

WHY IS THERE DEATH AND SUFFERING?

by Ken Ham and Dr Jonathan Sarfati

Death and suffering is everywhere!

'Earthquake Claims 10,000 in India.' 'Thousands Perish in Bangladesh's Flood.' Tragedy is constantly in the news, including large-scale, 'senseless' disasters that snuff out the lives of thousands, such as the terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Center. Nor is tragedy confined to today—it wasn't too long ago that an evil regime wiped out 6 million Jews and many others. In addition to the headline events, each of us suffers pain at one time or another—illness, headaches, accidents and death. It's not surprising, when the burdens become too great, that people cry out to God in anguish, 'Why don't you do anything? Don't you care?'



How can an all-powerful, loving God allow suffering?

As the shock of each traumatic event subsides, people begin asking why such things occur. Reading about past wars or visiting memorials like the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., inevitably raises the same question, 'How can there be a loving God controlling the universe in the light of such death and suffering?'

The pervasiveness of suffering is possibly the most effective tool that atheists use to attack the Bible's picture of a 'loving God.' Atheists make what appears to be a reasonable complaint: 'If God is loving and all-powerful, then why doesn't He use His power to stop the evil, suffering, pain and death?'

Multitudes have rejected God because of suffering!

Sadly, most people—even Christians—have no ready answer to the question of death and suffering in the world. Believing that the world is millions or billions of years old, they have a difficult time explaining the purpose behind the apparent cruelty that they see.

Charles Darwin rejected Christianity after the death of his daughter. 'Annie's cruel death destroyed Charles's tatters of beliefs in a moral, just universe. Later he would say that this period chimed the final death-knell for his Christianity,' says a recent biography of Charles Darwin. '... Charles now took his stand as an unbeliever.'¹



Darwin is only one of thousands of famous people who have struggled with this issue, trying to reconcile belief in God with the death and suffering he observed all around, that he believed had gone on for millions of years. Darwin's struggle came to a climax with the death of his daughter Annie.²

When Charles Darwin wrote his landmark book *On the Origin of Species*, he was in essence writing a history of suffering and death. In the conclusion of the chapter entitled *On The Imperfections Of The Geological Record*, Darwin said the modern world has arisen 'from the war of nature, from famine and death.'³ Based on his evolutionary perspective, Darwin considered death to be a permanent part of the world.

The billionaire Ted Turner, a famous media mogul, says he lost his faith after his sister died. The *New York Times* ran a sobering article, saying, 'Turner is a strident nonbeliever, having lost his faith after his sister ... died of a painful disease. ... "I was taught that God was love and God was powerful," Turner said, "And I couldn't understand how someone so innocent should be made or allowed to suffer so."⁴

A famous evangelist rejected Christianity, in part because of the suffering he saw. Former well-known evangelist, the late Charles Templeton, published *Farewell to God* in 1996,^{5,6} describing his slide into unbelief and his rejection of Christianity. Once listed among those 'best used of God' by the National Association of Evangelicals,⁷ Templeton listed several 'reasons for rejecting the Christian faith.' For instance:

- Geneticists say it is 'nonsense' to believe that sin is the 'reason for all the crime, poverty, suffering, and general wickedness

in the world.⁷⁸

- The ‘grim and inescapable reality’ is that ‘*all life is predicated on death*. Every carnivorous creature *must* kill and devour another creature. It has no option.’⁷⁹

Templeton, like Charles Darwin, had a big problem understanding how to reconcile an Earth full of death, disease and suffering with the loving God of the Bible. Templeton stated:

‘Why does God’s grand design require creatures with teeth designed to crush spines or rend flesh, claws fashioned to seize and tear, venom to paralyze, mouths to suck blood, coils to constrict and smother—even expandable jaws so that prey may be swallowed whole and alive? ... Nature is in Tennyson’s vivid phrase, “red [with blood] in tooth and claw,” and life is a carnival of blood.’¹⁰

Templeton then concludes: ‘How could a loving and omnipotent God create such horrors as we have been contemplating?’¹¹

Templeton is not the first person to talk like this. When told that there is a God of love who made the world, embittered people often reply: ‘I don’t see any God of love. All I see are children suffering and dying. I see people killing and stealing. Disease and death are everywhere. Nature is “red in tooth and claw.” It’s a horrible world. I don’t see your God of love. If your God does exist, He must be a sadistic ogre.’

Does an atheist really have a case?

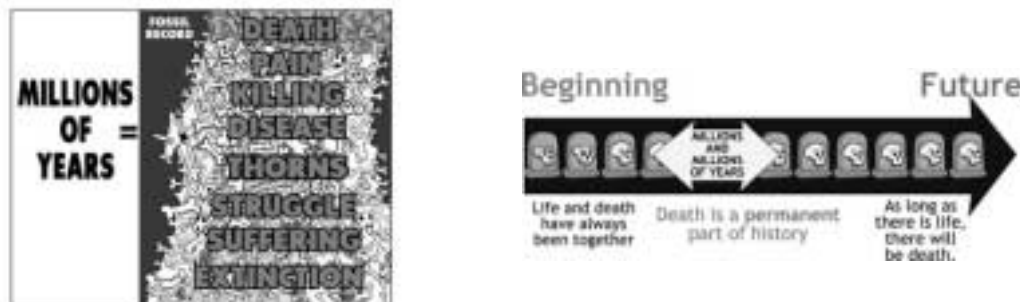
It’s often useful to ask a questioner to justify the validity of his question *under his own belief system*. For an atheist to complain that the Christian God is ‘evil,’ he must provide a standard of good and evil by which to judge Him. But if we are simply evolved pond scum, as a consistent atheist must believe, where can we find an objective standard of right and wrong?

Our ideas of right and wrong, under this system, are merely outcomes of some chemical processes that occur in the brain, which happened to confer survival advantage on our alleged ape-like ancestors. But the notions in Hitler’s brain obeyed the same chemical laws as those in Mother Teresa’s, so on what grounds are the latter’s actions ‘better’ than the former’s? Also, why should the terrorist attack slaying thousands of people in New York be more terrible than a frog killing thousands of flies?

A Christian, however, believes there is an objective standard of morality that rises above individual humans, because it is set by an objective and transcendent moral Lawgiver who is our Creator. An atheist’s argument against God because of objective evil inadvertently concedes the very point he is trying to argue against!

Such questions about God stem from a wrong view of history

Belief in evolution and/or millions of years of history necessitates that death has been a part of history since life first appeared on this planet. If you believe that the fossil layers (containing billions of dead things) represent the history of life over millions of years, it’s a very ugly record—full of death, disease and suffering.



‘**Time and death.**’ The late evolutionary scientist Carl Sagan described Darwin’s view of death well: ‘The secrets of evolution are time and death.’¹² This sums up the most widely accepted history of death in this world. According to this view, (1) death, suffering and disease over millions of years led up to man’s emergence; (2) death, suffering and disease exist in this present world; and (3) death, suffering and disease will continue into the unknown future. Death is a permanent part of history, and death is our *ally* in the ‘creation’ of life.

Implications about suffering, if you accept this view of history. If one believes in millions of years, then this world has always been a deadly place. The question that we naturally ask is ‘Who caused the cancer, disease and violence represented in the fossil record?’ Christians who believe in millions of years of history have a serious problem. The Bible plainly says that God is the Creator, and He called *everything* that He had made—before, leading up to, and including Adam and Eve, but before their Fall—‘very good’ (Genesis 1:31).

This situation is represented in the following:



As soon as Christians allow for death, suffering and disease before Adam’s sin (which they automatically *must* if they believe in millions of years), then they’ve raised a serious question about their Gospel message. What, then, has sin done to the world? According to Christian teaching, death is the penalty for sin (Romans 3:23)—and this fact is the foundation of the Gospel! Moreover, how can all things be ‘restored’ to a state with no death, pain or tears in the future (Revelation 21:4) if there *never* was a time free of death and suffering? The whole message of the Gospel falls apart if you have this view of history. It also would mean that God is to blame for death.



The wrong view!

The Bible gives the *right* view of history—and the right view of God!

Fortunately, God has given us a different account of the history of death, recorded in His Word—the Bible. This historical document connects to real issues of life, and it fully explains why horrible things happen. In fact, God’s Word has much to say about death.



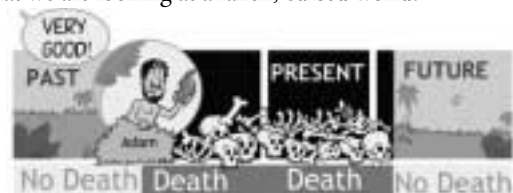
‘Sin and death.’ This phrase sums up the true history of death, as recorded in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. God originally created a perfect world, described by God as ‘very good’ (Genesis 1:31). People and animals ate plants, not other animals (Genesis 1:29-30). There was no violence or pain in this ‘very good’ world.

But this sinless world was marred by the rebellion of the first man, Adam. His sin brought an *intruder* into the world—death. God had to judge sin with death, as He warned Adam He would (Genesis 2:17, cf. 3:19).

Indeed, God apparently caused the first death in the world—an animal was slain to make clothing for Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21). As a result of God’s judgment on the world, God has given us a taste of life without Him—a world that is running down—a world full of death and suffering. As Romans 8:22 says, ‘the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs’—because God Himself subjected the creation to processes of decay (v. 20).

Implications about suffering, if you accept this view of history. How can we find a God of love amidst the groaning of this world? By understanding the Genesis account of the Fall, we know that we are looking at a fallen, cursed world.

From the Bible’s perspective of history, death is an enemy, not an ally. In 1 Corinthians 15:26, the Apostle Paul describes death as the ‘last enemy.’ Death was *not* a part of God’s original creation, which truly was ‘very good.’ Based on a straightforward reading of the Genesis account, history can be represented by the diagram to the right.



Death and suffering is the penalty for sin. When Adam rebelled against God, in effect he was saying that he wanted life without God. He wanted to decide truth for himself, independent of God. Now the Bible tells us that Adam was the head of the human race, representing each one of us, who are his descendants. Paul says in Romans 5:12–19 that we sin ‘in Adam,’ after the likeness of Adam. In other words, we have the same problem Adam had. When Adam rebelled against God, all human beings, represented by Adam, effectively said that they wanted life without God.



God had to judge Adam’s sin with death. He had already warned Adam that if he sinned, he would ‘surely die.’ After Adam’s Fall, he and all his descendants forfeited the right to live. After all, God is the author of life. Death is the natural penalty of choosing life without God, the giver of life. Also, because the Lord is holy and just, there had to be a penalty for rebellion.

The Bible makes it clear that death is the penalty for *our* sin, not just the sin of Adam. If you accept the Bible’s account of history, then our sins—not just the sins of ‘the other guy’—are responsible for all the death and suffering in the world! In other words, it is really *our* fault that the world is the way it is. No-one is really ‘innocent.’

God has removed His sustaining power—temporarily. At the same time that God judged sin with death, He withdrew some of His sustaining power. Romans 8:22 tells us that the whole of creation is groaning and travailing in pain. Everything is running down because of sin. God has given us a taste of life without Him—a world full of violence, death, suffering and disease. If God withdrew *all* of His sustaining power, the creation would cease to exist. Colossians 1:16–17 tells us that all things are held together, right now, by the power of the Creator, the Lord Jesus Christ. However, in one sense He is not holding it together perfectly, as He is deliberately letting things fall apart to give us a taste of what life is like without God. In other words, God is allowing us to experience what we wanted—life without God (cf. Romans 1:18–32).

In the Old Testament, we get a glimpse of what the world is like when God upholds things one-hundred percent. In Deuteronomy 29:5 and Nehemiah 9:21, we are told that the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years, and yet their clothes didn’t wear out, their shoes didn’t wear out and their feet didn’t swell. Obviously God miraculously upheld their clothing, shoes and feet so that they would not wear out or fall apart as the rest of the creation is doing. One can only imagine what the world would be like if God upheld every detail of it like this.

The book of Daniel, chapter 3, gives us another glimpse, when we read about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego walking into an intensely blazing furnace yet coming out without even the smell of smoke on their clothes. When the Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of the universe, upheld their bodies and clothing in the midst of fire (v. 25), nothing could be hurt or destroyed.

These examples help us understand a little of what it would be like if God upheld every aspect of the creation—nothing would fall apart.

At present, we are living in a universe where things are decaying. Around us we see death, suffering and disease—all as a result of God’s judgment against sin and His withdrawal of some of His sustaining power to give us what we asked for—a taste of life without God. Thus, looking through ‘Biblical lenses,’ we see our sin in Adam as the ‘big-picture’ perspective on tragic events, such as the actions of terrorists. Of course, such specific evil acts were also a result of the individual sin of the terrorists. The suffering caused by the earthquake in India, by contrast, cannot be blamed on any individual’s sin today, but is still the consequence of sin in general (more on this below).



In contrast to the view that death and suffering have continued for millions of years, this Biblical view of history has a wonderful implication for the future. The world will one day be *restored* (Acts 3:21) to a state in which, once again, there will be no violence and death. According to Isaiah 11:6–9, wolves and lambs, leopards and goats, lions and calves, and snakes and children, will dwell together peacefully. Clearly, this future state reflects the paradise that was once lost, not some imaginary land that never existed.



All right, so Adam's Fall explains sorrow in general, but what about specific cases of 'senseless suffering'?

The Bible teaches that suffering is part of the 'big picture' involving sin, but *individual* cases of suffering are *not* always correlated with *particular* sins of individuals.

God allowed the suffering of righteous Job. A man named Job, who was the most righteous man on Earth at his time, suffered intensely—losing all his children, servants and possessions in a single day; then he was struck by a painful illness. The Lord never told Job the specific reasons for his suffering, but God lets every reader of the book of Job witness some extraordinary 'behind-the-scenes' events in Heaven, which Job never saw. The Lord had reasons for allowing Job's suffering, but He never told Job these reasons, and He demanded that Job not question the decisions of his Maker.

Jesus was asked why a man was *born blind*. When Jesus and His disciples passed by a blind man, His disciples asked Him whether the man's blindness from birth was due to his own sin or the sin of his parents. Jesus explained that neither was the case. The man was born blind so that God could demonstrate His power (when Jesus healed him, John 9:1-7).

Jesus discussed why eighteen Jews died tragically when the tower of Siloam collapsed. Jesus said something that is directly applicable to modern tragedies, such as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the United States on September 11, 2001. Luke 13:4 records His words: 'Those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were sinners above all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!' Suffering in our lives is *not* always related to our personal sin.

Note, however, that Jesus went on to say that 'unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.' Though this may have been referring to perishing physically in the coming downfall of Jerusalem, the bottom line is that no-one is innocent. All of us are sinners and therefore condemned to die. Thousands of people died in the World Trade Center catastrophe, but the hundreds of millions of people who saw and heard about this event will also die one day—in fact, thousands of them are dying every day—because all humans have been given the death penalty because of sin.

The account of the rich man and Lazarus is a key to understanding suffering. The Bible is never embarrassed to talk about the question of suffering. God's past judgments have included almost every type of suffering imaginable, and He repeatedly asserts His absolute power and authority over men's lives. Yet in one of Christ's most memorable teachings (Luke 16:19–31), the Son of God gives the key to understanding the apparent injustices of this world.

A wicked rich man lived in splendor, while a faithful beggar named Lazarus sat at the rich man's gate, covered with sores and eating table scraps. But the story does not end here. There is an eternal world to come, where God will make all things right. The hope of a resurrection is the key to understanding our suffering.¹³

Once, the twentieth-century atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell claimed that no-one could sit by the bedside of a child with a terminal disease and believe in a loving God. A minister who actually had experience with dying children (unlike Russell who never got his own hands dirty with such practical things) challenged Russell to explain what he could offer such a child. An atheist could only say, 'Sorry, chap, you've had your chips, and that's the end of everything for you.' But the Christian has hope that this life is *not* the end.

The Apostle Paul found reasons to 'glory in my infirmities.' Paul's 'résumé of suffering' included torture, beatings, imprisonment, stoning, shipwreck, robbery, infirmities, exhaustion, hunger, thirst, and cold. His letters show that Christ's Resurrection was the key to his making sense of his suffering. Without the Resurrection, 'then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain, ... [and] we are of all men most miserable' (1 Corinthians 15:14, 19).

Though sometimes we will never see in this life the reasons for some suffering, Paul's letters contain practical reasons for the suffering of God's children, even when they have done nothing wrong. For instance:

1. Suffering can 'perfect' us, or make us mature in the image of Christ. (Job 23:10, Hebrews 5:8–9).
2. Suffering can help some to come to know Christ.
3. Suffering can make us more able to comfort others who suffer.

Is God doing anything about death and suffering?

People who accuse God of sitting back and doing nothing are missing a vital truth. In reality, God has already done everything you would want a loving God to do—and infinitely more!

The Son of God became a man and endured both suffering and a horrible death on man's behalf. Adam's sin left mankind in a terrible predicament. Even though our bodies die, we are made in the image of God, and thus we have souls that are immortal. Our conscious being is going to live forever. Unless God intervened, Adam's sin meant that we would spend an eternity of suffering and separation from Him.

The only way for us to restore our life with God is if we are able to come to Him with the penalty paid for our sin. Leviticus 17:11 helps us to understand how this can be done. It says, 'The life of the flesh is in the blood.' Blood represents life. The New Testament explains that 'without the shedding of blood there is no remission [of sins]' (Hebrews 9:22). God makes it clear that, because we are creatures of flesh and blood, the only way to pay the penalty for our sin is if blood is shed to take away our sin.

In the Garden of Eden, God killed an animal and clothed Adam and Eve as a picture of a *covering* for our sin. A blood sacrifice was needed because of our sin. The Israelites sacrificed animals over and over again; however, because Adam's blood does not flow in animals, animal blood, though it could temporarily cover our sin, could never take it away. The Hebrew word translated 'atonement' is *kaphar*, which means 'cover.'

The solution was God's plan to send His Son, the Second Person of the triune Godhead, the Lord Jesus Christ, to become a man—a perfect man—to be a sacrifice for sin. In the person of Jesus Christ, our Creator God stepped into history (John 1:1–14) to become a physical descendant of Adam, called 'the last Adam' (1 Corinthians 15:45), born of a virgin. Because the Holy Spirit overshadowed His mother (Luke 1:35), He was a perfect man, one without sin—despite having been tempted in every way that we are (Hebrews 4:15)—who thus could shed His blood on a cross for our sin.



Because mankind's first representative head—Adam—was responsible for bringing sin and death into the world, the human race can now have a new representative—the 'last Adam'—who paid the penalty for sin. No sinner could pay for the sins of others, but this last Adam—Jesus Christ—was a perfect man. God in human flesh was able to bear the sins and sorrows of the world.



The Son of God rose from the grave so that He could provide eternal life for all who believe (John 3:16). After Christ's suffering and death, He rose from the dead, showing He had ultimate power—power over death. He can now give eternal life to anyone who receives it by faith (John 1:12, Ephesians 2:8–9). The Bible teaches us that those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and believe that God has raised Him from the dead, and receive Him as Lord and Savior, will spend eternity with God (1 Corinthians 15:1–4).

The Son of God sympathizes with our sorrows. Christ's suffering and death mean that God Himself can personally empathize with our suffering, because He has experienced it. His followers have a High Priest—Jesus—who can be 'touched with the feeling of our infirmities. ... Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need' (Hebrews 4:15–16).

How long will this suffering and death go on?

People who complain about the suffering on this Earth need to understand God's perspective of time. God dwells in eternity, and He is lovingly preparing His people to spend an eternity with Him. As the Apostle Paul said, 'I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us' (Romans 8:18). The book of Hebrews says that Jesus Himself, 'for the glory that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God' (Hebrews 12:2).

The present suffering—intense as it can be at times—is so insignificant, in view of eternity, that it can't even be compared to the glory to come.

God has prepared an eternal home where there will be no more death or suffering. Those who put their trust in Christ as Savior have a wonderful hope—they can spend eternity with the Lord in a place where there will be no more death. 'And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away' (Revelation 21:4).

Indeed, death is really the path that opens the way to this wonderful place, called Heaven. If we lived forever, we would never have an opportunity to shed this sinful state. But God wants us to have a new body, and He wants us to dwell with Him forever. In fact, the Bible states that ‘precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints’ (Psalm 116:15). Death is ‘precious’ because sinners who have trusted Christ will enter into the presence of their Creator, in a place where righteousness dwells.

There is also a place of eternal separation from God. The Bible warns that those who reject Christ will taste a ‘second death’—eternal separation from God (Revelation 21:8).

Most of us have heard about Hell, a place of fire and torment. None other than Jesus Christ warned of this place more than He spoke of Heaven. He also made it clear that the torment of the wicked was as eternal (Greek *aiônios*) as the life of the blessed (Matthew 25:46). God does not delight in the death of the wicked. ‘Say unto them, As I live, said the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn, turn from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?’ (Ezekiel 33:11). God takes no pleasure in the afflictions and calamities of people. He is a loving, merciful God—it is *our* fault that man is in the current state of suffering and death.



As we face horrible suffering, such as the tragedy at the World Trade Center, let it remind us that the ultimate cause of such calamity is our sin—our rebellion against God. Our loving God, despite our sinfulness, wants us to spend eternity with Him. Christians need to stretch forth a loving, comforting arm to those who are in need of comfort and strength during times of suffering. They can find strength in the arms of a loving Creator who hates Death—the enemy that will one day be thrown into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:14).

There is no conflict between the statements ‘God is all-powerful and loving’ and ‘the world is full of suffering and evil.’ For God to rid the world of evil would require ridding the world of us! Instead, God wants us to be saved from His wrath to come. One day, God will indeed rid the world of evil.

We have two options: separate from our sins by trusting in Christ, and dwell with God forever; or cling to our sins, in which case God will grant our wish and separate us from Himself for eternity. This is why Jesus on the Day of Judgment says to evildoers, ‘Depart from me ...’ (Matthew 7:23, Luke 13:27).

When we understand the origin of death and the Gospel of Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the Bible, then we can understand why this world is the way it is and how there can be a loving God in the midst of tragedy, violence, suffering and death. Which view of death do you accept? Is it one that makes God an ogre responsible for millions of years of death, disease and suffering? Or is it one that places the blame on our sin, and pictures our Creator God as a loving, merciful Savior who wept over the city of Jerusalem, who wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus, and who weeps for all of us?

Here’s the Good News

Answers in Genesis seeks to give glory and honor to God as Creator, and to affirm the truth of the Biblical record of the real origin and history of the world and mankind.

Part of this real history is the bad news that the rebellion of the first man, Adam, against God’s command brought death, suffering and separation from God into this world. We see the results all around us. All of Adam’s descendants are sinful from conception (Psalm 51:5) and have themselves entered into this rebellion (sin). They therefore cannot live with a holy God, but are condemned to separation from God. The Bible says that ‘all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God’ (Romans 3:23) and that all are therefore subject to ‘everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power’ (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

But the good news is that God has done something about it. ‘For God so loved the world, that He gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life’ (John 3:16).

Jesus Christ the Creator, though totally sinless, suffered, on behalf of mankind, the penalty of mankind’s sin, which is death and separation from God. He did this to satisfy the righteous demands of the holiness and justice of God, His

Father. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice; He died on a cross, but on the third day, He rose again, conquering death, so that all who truly believe in Him, repent of their sin and trust in Him (rather than their own merit), are able to come back to God and live for eternity with their Creator.

Therefore: 'He who believes on Him is not condemned, but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God' (John 3:18). The Bible also says, 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9).

What a wonderful Savior—and what a wonderful salvation in Christ our Creator!

(If you want to know more of what the Bible says about how you can receive eternal life, please write or call the *Answers in Genesis* office nearest you)

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