

SUFFERING

Why Does God Allow Suffering?

There should be a warning label on every newborn baby that lists the side effects of living life. Life can be full of fun, adventure and excitement, but there are side effects. There's illness, abuse, broken relationships, betrayal, sorrow, disappointment and more. Maybe the closest thing we have to a warning label are the words of Jesus in John 16:33 where He says : In this world you will have trouble." The word "trouble" is a general word for trouble of any and every kind. Jesus was saying, "As long as you are in this world, you are going to be hit from all directions." But why? Why these side effects? Why is there suffering and evil and pain?

That "why" question goes back thousands of years. It was asked in the Old Testament by Job and the writers of the Psalms.

Psalm 10:1, "Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"

Psalm 43:2, "You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?"

Psalm 44:24, "Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?"

You don't have to try very hard to find someone asking "why" in the Scriptures.

People certainly asked "why" in the 20th century, when they witnessed two World Wars, the Holocaust, devastating famines in Africa, the killing fields of Cambodia, the emergence of AIDS, the attacks of 9/11.

And people continue to ask the question. A national survey asked people what question they'd ask if they could only ask God one thing. The Number One response was: "Why is there suffering in the world?" Why all of this if there's a loving and powerful God? Why do bad things happen to good people?

VARIOUS VIEWS ONN SUFFERING

1. THE ATHEISTIC VIEW

Life is governed by chance, not order. Therefore there is no right, no wrong, and no evil. There is really no basis for complaining or compassion.

2. THE EASTERN VIEW

1) Evil is an illusion. The problem is merely our perception. Through enlightenment we can see this and then pursue detachment from all desire which is the source of all suffering.

2) There is karmic justice. We are reincarnated according to past evil or progression. Whatever one experiences is the result of a perfect impersonal system of justice.

3. THE CHRISTIAN VIEW

The Christian view is that there is an all-powerful God who understands all things. He understands what we don't.

First Corinthians 13:12 says that on this side of heaven, we only see things dimly. He is saying our understanding is limited, but we can understand some of it

I remember certain occasions when I was in a storm so bad that I couldn't see the road in front of me. I could barely see the white stripe on the edge of the road, so I just crept along. But then a truck appeared in front of me, and I could clearly see his tail-lights through the storm. He apparently had fog lamps in front, and I knew if I could just follow those tail-lights, I'd be headed in the right direction.

And the same is true in understanding why there is evil and suffering in our world. We may not be able to make out all the details of why, but there are some key Biblical truths that can illuminate some points of light for us. And if we follow those lights, they will lead us in the right direction.

DISPELLING THE MYTHS ABOUT SUFFERING

1. GOD IS NOT THE CREATOR OF EVIL AND SUFFERING.

At first thought, it may seem like basic logic that if we assume God to be the creator of all, He must have created evil and be responsible for it. Sovereignty over something is not the same as being the source of something. Why didn't God create a world where suffering and evil didn't exist?" The answer is: He did. Genesis 1:31 says: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." Part of the "good" of God's initial creation was free will. Free will was necessary if we are to be able to express love to God and to each

other. If you pull the string on a Barbie doll and it says, “I love you,” that doesn’t mean anything because it’s been programmed to say it. Real love must involve a choice. God created the potential for evil to enter the world, because that was the only way to create the potential for genuine goodness and love. But it was human beings, in our free will, who brought that potential evil into reality. Our choosing the wrong thing has resulted in the introduction of two kinds of evil into the world: “moral evil” and “natural evil.”

Moral evil is the pain and suffering that comes because we choose to be selfish, arrogant and uncaring. Some have estimated that 95 percent of the world’s suffering results from the sin of ourselves or others. Like that old cartoon said: “We have seen the enemy, and he is us.” The London Times asked a number of writers for essays on the topic “What’s Wrong With the World? G.K. Chesterton’s reply was the shortest and truest in history.

Dear Sirs,
I am.
Sincerely, G.K. Chesterton

The second kind of evil is called “natural evil”

These are things like earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes that cause suffering. These are also the result of sin being allowed into the world. As one author explained: “When we humans told God to shove off, He partially honored our request. Nature began to revolt. The earth was cursed. Genetic breakdown and disease began. Pain and death became part of the human experience.”

Genesis 3:18 says it’s because of sin that nature was corrupted, and “thorns and thistles” entered the world. Romans 8:22 says, “For we know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain like the pain of childbirth.”

Nature longs for redemption to come and for things to be set right. But couldn’t God have foreseen all of this? He did. But look at it this way: many of you are parents. Even before you had children, couldn’t you foresee that there was the very real possibility they may suffer disappointment or pain or heartache in life, or that they might even hurt you and walk away from you? Of course, but you still had kids. Why? Because you knew there was also the potential for deep love and great meaning.

And it’s the same with God. He knew we’d rebel against Him, but He also knew many people would choose to follow Him and spend eternity in heaven with Him, and that it was all worth it for that, even though it would cost His own Son great pain to achieve their redemption.

2. BEING FAITHFUL TO GOD WILL NOT ELIMINATE ALL SUFFERING

God does not promise health and prosperity in return for faith. Job was the most righteous man on the earth when incredible suffering hit him. Notice how he responded. After going through incredible suffering, said,

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb; and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.” Job 1:21

Job says God could do whatever he wanted and was not obligated to give him anything not health, not wealth, not a pleasure, nothing. He had faith, but that did not exempt him from suffering.

Many TV preachers tell people that if they’ll just have enough faith, they will never be sick, they will always have plenty of money and nice cars, and all of their loved ones will be saved. If you’re one of their followers and you don’t get what they say you’re supposed to have, guess what they’ll tell you? “You don’t have enough faith.” That’s not what Jesus taught, and that’s not what the apostles experienced.

EMBRACING TRUTH ABOUT SUFFERING

1. THOUGH SUFFERING ISN’T GOOD, GOD CAN USE IT TO ACCOMPLISH GOOD.

Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

There are several ways He does that.

a) God uses pain to draw people toward Christ.

Philosopher Peter Kreeft put it this way: “The meaning and purpose of suffering in history is that it leads to repentance. Only after suffering, only after disaster, does Israel, do nations, do individuals turn back to God. Suffering brings repentance.”

As C.S. Lewis says: ‘God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.’” We are more likely to turn to God with all of our hearts when we experience suffering or loss than we are when we’re happy and trouble-free.

Second Corinthians 7:10 says: “For God sometimes uses sorrow in our lives to help us turn away from sin and seek eternal life....”

It is often through suffering that God leads us into the greatest joy in life, which is an intimate relationship with Him. And the truth is that it's worth any price if it means coming to know God personally. Joni Eareckson Tada has suffered for more than thirty years ever since she broke her neck as a teenager and was paralyzed. She said, "I'd rather be in this wheelchair knowing God than on my feet without Him." Whatever it takes to bring you to God is worth it.

b) God uses pain to sharpen our character; to help His children become more like Christ.

Romans 5:3 says: "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

Improvements in our character and our wisdom usually come through a process involving sacrifice, difficulty, trials or pain. That's how we learn and mature and grow.

Hebrews 5:8: "But even though he was God's Son he learned to be obedient by means of his sufferings."

If Jesus learned obedience through suffering, then why would that be any less true of us?

c) God uses pain to lovingly discipline His children for their own good so that we might learn the right path to take.

Hebrews 12:10-11 says: "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Discipline is not punishment. Punishment is retribution for misdeeds of the past. Discipline is the loving way that we correct someone's behavior so their future will be better for them. The worst thing you can do as a parent would be to not correct your child when he or she is straying. When you discipline your child, you are protecting him from the harm that will result if they continue to walk in the wrong direction.

God has the big picture and we don't. He can see the good that will result from the discipline He allows, but most of the time we can't see it when we're in the midst of it. For example, you're walking in the woods and come across a bear with his leg in a trap. You have compassion for the bear and want to help him, but he's afraid of you and not cooperating so you have to shoot him with tranquilizers. The bear thinks you're trying to

hurt and kill him. He can't understand why you'd intentionally inflict harm that way. Then, to get his leg out of the trap, you have to first push it deeper into the trap to release the tension on the spring. If the bear were still semi-conscious, he would be even more convinced you were out to hurt him. But he would be wrong! He can only see the situation from his limited perspective, and wonders, "Why is he making me suffer?" And we see things from our limited perspective. We wonder why God is allowing pain in our lives when actually he's allowing it because he sees the big picture and knows it's the best thing that can happen to us.

Joni Eareckson-Tada put it this way: "Every sorrow we taste will one day prove to be the best possible thing that could have happened. We will thank God endlessly in heaven for the trials He sent us here.

d) God can use our suffering to strengthen our faith

Pretend that you are prisoner of war and you have an evil taskmaster who tries to make you weak and powerless by forcing you to carry a heavy boulder on your shoulders all day. Some of your fellow prisoners give in under the strain, and stop trying, and let the boulder crush them completely. But you keep carrying the weight. Soon you discover that carrying that boulder isn't making you weaker, it's making you stronger. Eventually you have the strength to cast the boulder aside and overpower your captor and earn your freedom.

This is exactly what your problems can do for you. You can give up and let your problems destroy you, or you can use them to become a stronger and better person. No one in their right mind would choose to suffer, but when it happens, we can rejoice in the fact that the suffering isn't going to beat us; we will eventually win the battle.

If you're committed to God, He promises that He can take whatever pain you're experiencing and draw something good from it. God took the worst thing that has ever happened in the history of the universe — the death of Christ on the cross and turned it into the very best thing that has happened in history of universe. So if God can take the very worst and turn it into the very best, can he not take the negative circumstances of your life and create something good from them?

2. THE DAY IS COMING WHEN SUFFERING WILL CEASE AND EVIL WILL BE JUDGED.

A lot of times you'll hear people say: "If God has the power to eradicate evil and suffering, why doesn't He do it?" And the answer is that because He hasn't done it yet doesn't mean He won't do it. The Bible says that the day will come when sickness and pain will be removed and people will be held accountable for the evil they've committed.

So what's holding Him up? One answer is that some of you are. He's actually delaying the consummation of history in anticipation that some of you will still put your trust in Him and spend eternity in heaven.

Second Peter 3:9 says: "The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

3. OUR SUFFERING WILL PALE IN COMPARISON TO WHAT GOD HAS IN STORE FOR HIS FOLLOWERS.

Look at this verse and remember it was written by the apostle Paul, who suffered through beatings and stonings and shipwrecks and imprisonments and rejection and hunger and thirst and homelessness and far more pain that most of us will ever have to endure. These are his words:

Second Corinthians 4:17: "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

Romans 8:18: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Think of it this way. Let's say that on the first day of 2008, you had a terrible day. You had a painful root canal at the dentist. You crashed your car. Your stock portfolio took a nosedive. Your spouse got sick. A friend betrayed you. From start to finish, it like the title of that children's book: Alexander & the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.

But then every other day of the year was just plain terrific. You get promoted at work to your dream job. Time magazine puts your color photo on its cover as "The Person of the Year." You have your first child and he's healthy and strong. Your marriage is idyllic, your health is fabulous, you have a three-month vacation in Tahiti.

Then next New Year's Day someone asks, "So, how was your 2008?" You'd say, "It was great; it was wonderful!" And they'd say, "But didn't it start out bad? Didn't you go through a lot of trouble that first day?"

You'd think for a moment and say, "You're right. It was a bad day, no denying it. It was difficult at the time. But when I look at the totality of the year, when I put everything in context, it's been a great year. The 364 terrific days far outweigh the one bad day. It just sort of fades away."

And the same will be true in heaven. That's not to deny the reality of your pain in this life. It might be terrible, but in heaven, after 54,484,545 days of pure bliss — and with an infinite more to come — if someone asked, "So, how has your existence been?", you'd instantly react by saying, "It has been absolutely wonderful! Words can't describe the joy and the delight and the fulfillment!"

And if they said, "But didn't you have a tough time before you got here," you'd probably think back and say, "Well, yes, it's true that those days were painful, I can't deny that. But when I put them into context, in light of all God's outpouring of goodness to me, those bad days aren't even worth comparing with the eternity of blessings and joy that I've experienced."

4. WE DECIDE WHETHER TO TURN BITTER OR TURN TO GOD FOR PEACE AND COURAGE.

We've all seen examples of how the same suffering that causes one person to turn bitter, to reject God, to become hard and angry and sullen, can cause another person to turn to God, to become more gentle and more loving and more tender, willing to reach out to compassionately help other people who are in pain.

Some who loses a child to a drunk driver turn inward in chronic rage and never-ending despair; another turns outward to help others by founding Mothers Against Drunk Drivers.

Not all of us benefit from suffering and learn from it, because that's up to us, it's up to our free will." We make the choice to either run away from God or to run to Him. But if we run to him, we will be blessed.

God isn't some distant, detached, and disinterested deity; He entered into our world and into our pain. Jesus is there, sitting beside us in the lowest places of our lives. Corrie ten Boom wrote these words: "No matter how deep our darkness, he is deeper still." Every tear we shed becomes his tear.