satan. Satan was hurled to the earth, along with a third of the angels. Now he attacks God's people.

What is God doing about the suffering caused by this warfare? We find a two part answer in Rev. 12:10–11. First, God's solution to human suffering is salvation through Christ (v. 10). Second, though the war continues, God's peo-

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ple are already able to “overcome” Satan by “the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.” This gives them the courage to face death bravely.<sup>1</sup>

How can the Great Controversy model help us? The answer is simply this: There’s a war on!<sup>2</sup>

The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan is a real war. It’s been going on for a long time, though it’s nearly over. When we look at suffering in the light of how we know war works, especially a world war, we can understand why there are six different reasons why we suffer.

Let’s look at the six reasons for suffering we find in the Bible and how the Great Controversy idea, the warfare model, helps us understand them. Some of these reasons for suffering are better supported than others, but all are revealed truth and not meant to contradict each other. The Great Controversy framework helps us fit them together so they make sense.

#### **Reason 1: A Sinful World**

Death entered the world with Adam’s fall (Rom. 5:15–16), and with it the suffering that leads to death and is caused by death. From the fall come briars, blight, drought, and plague (Gen. 3:17–18, though drought and plague may also be sent by God—Deut. 28:22). From the fall come the pain and disease and wearing down and aging which is the human condition in a sinful world. Indeed, “the whole creation has been groaning” under the weight of sin as it awaits the birth of the Kingdom of God (Rom. 8:20–23). This suffering is not usually *from* God, though He warned us of it and *uses* it.

We suffer because we live in a place where suffering happens. We often suffer not because of sinning but because of poor choices, such as walking into a dangerous but avoidable situation (Prov. 22:3). We may also suffer when others’ sins affect us when we are “innocent bystanders.” This may be the case when a drunk driver runs into a school bus and injures children, or when a grandmother is shot unintentionally in a gang war. However, we may be sure that even in situations such as this, God will try to bring as much good as possible from the suffering.

When Jesus healed, he sometimes liberated a prisoner of Satan, who had caused a person’s suffering (Luke 13:11–13, 16). When a disease was due to sin or possibly a punishment for sin, Jesus forgave that sin before healing (Matt.

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<sup>1</sup> What I’m describing here is a chiasm. Rev. 12:1–15:4 is a division of Revelation made up of several interesting chiasms which help us understand the Great Controversy. For more information, see William H. Shea and Ed Christian, “The Chiastic Structure of Rev 12:1–15:4: The Great Controversy Vision,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, to be published Fall 2000. If you do not have access to this journal, I will send you a copy if you contact me at [christia@kutztown.edu](mailto:christia@kutztown.edu) or by mail at Dept. of English, Kutztown Univ., Kutztown, PA 19530.

<sup>2</sup> Among the important references to spiritual warfare in the New Testament, many of them tied to suffering and perseverance, are Eph. 6:10–18; Luke 21:12–19; 1 Pet. 5:8–10; Heb. 10:32–39; 2 Cor. 6:1–10, 10:2–5; Rom. 13:11–14; 1 Tim. 1:18–19, 6:11–12; and 2 Tim. 4:6.

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9:2–7). Jesus even revealed that a man had been born blind so God’s character could be revealed when the blind man was healed (John 9:2–3). Usually, however, there was no mention of such reasons for sickness when Jesus healed. It seems likely that most of the people Jesus healed were suffering because they lived in a world of sin. They were in the wrong place at the wrong time, as we all are. When Jesus healed all the sick in a village or a crowd, He revealed a glimpse of what a world without sin would be like.

Jesus said that when Pilate killed a group of Galileans who were sacrificing to God, or when the tower of Siloam fell, crushing eighteen people, it was not a result of the victims’ sins (Luke 13:4–5). We cannot eliminate the possibility that Satan made the tower fall in order to cause suffering. However, it seems that sometimes towers fall because of loosened stones and gravity.

Gravity is not a result of sin. There was gravity before there was sin, even though so far as we know, it is only in our sinful world that accidents happen and towers fall. Accidents are often due to carelessness, but not always. Satan may benefit from accidents as people respond by doubting God. God may benefit from accidents by making them “work together for good” (Rom. 8:28). Still, one reason for suffering seems to be people being in the wrong place at the wrong time—i.e., in this world while Satan claims to be its prince (John 12:31).

**In a War Zone.** How does the Great Controversy model help us understand this? It tells us we are in a war zone. When there’s a war on, you have to expect that both people and land will suffer, even civilians, even when they are not the enemy’s target (and they sometimes are). Life is more dangerous in a war zone. Crops are ruined, forests destroyed, water poisoned, roads and fields mined. Bombs fall in unexpected places. Bullets ricochet. People starve.

The effects of sin on the world are similar to the effects of war. This entire world is a war zone. In this war zone there are drunk drivers and bad neighborhoods, because war can drive people crazy, so the innocent suffer. In a war zone people are more susceptible to disease. In the midst of war, people die from freak causes seemingly unrelated to the war, and yet if the war had not been going on, perhaps a saving treatment would have been available, a vaccine or antitoxin or antibiotic.

What is worse, our spiritual enemy has used germ warfare. The earth is still poisoned with its effects, and because of the war our resistance is low. This is usually why farmers die of tetanus, or why women die in childbirth. This is usually why babies die of leukemia. When we get cancer, it may be merely because radon gas is percolating into our house from the ground. That’s what happens in a war zone. The Bible tells us the effects of sin, the earth’s groaning, can be removed only through burning the earth with “fervent heat” (2 Pet. 3:10) and recreating life on it (Rev. 21:1).

The Great Controversy model suggests that much suffering happens simply because of the nature of things in a war zone. However, God promises that if we

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love Him and trust Him He will bring good from it, even though we may see no sign of that good in this life.

**Reason 2: A Devouring Devil**

Peter warns that the devil is seeking to devour us, much as he tried earlier to “sift” Peter “like wheat” (I Pet. 5:8–9; Luke 22:31). Thus, much suffering is due to Satan, in his anger and hatred (Rev. 12:12, 17), trying to hurt us—whether it serves his purpose or whether it works against him by thrusting us into the arms of God. His target may be humanity in general, a group such as a church, or an individual (Luke 13:16). Sometimes, as with Job, he makes us suffer in hope that we will curse God (Job 2:5–6).<sup>3</sup> At other times, it seems, he merely revels in causing a suffering which is the opposite of the nature of heaven.

**Under Enemy Fire.** How does the Great Controversy model help us understand this? It tells us we are under enemy fire. In the Great Controversy model of Rev. 12, the dragon is attacking God’s people. God’s people are His soldiers, sent into battle against the forces of evil to rescue the perishing (2 Cor. 10:3–5). Should soldiers be surprised if the enemy shoots at them? No! Facing bullets is part of the job! Of course, unlike most soldiers, if they are wounded or killed in action, God’s troops can look forward to full restoration and great reward (2 Tim. 4:7–8).

Experience shows us that sometimes enemies don’t only shoot at soldiers. Some enemies shoot or bomb civilians, too. That’s what Satan does.

Thus, sometimes suffering is due to the enemy attacking God’s soldiers. More often—as most people are not “soldiers of the cross”—suffering is due to the enemy attacking those who do not belong to God, perhaps in hope that they will blame God, or perhaps merely because the enemy hates them.

Unfortunately, only God’s soldiers have been assured that they will be healed when the great General appears in person to end the battle (Rev. 22:2, 14). In World War II governments rationed tires, gasoline, butter, wool, chocolate, sugar and more. Soldiers got all they wanted, but civilians never got enough. Similarly, God bestows more grace, more blessings on those who serve Him. Other things, such as new cars, were not available to those not active in the war effort. In the Great Controversy model, the assurance of eternal life is reserved entirely for those who are faithful soldiers in the Lord’s army.

**Reason 3: “God Gave Them Up”**

The Bible teaches that suffering is sometimes due to God allowing us to suffer the natural effects of our sin (Rom. 1:18–32; “God gave them up . . .”). In this case God is not punishing us for our sins, but allowing our sins to punish

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<sup>3</sup> In this case God has *allowed* Satan to make Job suffer—for a reason—but Satan asks God’s permission to try to devour Job. Job’s suffering is not God’s idea, nor is the mode of suffering Satan inflicts.

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us—sins we have freely chosen, despite His warning.<sup>4</sup> His desire is that the ill effects of our sins will bring us back to Him. If this is why we are suffering, we can often determine it by asking ourselves if we are doing anything on the list of reasons why “God gave them up.”

**Danger! Landmines!** How does the Great Controversy model help us understand this? It warns us to beware of dangerous places. If the General has a sign posted warning that a road has been mined, is He to blame if I choose to walk down that road and get blown up? If the General tells you how to avoid an enemy machine gun nest, but you go to have a look, is it His fault if you are shot? If the General says the enemy has poisoned the river, but we drink from it, should we blame Him when we get sick?

In World War I many thousands of soldiers contracted syphilis from visiting prostitutes, even though they were warned to avoid them. Were their commanders to blame when the disease ruined their lives? Should the officers have imprisoned or shot their soldiers for disobeying?

The Great Controversy model shows us that God has posted warnings: “Enter at your own risk.” He has given us a code of military conduct, a training manual, a handbook of strategy, a map of mined areas and safe roads and bridges. Have we read it?

He has also, however, allowed both His troops and civilians to decide for themselves whether or not to heed those warnings. He has allowed them to suffer if they choose to disobey, in hope that they will learn their lesson and come back to Him.

**Reason 4: The Wrath of God.**

The Bible also clearly teaches that sometimes God’s wrath is poured out on the enemies of His people or on His people themselves if they turn away from Him and commit “adultery” with false gods by serving them.<sup>5</sup> At times God seems to do this Himself.<sup>6</sup> At other times He sends or allows someone else to pour out His wrath for Him—sometimes even human armies.<sup>7</sup>

When God’s wrath is poured out on a country or an army, this needn’t mean that there are no righteous people there. If righteous citizens of a country die, due to being in the wrong place at the wrong time (reason #1), God knows who they are and won’t forget them in the resurrection. Nevertheless, He often says, “Come out of her, my people,”<sup>8</sup> and if we suffer after failing to obey, we can’t blame God for it.

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<sup>4</sup> See Jer. 2:17, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Eph. 5:3–6; Rev. 2:21–22; Deut. 28:20; Rom. 1:18–32; Num. 14:33–34; Lam. 1:12; Exek. 22:17–22;

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 3:15, 16, 6:7, 15:14; Exod. 3:20; Jer. 15:7, 14, 18:7–10, and many more.

<sup>7</sup> Exod. 23:28, 33:2; Lev. 26:22, 25; Jer. 18:17, 24:10, 43:10–13, 51:2, 53,

<sup>8</sup> Isa. 48:20; Jer. 50:8, 51:6–9, 45; II Cor. 6:17; Rev. 18:4.

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**Deserters Will Be Shot!** How does the Great Controversy model help us understand this? It reminds us that during wartime, those who oppose an army must expect to be punished if caught. In war, deserters and traitors are often shot. So are enemy spies. Rebel forces are wiped out.

When British soldiers shot at German soldiers during World War I, no one was surprised. That's what they were supposed to do. If you are fighting for the enemy, getting shot is one of the risks.

When the Allied forces bombed Berlin during World War II, this was not unexpected. There was a war on, and Berlin was the enemy capital. Those who chose to stay knew they would be bombed.

If God is truly at war with Satan, those who choose to fight under Satan's command should not be surprised if God's wrath is turned on them and they suffer. When God sent an angel to kill 185,000 Assyrian soldiers who dared take up arms against the people of God (2 Kings 19:35), it was part of the war effort. The Levites killed with their swords three thousand Israelites who had rebelled against the God they had sworn to obey and worshipped a golden calf. Then God sent a plague on the rebels (Exod. 32:27–35). The rebels received appropriate penalties, no less than many generals would mete out.

The suffering of Babylon in Rev. 18 is due to her rebellion against God and her harlotry with “the kings of the earth” (v. 3). This harlot Babylon stands for a church composed of people who claim to be God's people, but are actually in love with the world.<sup>9</sup> (And we mustn't forget that this woman is also “the mother of harlots” [Rev. 17:5]—she has spawned many unfaithful churches.)

God's wrath against sin and unrepentant sinners, against the enemies of His people, against traitors and rebels, and the suffering that results from that wrath, is simply what we should expect from the Commander in Chief of the great war.

Some people refuse to believe in the wrath of God because it doesn't seem very loving. Yet they call God “Father” and ask Him to deliver them from evil! If a father catches enemy soldiers torturing his children, won't he fight to rescue them, or die trying? The seven trumpet judgments of Revelation and the final judgment on Babylon occur after “the prayers of the saints” have been presented to God and in response to the persecution of the saints.<sup>10</sup> Those who hurt God's children are God's enemies *because* He loves His children so much.

Also, in some countries those who are able to help someone in an emergency and fail to do so can be prosecuted. Society is outraged when a doctor fails to help an accident victim who is bleeding to death. God is also outraged when people who claim to be His soldiers refuse to rescue those held captive by the enemy (Matt. 25:31–46).

### **Reason 5: A Harvest of Righteousness**

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<sup>9</sup> See Jer. 3:8–10, 5:7; Rev. 2:20–23.

<sup>10</sup> See Rev. 5:8, 8:3–4, 11:18, 16:5–6, 17:6, 18:20, 24.

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When God's people suffer, God may be sending or allowing the suffering to train or strengthen them. This isn't a pleasant or popular idea, but the Bible teaches it.<sup>11</sup> Many who claim to be Christians would forsake God if He sent suffering to them. Others are faithful servants, though they seldom suffer. God knows hearts and knows what it will take to make us effective and faithful.

**Basic Training.** How does the Great Controversy model help us understand this? Soldiers must be trained. It makes no sense to send scrawny, weak-kneed wimps into battle against giants. This is why soldiers are sent to boot camp for basic training before they are sent into battle. They run for miles and exercise for hours while their sergeants shout at them. They get by with little sleep and uncomfortable quarters. They are being hardened, being prepared to face the enemy. They learn the enemy's tricks. They learn to fight and survive.

This is one reason why God lets His people suffer. He is preparing them to face the enemy. He is making them strong through suffering. He is making them better soldiers, ready to serve Him in the war against Satan and his troops, ready to rescue the captives. We might not like it, but He knows best.

### **Reason 6: A Spectacle to the Universe**

Finally, God sometimes allows His people to suffer because their faithfulness in the face of persecution or other suffering brings people to Him or reveals the righteousness of the saints and of God Himself to the watching universe.<sup>12</sup>

In 1949 there were about a million Christians in China. Today, after fifty years of persecution, there are at least fifty million, and some say twice that. In China Christians suffered faithfully so others might see and turn to a Christ worth dying for.

The pain of watching loved ones suffer and die can test our faith, but after the resurrection, when we find that the brief but untimely separation means that someone who would have been lost has now received eternal life, will we say God was unfair? I think not. Witnessing with words is not the only way to make disciples, and making disciples is, after all, what Christ requires of us (Matt. 28:18–20).

**War Heroes.** How does the Great Controversy model help us understand this? It reminds us of war heroes. Remember the parades and parties held to welcome home war heroes during World War II? The whole country celebrated those willing beyond the call of duty to suffer and face death. Heroes were sent on speaking tours around the country to sell war bonds and encourage enlistment. Thousands of boys joined up because they wanted to be like their heroes. Thousands of soldiers fought harder because they had heard about the bravery of these heroes.

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<sup>11</sup> See Rom. 5:3; 2 Thes. 1:3–5; Heb. 2:10–11; Heb. 12:5–11; Rev. 3:19; Isa. 48:10; Jer. 9:7; Zech. 13:9.

<sup>12</sup> See 1 Cor. 4:9; Job 1:6–12, 2:3–7; 2 Thes. 1:3–6, 12; 2 Tim. 1:8, 11–12, 2:8–10; Acts 5:41, 9:15–16; 1 Pet. 4:12–13, 16–17, 19; Rev. 1:9; John 11:4; Phil. 1:27–30; 2 Cor. 1:5–6; Jer. 15:15.

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Here is the final reason for suffering. God allows His faithful soldiers to suffer in order to gain more recruits for the fight against Satan, the fight for human souls. Civilians see this heroism and enlist. Even those who are AWOL, absent without leave, may turn themselves in and return to faithful service in the trenches.

Good generals don't want their troops to die. Many hesitate before sending them into battle. However, generals know that the sacrifice is necessary. Some must suffer that others might live.

The Great Controversy model reveals that God sends his faithful ones into battle because within His strategy He knows that their suffering and death are necessary to the war effort. Yes, the "once for all" victory was won at the cross (Heb. 9:26)—but by their heroic action God's faithful soldiers may gain the individual rescue of civilians held captive by the enemy.

Their suffering, however, is temporary, and the hero's welcome that awaits them will be worth the sacrifice. "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life," Jesus says (Rev. 2:10).

#### **So Why Am I Suffering?**

The Great Controversy helps us make sense of these six biblical reasons for suffering. However, it doesn't reveal beyond doubt which of these six is the reason for our own suffering or that of our loved ones.

Sometimes we simply can't know for sure. As God reveals to Job, there are many things God knows which we can't yet understand. Nevertheless, in many cases, by searching our hearts or peeking into the hearts of others we can guess at the reason for suffering.

Perhaps we know that we are in rebellion against God, even though we are in church every week, and sense that God may be fighting against us because we are fighting against His saints.

Perhaps we know there are evil habits in our lives which will keep us from heaven because we cherish them more than we cherish the God who asks us to give them up.<sup>13</sup> Is it possible that we are suffering because God has "given us up" to them so their effects will bring us back to Him?

Perhaps we know we are active in the fight against evil, clothed in "the full armor of God" (Eph. 6:10–18). We might be suffering because God is making us "a spectacle to the whole universe" (1 Cor. 4:9), revealing our faithfulness. Or we might be suffering because Satan is trying to devour us (1 Pet. 5:8).

Perhaps a loved one has died, tragically, unexpectedly. If we search, do we find that someone who has long rejected God has now come to the cross as a

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<sup>13</sup> See Eph. 5:3–6; Gal. 5:19–21; Rev. 22:14–15.

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result? Are we willing to make the trade—a few years in this life for someone else’s eternal life?<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps someone has died as the result of a freak accident. It may be no more than being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or perhaps Satan was trying to strip us of our faith, or perhaps there is another reason. Can we comfort one another with these words and trust that God knows hearts and we don’t?

Perhaps a child is born with a birth defect, or a young mother develops a terrible cancer. Is it possible that this is simply what sometimes happens in a world in which sin has been active for so long?

All we have are hints, guesses. The Bible gives us the outline of the Great Controversy, and it gives us reasons why suffering occurs, but it doesn’t tell us which reason is at work.<sup>15</sup>

One thing we know for sure, though, is this. For those who love God, for those who belong to God, for those who are faithful, there is always a happy ending in the long run (Rom. 8:28).

We also know this: God is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). Although there’s a war on, God is doing everything He can to save as many as possible, and He asks us to help Him, even if we suffer for it.

Are you willing?

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<sup>14</sup> Forbidding Ezekiel to complain, God took away his wife—as an object lesson—in an attempt to bring His people back to Him (Ezek. 24:15–27).

<sup>15</sup> Some readers who prefer a more Calvinistic framework may say that the warfare model does not adequately account for the sovereignty of God. In fact, one could fit these six reasons for suffering and the Great Controversy warfare model within what God permits or decrees (what is called His “permissive will” or His “decretal will”). Thus, God permits Satan to attack His creatures, permits accidental suffering, permits the effects of sin on His creation, and permits people to suffer from their wrong choices because such suffering fits into His sovereign will, into the strategy for destroying evil and rescuing sinners which He has always known. He decrees His own children’s suffering in order to strengthen them or in order to use them to win the war in the way He has determined it must be won.