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Editor: anabaptistmennonites.org.

Many men raise this question to vent their anger at God or question His existence. Philosophers have debated this question for thousands of years without fully satisfying themselves or others. Pain, injustice, and grief have tested the faith of even such devout saints as Job. But skepticism offers no comfort or answers to life's problems.

Some, in their frustration with evil and suffering, question God's existence. But if God does not exist and all events happen by fate, what is the use to be angry about suffering? When Job's wife recommended, "Curse God, and die," Job countered, "Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh" (Job 2:9-10).

Most unbelievers acknowledge the existence of God by challenging His methods and ethics. God's critics conclude that He either is not powerful enough or is not good enough to eliminate evil. But if God is big enough to be blamed for suffering and evil, is challenging His judgment really wise? "Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct him? he that reproveth God, let him answer it" (Job 40:2).

A very common rationale for suffering is that Satan is the cause of all evil and suffering. But this logic does not explain why God allows Satan to inflict suffering. God never passed the blame for suffering on to Satan. The Garden of Eden verdict of suffering, pain, and death issued from God Himself. True, Satan incited man's rebellion, but God determined the consequences and carried them out. God intends that men understand the seriousness of sin by the consequences that He administers.

Part of the world's misunderstanding of God stems from Christianity's misrepresentation of God. God's goodness has been emphasized as the primary reason to love and worship Him. But God is also holy and righteous. The fact that God has a standard of righteousness and holds men accountable for sin is an essential part of His goodness. "For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Malachi 3:6). Man becomes disillusioned with God when he arrogantly assumes that he knows better than God what is good. Although God's Word may not always satisfy man's logic, it does give soul rest as its answers are accepted by faith.

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

From experience we know that physical hardship, pain, and suffering have refined and purified our spiritual lives. Can we trust God and accept that from His infinite perspective, He has a purpose—even when we can see no good in a situation?

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). When men face suffering, they may be tempted to question God's love. But God showed His love by suffering for us. Jesus came down from heaven and lived in this sin-cursed earth to empathize with our suffering, to suffer as our sacrifice, and to deliver us from suffering.

"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). Those who do not rebel against God's sovereignty have hope. An end to suffering is promised. Resignation in suffering is an aroma of praise to God, which will be rewarded by an eternity of bliss. "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:17). Suffering is lightened when our eyes are fixed on the eternal.

Rather than giving Job a rationale for suffering, God reminded him of His sovereignty evidenced by creation. Job responded by falling down in worship. Resignation in suffering acknowledges God's sovereign wisdom. Challenging God for circumstances of life is evidence that its most basic lessons have not been learned.

The suffering that God has allowed is easier to accept than suffering He has promised He will yet bring to the ungodly. "The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb" (Revelation 14:10).

Those who rebel against the earthly curse and consequence for sin will endure eternal suffering. God is right and good in doing so. "For true and righteous are his judgments" (Revelation 19:2).

—BAS



Valentine's Vanities

For many of us, February 14 passes without notice. We may see card displays, confectionaries, and other items packaged in red. But without understanding the implications, we may be seduced into observing this pagan holiday.

Americans are poised to spend approximately \$17.6 billion on Valentine's Day items this year. The average American spends more on Valentine's Day each year. Approximately 180 million cards will be exchanged this year versus 100 million cards ten years ago. Only Christmas card giving exceeds this number. Florists market two hundred million roses with revenue of \$403 million. This is vanity.

Eight hundred years prior to the establishment of Saint Valentine's Day, the Roman festival of Lupercalia was held on February 15. Lupercus was a primitive deity believed to gather people together for safety and protect their herds and flocks from wolves. His name meant "wolf man." The purpose of these celebrations was also to ensure fertility for animals, fields, and people. On February 14, a day of celebration dedicated to the sun god Juno, preceded the festival. Juno was the Roman queen of gods known as the god of women, also called Februata, meaning "feverish" or "hot." The month February is named after this goddess. The celebrations of these two days were centered on romantic and physical relationships of young men and women, many of which were unholy.

In time these two celebrations were assimilated into Roman Catholic practice. The church attempted to moderate the licentious nature of these pagan holidays. Pope Gelasius outlawed the pagan Lupercalian festival in A.D. 496 and set aside the day to honor a martyred Saint Valentine. Later yet, in 1969, the Catholic Church removed St. Valentine's Day from the official calendar of holidays.

The worship of Lupercus and Juno originate with the gods of ancient Babylon, the seat of pagan worship and the counterfeits of true religion. Nimrod, the leader of Babel's occult worship, was given a name meaning, "Let us rebel!" He was "a mighty hunter before the LORD" (Genesis 10:9), which suggests that he was a man of great wickedness.

Legends abound of a martyred Nimrod. Although not recorded in Scripture, the Jewish historian Josephus reports that Shem slew his great-nephew Nimrod because he led people back into the idolatry practiced before the Flood. Nimrod was supposedly reincarnated in the form of a son called Tammuz, who was resurrected from his no-longer-beating heart.

Nimrod and Tammuz became the fountainhead of male god heroes in mythology. In Roman, Grecian, Assyrian, Babylonian, or Egyptian sources, they are known as Horus, Baal, Bel, Mithras, and Bacchus. Semiramis, the sun-god wife of Nimrod, is also worshipped under many names, including Juno, Venus, Diana, Astarte, and Ishtar.

The heart from which Tammuz sprang became a symbol that is still used to illustrate love and romance in western cultures. Valentine's Day cards picture Tammuz, called Cupid, as an innocent, unclothed little boy with wings and a bow and arrow. The bow and arrow he carries identify him as the hunter reborn. Cupid's wings symbolize that he is the reincarnation of Nimrod. He shoots his bow and arrow, causing men and women to love and desire one another.

The idol called the "desire of women" (Daniel 11:37), the "image of jealousy" (Ezekiel 8:5), and Tammuz, for whom women wept (Ezekiel 8:14), are none other than Tammuz, or Cupid, of ancient Baal worship. Feminine interest continues today with 85 percent of Valentine's Day cards purchased by women.

God condemned Israel's worship of heathen deities. "Therefore will I also deal in fury: mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity: and though they cry in mine ears with a loud voice, yet will I not hear them" (Ezekiel 8:18). God hates the mixing of pagan worship with true worship. When persons ask another to be their Valentine, or "mighty one," they give tribute to these pagan deities.

God warned the Israelites to completely avoid all connections with heathen worship. "And in all things that I have said unto you be circumspect: and make no mention of the name of other gods, neither let it be heard out of thy mouth" (Exodus 23:13). To purchase and give Valentine's Day cards, gifts, and messages links us to pagan customs.

The widespread use of red and hot pink for Valentine's Day should raise a red flag. "MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" was arrayed in scarlet color, typifying her immoral character. These colors fit with the heathen but do not belong with the attire of the separated child of God.

Whenever we borrow the symbols of an unregenerate society as tokens of our expressions, we also borrow their meanings. The heart as used in Western culture as a symbol of love and romance originates with the pagan trinity of Nimrod, Semiramis, and Tammuz, along with their exploits, some of which were very immoral. In a day when moral purity is disdained, we should avoid all symbols that hint at permissive living, includ-

ing the heart pierced with an arrow. Many of the romantic messages on Valentine's Day items are sensual and inappropriate for exchange.

God intended that marital love and romance be sacred. Tokens of appreciation and love between husbands and wives and courting or betrothed couples are valuable and appropriate. However, they are better shared or sent at other times and in other ways than on Valentine's Day. May our homes be spared from the brazen exploitation of romance, which leads to moral failure and corrupts the purity of the home.

"Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen" (1 John 5:21).



SUNDAY BUYING AND SELLING

On our way to church we pass a yard sale. The children ask, "Why do those people have a yard sale on Sunday?" They understand that to buy and sell on Sunday is wrong. They do not even suggest that we should stop and see what is for sale.

How will we hold conviction in the rising generations against buying and selling on Sunday? The seniors of our congregations can remember when no stores were open on Sunday. Today it is very common for convenience stores and gas stations to be open for Sunday business. Even the lumber and hardware stores and grocery stores are open twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. How can we maintain conviction against Sunday buying and selling?

We should reflect on our purpose for observing Sunday. First of all, we want Sunday to be a day of devotion and worship to God. We also want Sunday to be a day that brings spiritual strength to us as individuals and to those around us. We need to choose the involvements and activities that are conducive to these goals in order to achieve them. For example, meeting together with other believers to study the Bible, to sing, and to pray are avenues to our goal. From studying 1 Corinthians 16 and 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, we learn that collecting a gift (we are assuming it was money) on the first day of the week to share with the needy was a blessing to the saints. From this we conclude that the giving of money on Sunday is included in our worship experience. But engaging in business transactions, doing record keeping, or working at comparable involvements will distract from devotion and worship to God.

Jesus and the Pharisees were in conflict over the Sabbath observance (Matthew 12:1-13). Jesus' view of Sabbath activities gives us some insight into His view of the Lord's Day. The Pharisees thought they had a reason to condemn Jesus' disciples. Jesus cited to them an example of their hero David when the value of his need overrode the value of the Law. It was more important at the moment for David and his men to have food than it was to abide by the letter of the Law.

The Pharisees still were not satisfied. They brought up the issue of healing on the Sabbath. Jesus showed them that maintaining the spirit of the Gospel was more important than keeping the letter of the Old Testament Law. It is more important to have compassion on the sheep or the man in need than it is to avoid any activity on the Sabbath.

We apply the same principle to our observance of Sunday. If someone of our family falls and breaks his arm, we take him for emergency care even if it is Sunday. We even purchase pain medicine on Sunday rather than ignore a person's suffering.

The men of Tyre brought produce into Jerusalem to sell on the Sabbath Day (Nehemiah 13:16-17). Nehemiah reproved the nobles of Judah because they allowed this. Both those who were buying and those who were selling were profaning the Sabbath Day. For us to buy on Sunday requires a store to be open on Sunday. We do not want to be responsible for giving the storekeeper a basis for being open so we can buy from him. How could we encourage a clerk to worship on Sunday if we would buy from him on Sunday?

We should be careful of the testimony we give. A minister from Virginia had a preaching appointment in Pennsylvania on Sunday morning and one in Maryland the same evening. He needed more than one tank of gasoline to make his complete journey so he borrowed from a church brother. He set a good example for his family and others around him.

What thought goes through your mind when you see an advertisement that ends with "No Sunday sales"? A young man was traveling in a strange community and was trying to decide at which farm to stop to ask a favor. He decided on one that had a sign: "Fresh eggs for sale (no Sunday sales)." Why? He expected that a farmer who honored the Lord's Day would be inclined to help his fellow men. When you see a listing in the classified ads that says, "No Sunday calls please," you expect to talk to someone who is honest in his dealings.

Avoiding unnecessary business activity on the Lord's Day is evidence of a separated people. People of the world should be surprised when they see

God's people buying and selling on Sunday.

We must remember that we will give account to God personally (Romans 14:12). We cannot hide from God. He will judge even our intentions.

We should follow the guidelines given in our church's Rules and Discipline which states, "Members shall seek to avoid labor and business on the Lord's Day as much as possible."

We need to value the carefulness of past generations. God blessed them for their carefulness, and He will also bless us for carefully avoiding buying and selling on Sunday.



" A Famine . . . of Hearing"

The word famine raises mental pictures of barren farmland and poverty-stricken children holding empty dishes. But when God promised "a famine ... of hearing" (Amos 8:11), what were the results?

The Book of Amos begins with a call from God. Amos was a shepherd from the southern kingdom, Judah. He left his shepherding to prophesy a message of righteousness and uncompromising judgment against Israel. He warned of a famine to come.

A famine? No one in Israel expected a famine. Jeroboam II had acquired new territory. Israel was trading with the prosperous caravans that traveled through Samaria. No enemies threatened their resources. Their food supply was abundant.

Amos's message, however, was not directed to Israel only. He first addressed Israel's heathen neighbors. He prophesied that God would cut them off, devour them, and send fire to punish them. God would hold these Gentile nations accountable for their atrocities. Amos then turned to his burden for Israel.

Israel was also found wanting. Yes, they were God's special people, and God had miraculously brought the whole family out of Egypt (Amos 3:1). However, this did not blind God to their offenses. They oppressed the righteous and the poor. They were guilty of immorality and riches gained by extortion and bribery.

Amos asked them to listen. God's judgment was imminent because Jehovah had chosen them out of "all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2). Their "chosen" status with God made their sin more serious and their judg-

ment more severe. This was not unreasonable on God's part. Amos pointed out that every cause has an effect (Amos 3:3-8). "Will a lion roar ... when he hath no prey?" (Amos 3:4).

Their hoarded prosperity made them like the "kine of Bashan"—well-fed and unmanageable. They trod upon the poor, taking wheat without rightfully paying. By unjust gain the rich built houses of hewn stone with pleasant vineyards for their own enjoyment. Life was good; they felt physically satisfied. But God said, "Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel" (Amos 4:12). Israel had rejected God's call, "Seek ye me, and ye shall live" (Amos 5:4). God responded with rejection as well. "I will not smell in your solemn assemblies." "I will not regard . . . the peace offerings of your fat beasts." "Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs" (Amos 5:21-23). Their worship had become formality that soothed the soul without heartfelt adoration.

Amos now presented the coming judgment, pronouncing woe to those that enjoyed beds of ivory and savored fatted lambs and calves. They would be plagued with grasshoppers. Fire would devour part of the land. God's plumb line of absolute righteousness would divide between evil and good (Amos 7).

Did Amos reach his audience? He was told to go home to Judah, to "eat bread, and [to] prophesy there" (Amos 7:12). God's message through Amos had no place here! Bethel was the king's chapel (Amos 7:13). However, God considered their readiness for judgment as a basket of ripe summer fruit.

In the midst of their judgment, they would desire to hear words of the Lord. God's desire for Israel was not a famine of hearing. His judgments were not intended to annihilate but to sift. He would punish Israel, yet not the smallest grain would fall to the ground unnoticed (Amos 9:9).

This message of God still challenges us today. Could we face a famine in our experience? A famine is not always from catastrophes beyond our control. Israel's famine of hearing was a result of knowingly rejecting God's Word. What can we learn?

God had planned that His people could exist without poverty. God had given laws for the care of the poor. The Israelites were not to glean the edges of their fields. The bondman was to go free in the seventh year. But at this time, the rich were becoming richer at the expense of the poor. While our possessions are not equal, we should share with each other "that there may be equality." We can never give so much that we are exempt from giving again.

Was the wealth of Israel wrong? God promised to bring them to "a land flowing with milk and honey." We are blessed with prosperity today. Just as He desired for Israel, so God desires that our physical blessings would produce a closer devotion to God and to His people. Our faith in God to meet needs without insurance programs brings the brotherhood together. Care and concern are cultivated as we sympathize with our brother's need. If we lose the brotherhood assistance concept, we will rob ourselves of God's blessing and produce a famine of hearing.

One of the greatest privileges we enjoy today is the freedom to worship God. Israel had God's directives for worship and even followed prescribed rituals for worship. Yet this was not always from the heart. As we prosper, we might mistakenly assume that success is a stamp of God's approval. Instead, we should humbly thank God for His blessings, which we do not deserve. Earthly things can steal our enthusiasm for worship so subtly that we fail to perceive it. What once stirred our hearts becomes just the norm.

Slowly, our energy for our occupation becomes all-consuming. Time needed to prepare for the Wednesday evening topic is somewhat burdensome. Tract distribution is left to those who are more energetic. Suddenly, the brother who leaned on us for support seems somewhat overbearing and inconsiderate of our time. What has happened that we no longer hear the words of the Lord?

God is faithful in proclaiming His will for man today. Just as God called men such as Amos to give His message, so He calls men yet today. Can we hear God's message, or is it easy to see it as "Amos's" message? Some in Israel said, "Go home." Our willingness to support our leaders and a disciplined church life expresses our desire to hear. Our obedience to God's Word guides us in hearing His will.

God's message to Israel applies to us today. Prosperity does make us prone to live for self. Living for self leads one to overconfidence. This produces a lack of compassion for our brethren. When we lack compassion, we lose our feeling of urgency to obey God's Word. As our desire for obedience wanes, our worship becomes noise, and spiritual famine becomes reality.

Today we have the choice to be like Amos—proclaiming the source for spiritual nourishment, and practicing obedience in our daily lives. Or we can join the line of spiritually famished people holding empty dishes—tomorrow.



The Abundant Life (Part 2)

Brotherhood Acceptance

"Dear Lord, please let me stay. Please let me stay here forever," prayed a nine-year-old orphan at his first opportunity to enjoy a table filled with food, and, most important of all, to experience the love of a family. Many of us who have grown up surrounded with love do not fully realize the strong desire to love and be loved. God created us with the desire to belong and to include others in our lives.

Brotherhood is one of the blessings of the abundant life. "[He] hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6). Together is used three more times in this chapter. Jesus also desires this "togetherness" with us. "And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren!" (Matthew 12:49).

Acceptance is the first blessing that brotherhood brings. Before conversion, we were alienated and far away from not only God but also His people. We who before were foolish, disobedient, and living in malice, envy, and hate entered humbly into the loving fellowship of believers.

Ananias was a good example of accepting others. How well Ananias knew of all the hurt that had come to the church through Saul! Yet when he understood that a new life had begun for Saul, 'Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul" (Acts 9:17). Imagine the effects of this brotherly kindness of the hunted to the hunter. These two words from Ananias meant, "Saul, I accept you." Furthermore, to Saul these two words meant, "I am being received despite my past." What a bonus for those who choose the abundant life—to be accepted not only by God but also by His people! This is brotherhood.

Spiritual brotherhood is security. Each brother protects the welfare of the other. In *Pilgrim's Progress*, while in the miserable dungeon of Giant Despair, Hope gently encouraged Christian to remember past victories and also to look at the eternal consequences.

In spiritual weariness and discouragement, a brother's simple question to us, "What are the other options?" can bring us to our senses.

We need our brethren for encouragement. That is one benefit of preaching, Sunday school discussion, and one-on-one sharing. We need examples of faith, forgiveness, meekness, and love. Those who are faithful in the storms of life, have firm convictions, and are grounded in the love and knowledge of truth should be our heroes. Our lives can be patterned after

theirs and their counsel sought amidst the perplexities of life.

What should our response be to the fullness of brotherhood? "Freely ye have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). We can keep only that which we give away. Let us welcome others into the brotherhood, encourage faithfulness, and be an example of the believers.

—Joel Burkholder



PRAYER POINT

*“The effectual fervent prayer
of a righteous man availeth much”*

*Pray that God would prepare young brothers and sisters
To teach in our Christian day schools*

*Thank God for the inspiration and instruction we receive
through our regional winter Bible schools*

*Pray for those who responded to the call of the Lord
during recent evangelistic services*

*Pray that God would help us give liberally and willingly
Toward the financial needs of the church and brotherhood*

*Thank God for the promise, “And thine ears shall hear a word
Behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it,
When ye turn to the right hand and when ye turn to the left.”
Isaiah 30:21*

