

The Problem of Suffering

Riverwood Covenant Church, January 8, 2023

Randy W. Nelson, University of Northwestern—St. Paul, MN

Joni Eareckson Tada. “Born the youngest of four daughters, Joni (pronounced Johnny) Eareckson grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, in the loving care of a tight-knit Christian family. She enjoyed the fellowship of her sisters, and countless friends while leading an active lifestyle that included horseback riding, survival outings, hiking, and swimming. During Joni’s teen years, she accepted Christ as her Savior, but still occasionally battled temptation and sin. Though happy and grateful for God’s blessings, deep down Joni longed and prayed for God to accomplish a transformative work in her life. The summer after Joni graduated high school, she joined friends at the beach to swim. On that hot July day, Joni misjudged the depth of the water and dove from a raft into the murky shallows. In her award-winning autobiography, Joni explains that life-altering moment at Chesapeake Bay in vivid detail: ‘I heard or felt a loud electric buzzing, an unexplainable inner sensation. It was something like an electrical shock, combined with a vibration—like a heavy metal spring being suddenly and sharply uncoiled, its ‘sprong’ perhaps muffled by the water. Yet it wasn’t really a sound or even a feeling—just a sensation. I felt no pain.’ The accident left Joni permanently paralyzed from the shoulders down. She underwent multiple surgeries and spent half a year pinned horizontally to a specialized hospital bed called a Stryker frame until her severed spine had healed enough to begin rehabilitation. During her long, gruelling years of recovery, Joni experienced depression, anger, resentment, and thoughts of suicide. Her despair over the permanency of her quadriplegia caused her to question God’s goodness and even His existence” (www.christianity.com).

INTRODUCTION TO PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

Questions about Suffering

- Is suffering universal?
- Are Christians immune to suffering?
- What type of suffering do people experience?
- Do people suffer equally, i.e., types and degrees of suffering?
- What happens to people’s faith when they encounter suffering?
- What is the immediate need for someone who is suffering?
- What types of theological questions usually follow suffering?
- How do theists make sense of suffering?

Three Concerns of Suffering

Personal Concern: Why am I suffering?

Pastoral Concern: How can I minister to those who are suffering?

Theological Concerns: Why does God allow or even cause suffering?

THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

Four Theistic Beliefs

1. God exists.
2. God is all-powerful.
3. God is all-good.
4. Suffering is real.

Clarification of Problem

- If God is all-powerful, he could stop human suffering.
- If God is all-good, he should want to stop human suffering.
- Yet, humans continue to suffer.
- How do theists explain this contradiction in their beliefs?

Eight Solutions to the Problem of Suffering

1. Atheism: Deny that God exists.
2. Finitism: Deny that God is all-powerful.
3. Dualism: Deny that God is all-good.
4. Idealism: Deny that suffering is real.
5. Free-will defense: Redefine God's omnipotence
6. Character-building defense: Redefine God's omnibenevolence
7. Best-of-All-Worlds defense: Redefine suffering
8. Mystery defense: Claim ignorance ("Everything happens for a reason")

THEODICY

Theodicy: Defense (*dike*) of God (*theos*) in the face of suffering. A theodicy attempts to demonstrate that the existence of God is not incompatible with the presence of suffering.

Limits of Theodicies

- Theodicies are constructed by humans who are finite and fallen.
- No one theodicy is helpful to all people at all times.
- Theodicies can become "pat answers" that are more hurtful than helpful.
- Some suffering might have multiple reasons.
- Some suffering might be inexplicable on this side of eternity.

Benefit of Theodicies

- Theodicies can help to provide a broader perspective on suffering.
- Theodicies can help to provide comfort during suffering.
- Theodicies can help to provide meaning after suffering.
- Theodicies can help to restore faith in God.

Richard Rice: “A theodicy is a kind of map. Its purpose is to locate our suffering on the landscape of human experience and help us find a way through it...To change the comparison, a theodicy is less like emergency surgery than physical therapy. It may not belong in a first aid kit for sufferers, but it does have a place in long term care. Ordinarily, people numbed by enormous loss are not ready for theorizing. What they need most is a helping hand or a shoulder to cry on. Over the long haul, however, they often need something more—a sense of where they are and a reason to keep going. That’s where a theodicy can help” (*Suffering and the Search for Meaning*, 21-22).

FREE WILL THEODICY

Freewill Theodicy

- Affirms beliefs (2) God is all-powerful and (3) God is all-good.
- Also affirms belief (4) Suffering is real.
- Redefines belief (2) God is all-powerful (omnipotent).

Traditional Definitions of Omnipotence

- God is all-powerful (i.e., almighty).
- God has infinite power.
- God is unlimited in his ability.
- God can do anything and all things.

Biblical Support for Omnipotence

“I am God Almighty” (Gen. 17:1).

"Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14).

“Great is our Lord and mighty in power” (Ps. 147:5).

“For the Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out and who can turn it back” (Is. 14:27).

“Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom” (Isa. 40:28).

"Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you" (Jer. 32:17).

“I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?” (Jer. 32:27).

“With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God” (Mt. 10:27).

“With God all things are possible” (Mt. 19:26).

“Everything is possible for you” (Mk. 14:36).

“For nothing is impossible with God” (Lk. 1:37).

“What is impossible with man is possible with God” (Lk. 18:27).

“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21).

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:8).

“Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come’” (Rev. 4:8).

“I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Rev. 21:22).

Is God’s Omnipotence Limited?

- The Bible asserts that there are some things that God cannot do.
- God cannot change.
- God can neither lie nor be tempted by evil.

Biblical Support for Limitations on God’s Omnipotence

"God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind" (Num. 23:19).

“He who is the glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man that he should change his mind” (I Sam. 15:29).

"But you do not change, and your years will never end" (Ps. 102:27).

“The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind” (Ps. 110:4).

"I the Lord do not change" (Mal. 3:6).

“He cannot disown himself” (II Tim. 2:13).

“God, who does not lie” (Titus 1:2).

"Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged" (Heb. 6:17-18).

"Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow" (Heb. 13:8).

"God cannot be tempted by evil" (James 1:13).

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17).

Are there other things that God cannot do?

- Can God make $2 + 2 = 5$?
- Can God make square circles?
- Can God make triangles with four sides?
- Can God create a rock so heavy that even he can't lift it?
- Can God contradict himself?
- Is God limited by logic?

What is Logic?

- Logic is the study of correct thinking.
- Logical fallacies are examples of faulty thinking.
- Did humans invent logic or discover logic?

Laws of Logic

- Law of Identity: A thing is what it is.
- Law of Non-contradiction: No statement is both true and false.
- Law of Excluded Middle: Every statement is either true or false.

Law of Non-Contradiction

- This basic principle of logic states that something is not what it isn't.
- "Contradictory propositions cannot both be true in the same sense at the same time."

"Anyone who denies the law of non-contradiction should be beaten and burned, until he admits that being beaten is not the same as not being beaten and being burned is not the same as not being burned" (Avicenna, Islamic Philosopher).

Law of Non-Contradiction Distinguishes Inconsistencies

- Communication vs. Miscommunication
- Integrity vs. Duplicity
- Honest vs. Lying
- Faithfulness vs. Unfaithfulness
- Immutability vs. Changeability

Redefinition of Omnipotence

- God can do all things consistent with his character.
- God's character includes holiness and logic.

Isn't This the Same as Finitism?

- With finitism, there are external limits on God, e.g., time, space.
- With the redefinition, there are no external limitations on God's power.
- The only limitations on God are internal.
- Should these really be considered limitations?

Humans Were Created to Be Free Moral Agents

- God is a moral God who created a universe with a moral structure.
- God also created moral agents, e.g., angels and humans.
- These moral agents are free to choose either to obey God or disobey God.
- Obedience is morally right while disobedience is morally wrong.
- God has the absolute right to establish moral boundaries for moral agents.
- God reveals his moral will through general and special revelation.
- General revelation includes moral conscience and judicial sentiment.
- Special revelation is found in Scripture.
- God holds moral agents accountable for their moral choices.
- Obedience is praiseworthy and rewardable.
- Disobedience is blameworthy and punishable.

Human Freedom and Logic

- Free moral agents have free will to make moral choices.
- Free will is the ability to choose to either obey or disobey.
- Human freedom, in fact, requires the ability to do wrong.
- Free will is eliminated if an action is coerced.
- God could have created robots that always choose to obey.
- But God cannot logically create a free moral agent who always chooses to obey.
- Why did God choose to create free agents?

Responsibility for Human Suffering

- Humans are responsible for the suffering in the world.
- We sinned by choosing to disobey God's moral commands.
- We are now a sinful people living in a cursed earth under Satan's rule.
- We suffer because of our bad choices and the bad choices of other humans.

Two Types of Suffering in the World

Moral Suffering

- Results from the evil choices of free moral agents, i.e., humans and angels.
- Some suffer from the consequences of their evil choices.
- Others suffer from the consequences of someone else's evil choices.
- Examples: lying, stealing, assault, rape, slavery, murder, war, genocide

Natural Suffering

- Results from God's curse on the earth due to human disobedience (Rom. 8:20-22).
- Examples: earthquakes, tornados, floods, hurricanes, diseases

Richard Rice: "There is suffering in the world...because some of God's creatures misused their freedom. God gave certain creatures the capacity to make important choices, in particular the choice to give or withhold their loyalty to God, to obey or disobey God's commands. Sadly, they disregarded God's directives, and the world's ills are ultimately the result of their rebellion. Suffering, then, is a consequence of sin, and sin is the misuse of freedom" (*Suffering and the Search for Meaning*, 44).

CHARACTER-BUILDING THEODICY

Character-Building Theodicy

- Affirms beliefs (2) God is all-powerful and (3) God is all-good.
- Also affirms belief (4) Suffering is real.
- Redefines belief (3) God is all-good (omnibenevolence).

Traditional Understanding of God's Omnibenevolence

- God is all-good.
- There is no evil in God's will or character.
- God is kind and generous in all his actions.
- All that God does is worthy of approval.
- Humans are especially the object of God's goodness.
- There is no good reason for God to cause human suffering.
- Therefore, God does not cause human suffering.

Biblical Support for God's Omnibenevolence

"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).

"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever" (1 Chron. 16:34).

"How abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear you, that you bestow in the sight of all, on those who take refuge in you" (Ps. 31:19).

"Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him" (Ps. 34:8).

"You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain, for so you have ordained it" (Ps. 65:9).

"For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless" (Ps. 84:11).

"For the Lord is good and his love endures forever" (Ps. 100:5).

"Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Ps. 103:1-5).

"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever" (Ps. 107:1).

"You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees" (Ps. 119:68).

"The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made" (Ps. 145:9).

"The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him" (Lam. 3:25).

"He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends his rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Mt. 5:45).

"If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him" (Mt. 7:11).

"But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (Lk. 6:35).

"No one is good--except God alone" (Lk. 18:19).

"Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Acts 14:17).

“Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4).

“Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness” (Rom. 11:22).

“And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17).

Is There a Morally Sufficient Reason to Cause Suffering?

(1) Greater Good May be Served

- A morally sufficient reason for causing suffering is that a greater good may be served.
- Example: A doctor causes pain during a medical procedure.
- The doctor is not morally culpable for reasonable pain that he caused.
- Example: A physical trainer causes pain during exercise or rehabilitation.
- The physical trainer is not morally culpable for reasonable pain that he caused.

(2) Greater Evil May be Prevented

- A morally sufficient reason for causing suffering is that a greater evil may be prevented.
- Example: A parent disciplines a child to deter bad behavior.
- The parent is not morally culpable for reasonable pain that is caused.
- Example: A judge imposes punishment on criminals, e.g., fines, detainment, death.
- The judge is not morally culpable for stealing, kidnapping, or murder.

(3) Greater Danger May be Avoided

- A morally sufficient reason for causing suffering is to warn of greater dangers.
- Example: The burning sensation of touching a hot stove prevents more serious burns.
- Pain is a hard teacher (“school of hard knocks”).
- Example: Pain can provide a warning of serious illness.

Distinction in God’s Will

- Decretive will. God “causes” certain things to happen, even if by secondary means.
- Permissive will. God “allows” certain things to happen.
- Moral will. God “commands” certain things to happen.
- Dispositional will. God “desires” certain things to happen.

Questions to Ponder

- Can God build human character from suffering that results from human causation?
- Would God ever allow human suffering to serve a greater good or prevent a greater evil?
- Would God ever cause human suffering to serve a greater good or prevent a greater evil?
- What greater good or greater evil could justify the divine causation of suffering?

Does God Ever Cause Suffering?

Biblical Examples of the Divine Causation of Human Suffering

- The Curse (Gen. 3:16-19)
- The Flood (Gen. 6:5-8, 18-23)
- Fire on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24-25)
- Ten Plagues on Egypt (Ex. 7:14-11:10)
- Destruction of Pharaoh's Army (Ex. 14:26-28)
- Covenant Curses for Nation of Israel (Deut. 28:15-29)
- Jesus' Suffering (Acts. 2:22-24; 4:27-28)
- God's Chastisement of Believers (Heb. 12:4-11)
- Eternal Suffering in Hell (Rev. 20:10-15)

God Takes Responsibility for Some Human Suffering

"The Lord said to him [Moses], 'Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord?'" (Exodus 4:11).

"See now that I myself am he! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand" (Deut. 32:39).

"The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord sends poverty and wealth" (I Sam. 2:6).

"This is what the Lord says: 'Out of your [David's] own household I am going to bring calamity upon you'" (II Sam. 12:11).

"Have you not heard? Long ago I ordained it. In days of old I planned it; now I have brought it to pass, that you have turned fortified cities into piles of stone" (II Kings 19:25).

"The Lord foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations" (Ps. 33:10-11).

"Our God is in heaven; he does whatever he pleases" (Ps. 115:3).

"The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths" (Ps. 135:6).

“The Lord works out everything for his own ends” (Pr. 16:4).

“When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future” (Eccl. 7:14).

“No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?” (Isa. 43:13).

“I form the light and create the darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things” (Isa. 45:7).

“With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please” (Jer. 27:5).

“Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?” (Lam. 3:37-38).

“He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them” (Dan. 2:21).

“The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men” (Dan. 4:17).

“All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: “What have you done?” (Dan. 4:35).

“When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?” (Amos 3:6).

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father” (Matt. 10:29).

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned...but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life” (Jn. 9:3).

“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Lk. 22:42).

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:18-21).

“For Scripture says to Pharaoh: ‘I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. One of

you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?’ ‘But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?’ (Rom. 9:17-21).

“It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil” (I Peter 3:17).

Clarification of Omnibenevolence

- God is all-good.
- But sometimes, according to Scripture, God causes human suffering.
- The divine causation of suffering does not diminish God’s goodness.

Morally Sufficient Reasons for Divine Causation of Suffering

- To serve a greater good: Build human character
- To prevent a greater evil: Chastise and punish disobedience
- To warn of a greater danger: Pain gets our attention

What Kind of Character is God Attempting to Build in Us?

- When we place our faith in Christ, we are born again (Jn. 1:12-13).
- We are adopted as children into God’s forever family (Rom. 8:16-17).
- As fellow Christians, we are brothers and sisters in Christ.
- “God loves us the way we are but too much to leave us this way” (Leighton Ford).
- God desires that Christians grow in the intimacy of their relationship with him.
- This requires that we grow in spiritual maturity.
- The goal of our spiritual development is to be formed into the image of Christ.

“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” (Rom. 8:29).

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2).

"Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (II Cor. 7:11).

“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

"For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (I Thess. 4:7).

Richard Rice: “According to ‘soul making theodicy,’ as it is often called, the value of moral growth or character development provides us with the best explanation for the presence of suffering in the world. From this perspective, it is not only possible for us to grow through suffering, suffering is absolutely essential to our growth. Without it we could never become everything we are meant to be. The lessons we most need to learn, the qualities of character we most need to acquire, are possible only if we undergo hardship and difficulty. To fulfill our potential, we therefore need the sort of environment that contains obstacles and challenges. And for this reason, the world as it presently exists, dangerous and threatening though it is, represents an ideal place for personal growth. It is the perfect setting for character development” (Suffering and the Search for Meaning, 63).

Biblical Support for Character-Building Theodicy

“But we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character; and character hope” (Rom. 5:3-4).

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ” (2 Cor. 1:3-5).

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Cor. 4:16-17).

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you” (James 1:2-5).

God Disciplines His Peoples

“In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.’ [Pr. 3:11-12] Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order 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” (Heb. 12:4-11).

God Wants His People to Bear Fruit

“Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down’” (Lk. 13:6-9).

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (Jn. 15:1-8).

Warren Wiersbe, *Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God’s People* (1984).

“A faith that can’t be tested can’t be trusted” (13).

“Suffering will be either your master or your servant, depending on how you handle the crises in your life. After all, a crisis doesn’t make a person; it reveals what a person is made of. What life does to us depends on what life finds in us” (14).

“The furnace of suffering has a way of testing the genuineness of our relationship with God. Is our faith real? Do we love Him for who He is or only for what he does for us?” (57).

“God has not promised to make us comfortable, but He has determined to make us conformable. He will put us into the furnace to remove the dross and to make us moldable in His hands. But keep this in mind: When you are in the furnace, you Father keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat. He knows just how much we can take” (72).

“When discussing these matters, I sometimes shock people by asking them, ‘Why do you want to see the world changed and all the bad things eliminated?’ Their usual answer is, ‘So that we can enjoy life more.’ Then I ask, ‘Do you think you would be a better person if you enjoyed life more?’ Too often, that question goes unanswered. The purpose of life is not enjoyment, to the exclusion of building character and glorifying God. We have no guarantee that a better environment would produce better people, that the absence of disease and pain would also mean the absence of hatred and deceit” (80).

“The trials of life can be God’s tools for engraving His image on our character. The experiences may not be enjoyable, but they can be profitable” (120).

“The Craftsman is our loving Father. We are the raw material. Suffering is the tool. Character is the product” (123).

“Our present suffering is an investment in future glory” (144).

MYSTERY SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

Mystery Solution

- Affirms belief (1) God exists.
- Affirms beliefs (2) God is all powerful and (3) God is all-good.
- Affirms belief (4) Suffering is real.

Clarification of Mystery Solution

- Unable to explain apparent contradiction between four propositions.
- This, however, is no reflection on God and his purposes.
- Rather, it reflects on the limits of human understanding.
- Humans are finite and sinful (noetic effect of sin).
- Believes that God is sovereign over his creation; nothing slips through his fingers.
- God has a perfect plan that is unfolding according to his purposes and for his glory.
- “Everything happens for a reason.”
- Nothing happens outside of God’s will.
- It is difficult to understand how suffering fits into to God’s plans.
- Presently, humans don’t have enough facts to render a fair judgment about God.
- Gives God the benefit of the doubt trusting that he has a reason for suffering.
- Accepts that some suffering is inexplicable on this side of eternity.
- Relies upon God’s presence and peace during times of suffering.

Biblical Support for Mystery Solution

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good” (Gen. 50:20).

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God” (Deut. 29:29).

“My heart is not proud, Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me” (Ps. 131:1).

“Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain” (Ps. 139:6).

“Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom” (Ps. 145:3).

“Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit” (Ps. 147:5).

“Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom” (Isa. 40:28).

“Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please’ (Isa. 46:9-10).

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord” (Is. 55:8).

“This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (Acts 2:23).

“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” (Rom. 8:28).

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways” (Rom. 11:33).

“What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived—the things God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).

JOB AND THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

Book of Job is Corrective Retributive Principle

- The righteous (wise) are blessed so that they always prosper.
- Thus, prosperity is a measure of righteousness
- The wicked (foolish) are cursed so that they always suffer.
- Thus, suffering is a measure of wickedness.
- The retributive principle is the result of absolutizing Proverbs.
- But are the proverbs to be interpreted as absolutes?
- Are Job's “friends” vindicated for condemning Job?

“In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil (*rah*)” (Job 1:1).

“The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger’ (Job 1:12).

“At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and 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.’ In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing” (Job 1:21-22).

“His wife said to him, ‘Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die.’ He replied, ‘You are talking like a foolish woman. **Shall we accept good from God and not trouble (rah)?**’ In all this, Job did not sin in what he said” (Job 2:10).

“Which of all these [animals] does not know that **the hand of the Lord has done this**? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind” (Job 12:9-10).

“[Job said,] Your maxims are proverbs of ashes; your defenses are defenses of clay. Keep silent and let me speak; then let come to me what may. Why do I put myself in jeopardy and take my life in my hands? **Though he slay me**, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face. Indeed, this will turn out for my deliverance, for no godless person would dare come before him! Listen carefully to what I say; let my words ring in your ears. Now that I have prepared my case, I know I will be vindicated. Can anyone bring charges against me? If so, I will be silent and die” (Job 13:12-19).

“Then Job replied: ‘Even today my complaint is bitter; **his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning**. If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say to me. Would he vigorously oppose me? No, he would not press charges against me. There the upright can establish their innocence before him, and there I would be delivered forever from my judge” (Job 23:1-7).

“Then the Lord answered Job out of the storm. He said: ‘Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you will answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me if you understand. Who marks off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together, and all the angels shouted for joy?’” (Job 38:1-7)

“The Lord said to Job: ‘Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him.’ Then Job answered the Lord: ‘I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more.’ Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm: ‘Brace yourself like a man; I will question you and you will answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God’s, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor and clothe yourself in honor and majesty. Unleash the fury of your wrath, look at every proud man and bring him low, look at every proud man and humble him, crush the wicked where they stand. Bury them all in the dust together; shroud their faces in the grave. Then I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you” (Job 40:1-14).

“Then Job replied to the Lord: ‘I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?’ Surely, I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you and you will answer me.’ My ears had heard of you

but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:1-6).

“They [Job's brothers and sisters] comforted and consoled him over **all the trouble (rah) the Lord had brought upon him**” (Job 42:16).

Conclusions about Suffering from Book of Job

- Job was a righteous man who suffered greatly.
- Job attributed his suffering ultimately to God (1:21-22; 2:10; 12:9-10; 23:1).
- But Job did not accuse God of wrongdoing.
- Job wanted to confront God about the extent of his suffering.
- Job gets his day in court, but God confronts Job about his finite perspective.
- Job acknowledges God’s sovereignty and his own ignorance.

Billy Graham: “The Book of Job does not set out to answer the problem of suffering, but to proclaim a God so great that no answer is needed.”

DEALING WITH SUFFERING

Reality Check about the Human Condition

- The world we live in is not the good world that God created (Gen. 1-2).
- Humans are sinful people living in a cursed earth under Satan’s control (Gen. 3).
- Suffering is universal; no one is untouched by it.
- Yet God is benevolent and continues to bless humans (Mt. 5:45; Acts 14:17).
- God sent Jesus to atone for human sins so that we might be reconciled to him.
- Our restored relationship with God begins now and continues for eternity in heaven.
- Christians, however, are not immune to suffering in this present evil age.

Our Need in Suffering

Immediate Need in Suffering

- Our immediate need is for comfort.
- Spend time with God through Scripture reading, prayer, and worship.
- Reach out to church family, immediate family, and close friends.
- Seek help through a doctor, a counselor, or a support group.

Long Term Need in Suffering

- Choose to get better rather than bitter.
- Find meaning in suffering.
- Develop a constructive interpretive style.
- Fight cynicism that can result from suffering.

Where is God when We Suffer?

God Can and Does Intervene in Suffering

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (Mt. 4:23).

“Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” (Mt. 12:1).

“Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him” (Acts 3:6-10).

“God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them” (Acts 19:11-12).

“But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me” (Phil. 2:25-30).

“Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:13-16).

Sometimes God Chooses not to Intervene

“Then David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’ Nathan replied, ‘The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because by doing this you have shown utter contempt for the Lord, the son born to you will die.’ After Nathan had gone home, the Lord struck the child that Uriah’s wife had borne to David, and he became ill. David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them. On the seventh day the child died. David’s attendants were afraid

to tell him that the child was dead, for they thought, ‘While the child was still living, he wouldn’t listen to us when we spoke to him. How can we now tell him the child is dead? He may do something desperate.’ David noticed that his attendants were whispering among themselves, and he realized the child was dead. ‘Is the child dead?’ he asked. ‘Yes,’ they replied, ‘he is dead.’ Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the Lord and worshipped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate. His attendants asked him, ‘Why are you acting this way? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that the child is dead, you get up and eat!’ He answered, ‘While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, “Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me and let the child live.” But now that he is dead, why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me’” (2 Sam. 12:13-23).

“Going a little farther, he [Jesus] fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. ‘Abba, Father,’ he said, ‘everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will’” (Mk. 14:35-36).

"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Cor. 12:8-9).

“Stop drinking only water and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses” (1 Tim. 5:23).

“Erastus stayed in Corinth, and I left Trophimus sick in Miletus” (2 Tim. 4:20).

God Promises Perfect Healing only in Heaven

“So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:42-44).

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away’” (Rev. 21:3-4).

Amid Suffering, God Promises His Presence and Peace

- God does not promise to eliminate all human suffering on this side of eternity.
- Jesus makes it clear that suffering will continue even for believers.
- God does promise his presence and peace through our suffering.
- As believers, we are called to trust God and persevere.

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Josh. 1:9).

“When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. ‘Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?’ the servant asked. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ the prophet answered. ‘Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’ And Elisha prayed, ‘Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see.’ Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (1 Kings 6:15-17).

“In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety” (Ps. 4:8).

“The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace” (Ps. 29:11).

“To you, Lord, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy: ‘What is gained if I am silenced, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness? Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me; Lord, be my help.’ You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. Lord my God, I will praise you forever” (Ps. 30:8-12).

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. The righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all” (Ps. 34:18-19).

“I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him” (Ps. 40:1-3).

“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?” (Ps. 56:3-4).

“Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken” (Ps. 62:1-2).

“Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens” (Ps. 68:19).

“I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by distress and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the Lord: ‘Lord, save me!’ The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The Lord protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me. Return to your rest, my soul, for the Lord has been good to you” (Ps. 116:1-7).

“When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord; he brought me into a spacious place. The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? The Lord is with me; he is my helper. I look in triumph on my enemies” (Ps. 118:5-7).

“Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn your commands. May those who fear you rejoice when they see me, for I have put my hope in your word. I know,

Lord, that your laws are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me. May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant. Let your compassion come to me that I may live, for your law is my delight” (Ps. 119:73-77).

“I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber” (Ps. 121:1-3).

“You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal” (Isa. 26:3-4).

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isa. 41:10).

“But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit” (Jer. 17:7-8).

“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him’” (Lam. 3:22-24).

“The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing” (Zeph. 3:17).

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Mt. 5:4).

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28).

“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt. 28:20).

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (Jn. 14:27).

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:37-39).

“If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (Rom. 14:8).

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:13).

“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear” (1 Cor. 10:13).

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Heb. 12:2-3).

“Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy” (James 5:10-11).

“So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good” (1 Pt. 4:19).

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Pt. 5:6).

“You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 Jn. 4:4).

FINDING MEANING IN SUFFERING

Introduction

- As a result of the human condition, suffering is inevitable.
- But suffering doesn’t have to be gratuitous (i.e., without value or meaning).
- “God works all things for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28).
- With God’s help, we can build something good from our suffering.
- Perhaps one of the solutions to suffering may help us find meaning in our suffering.
- Keep in mind that these solutions are constructed by finite and fallen humans.
- No one solution can answer every incident of human suffering.
- Whatever solution we find helpful, we will still need to work through the stages of grief.

Stages of Grief

- Denial—Avoidance, confusion, shock, fear
- Anger—Frustration, irritation, anxiety
- Bargaining—Struggling to find meaning
- Depression/Anxiety—Feeling overwhelmed and helpless
- Acceptance—Consider options, make plans, and move on

Consider Helpful Solutions to the Problem of Suffering

Mystery Solution

- We won't know the reason for suffering on this side of eternity.
- Despite this, we trust God and give him the benefit of the doubt.

Free Will Solution

- God is omnipotent, able to do all things consistent with his character, e.g., integrity, logic.
- God cannot create free moral agents who always do the right thing.
- Humans suffer because of their bad choices and the bad choices of others.
- As a result of sin, humans are sinful people living in a curse earth.

Character-Building Solution

- God is omnibenevolent (all-good).
- But sometimes there is a morally sufficient reason for the divine causation of suffering.
- God punishes human sin in this life and the next.
- God chastises his people to prevent a greater evil, namely, sin.
- God tests us to bring about a greater good, namely, transformation into image of Christ.
- "God is more interested in our character than our comfort" (Warren Wiersbe).
- Suffering can provide a time for self-reflection.

Cultivate a Biblical Perspective on Life

Temporal Christian Perspective (Good)

- We should enjoy God's material gifts and blessings even though they are temporal.
- Physical and emotional suffering are painful and inevitable.
- Sadness and anger are appropriate responses to suffering.
- We should work to alleviate suffering and comfort those who are suffering.
- Average life expectancy in the U.S. is 80 years old.

Eternal Christian Perspective (Better)

- What percentage of a Christian's existence is spent on the earth?
- 80 years / Infinity = 0%
- Difficulties both reveal and build Christian character which has eternal benefits.
- God is more interested in our character than our comfort.
- Suffering refines us into the image of Christ for God's glory.
- God should be the ultimate source of our peace and joy now and forever.
- We should trust God through our suffering.
- God is creating a beautiful portrait through our lives.
- Unfortunately, we don't always see our lives from God's perspective.
- Analogies: Needle point art, Anamorphosis

Develop a Constructive Explanatory Style

Introduction to Learned Optimism

- Throughout life, people experience a variety of challenges, e.g., change, loss, failure.
- Explanatory Style: Your way of explaining challenges is important.
- Negative thinking increases your Cortisol making you more vulnerable to illness.
- Optimists are healthier and tend to live 8 years longer than pessimists.
- It's not about completely avoiding or suppressing negative thoughts.
- It's about focusing mostly on the positive in reality.

Different Explanatory Styles when Encountering Challenges

- Pessimist: The challenge is personal, pervasive, and permanent
- Optimist: The challenge is not personal, not pervasive, and not permanent.

Inspiration Quotes about Explanatory Style

"Your way of explaining events to yourself determines how helpless you become, or how energize, when you encounter the everyday setbacks as well as the momentous defeats" (Martin Seligman).

"The way we perceive, process, and attach meaning to events is typically more critical than the nature of the actual event, especially in the case of depression and anxiety" (Gail Gazelle).

"It is not the event that disturbs the minds of men, but the view they take of them" (Epictetus).

"Remember that stress does not come from what's going on in your life. It comes from your thoughts about what's going on in your life" (Andrew Bernstein).

"You cannot control what happens to you, but you can control your attitude toward what happens to you, and in that, you will be mastering change rather than allowing it to master you" (Brian Tracy).

“It is your reaction to adversity, and not adversity itself, that determines how your life’s story will develop” (Dieter Uchtdorf).

“The meaning of things lies not in things themselves, but in our attitudes toward them” (Antoine de Saint-Exupery).

“It’s the meaning (attitudes and beliefs) we attach to events, not the events themselves, that largely determine how we react to them...So being a flexible thinker (or attempting to develop such a mindset), rather than remaining locked into a fixed viewpoint, allows for adaption to changing (and often unwelcome) circumstances” (Michael Neenan)

Avoid Becoming Cynical

What is Cynicism?

- A pessimistic explanatory style can lead to bitterness when challenges are encountered.
- Left unhealed, bitterness can lead to cynicism.
- Cynicism is the belief that everyone is motivated by self-interest and cannot be trusted.
- Cynicism is a defense mechanism designed to prevent further psychological injury.
- Cynicism can become a coping tool for stress and anxiety.
- A cynic is someone who chooses to challenge, discredit, and disbelieve anything positive.
- A cynic sees themselves as a passive victim of life’s tragedies.
- A cynic blames God, life, and others for their difficulties.

Cynical Perspective

“The light at the end of the tunnel is a train.”

“A cynic is a man who, when he smells flowers, looks for a coffin” (H. L. Mencken).

“What is a cynic? A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing” (Oscar Wilde).

“A cynic is not merely one who reads bitter lessons from the past; he is one who is prematurely disappointed in the future” (Sydney Harris).

“Cynicism is my armor. Irony my shield. Sarcasm my sword.”

“Cynicism places the cynic at the center seat of judgment with the self-appointed authority to criticize and condemn” (Jayce O’Neal).

“I don’t belief cynics are born; I believe they’re developed over time through a series of failed expectations” (Christopher Cook).

“Inside every cynical person, there is a disappointed idealist” (George Carlin).

What are the Consequences of Cynicism?

- Difficult to trust people
- Second-guess people's motives
- Doubt selfless actions of others
- Sarcastic responses to people
- Lack of meaningful relationships
- Disengagement from society
- Bitter outlook on life
- Disinterested in living (apathy)
- Lack of success and happiness
- Stress, anxiety, depression, burnout
- Health issues, e.g., heart disease, cancer
- Cognitive decline, e.g., dementia, Alzheimer's
- Shorter life expectancy

“Unfortunately, always acting cynical can have a long-term negative impact on your happiness...A cynical attitude hurts you in ways you'd probably never expect. On the whole, it affects your health, career, earnings, and relationships...If you constantly complain or are often sarcastic, people will avoid you...Cynicism and poor health often work in cycle, with each factor worsening the other...Cynics are three times more likely to develop dementia than people who maintain faith in humanity...One study found that people who have cynical personalities are five-times more likely to develop depression than those who do not have this personality trait” (Steve Scott).

How Can You Fight Cynicism?

- Acknowledge your cynical tendencies.
- Stop being so judgmental of people and events.
- Cultivate a more positive outlook.
- Challenge negative and unhelpful beliefs.
- Look for positive qualities in other people.
- Focus on personal growth rather than comparison to others.
- Express gratitude to God and others.
- Be mindful of the present moment.
- Participate in positive activities.
- Limit your news consumption.
- Develop constructive relationships with positive people.
- Remove toxic people from your life.
- Set and pursue positive and constructive goals.

Inspiration Quotes about Suffering

“Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved” (Hellen Keller).

“Nothing comes into my life that doesn’t first pass through the hand of God” (Chuck Swindoll).

“Joy is not necessarily the absence of suffering; it is the presence of God” (Sam Storms).

“The truth that many people never understand, until it is too late, is that the more you try to avoid suffering the more you suffer because smaller and more insignificant things begin to torture you in proportion to your fear of being hurt” (Thomas Merton).

“God will not permit any troubles to come upon us, unless He has a specific plan by which great blessing can come out of the difficulty” (Peter Marshall).

“When we long for life without difficulties, remind us that oaks grow strong in contrary winds and diamonds are made under pressure” (Peter Marshall).

“God brings men into deep waters not to drown them, but to cleanse them” (James Aughey).

“Though poor in this world's goods, though grieving the loss of loved ones, though suffering pain of body, though harassed by sin and Satan, though hated and persecuted by worldlings, whatever be the case and lot of the Christian, it is both his privilege and duty to rejoice in the Lord” (A. W. Pink).

“At the timberline where the storms strike with the most fury, the sturdiest trees are found” (Hudson Taylor).

“When God wants to do an impossible task, He takes an impossible man and crushes him” (Alan Redpath).

“The will of God is never exactly what you expect it to be. It may seem to be much worse, but in the end it’s going to be a lot better and a lot bigger” (Elizabeth Elliot).

“If all struggles and sufferings were eliminated, the spirit would no more reach maturity than would the child” (Elizabeth Elliot).

“We want to avoid suffering, death, sin, ashes. But we live in a world crushed and broken and torn, a world God Himself visited to redeem. We receive his poured-out life, and being allowed the high privilege of suffering with Him, may then pour ourselves out for others” (Elizabeth Elliot).

“If we do anything to further the kingdom of God, we may expect to find what Christ found on that road - abuse, indifference, injustice, misunderstanding, trouble of some kind. Take it.

Why not? To that you were called. In Latin America someone who feels sorry for himself is said to look like a donkey in a downpour. If we think of the glorious fact that we are on the same path with Jesus, we might see a rainbow” (Elizabeth Elliot).

“This is God's universal purpose for all Christian suffering: more contentment in God and less satisfaction in the world” (John Piper).

“Consider the matter of suffering. Why does a God of love allow us to go through suffering? That's because suffering is a part of the syllabus in our spiritual education” (Zac Poonen).

“The disappointment has come - not because God desires to hurt you or make you miserable or to demoralize you or ruin your life or keep you from ever knowing happiness. He wants you to be perfect and complete in every aspect, lacking nothing. It's not the easy times that make you more like Jesus, but the hard times” (Kay Arthur).

“Jesus promised the disciples three things - that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy and in constant trouble” (G. K. Chesterton).

“To choose to suffer means that there is something wrong; to choose God's will even if it means suffering is a very different thing. No healthy saint ever chooses suffering; he chooses God's will, as Jesus did, whether it means suffering or not” (Oswald Chambers).

“You may suffer and yet be un-Christlike, but no man can be Christlike and fail to suffer. If you ever, by the grace of God, become a partaker of the divine nature you must also inevitably become a partaker of His sufferings” (Clovis Chappell).

“There is no perfect life, no perfect job, no perfect childhood, no perfect marriage, and no perfect set of people who will always do what we expect them to do. What we have is a perfect God who is able to lead us through this imperfect life with unfailing strength, incomparable wisdom, and infinite love.”

“Expect the best. Prepare for the worst. Capitalize on what comes” (Zig Ziglar).

“Be grateful for the good in your life. Anticipate continued good things. Make the best of what comes.”

“Make the best of the cards that you've been dealt.”

“Resilience is accepting your new reality, even if it's less good than the one you had before. You can fight it, you can do nothing but scream about what you've lost, or you can accept that and try to put together something that's good” (Elizabeth Edwards).

“If you find a path with no obstacles, it probably doesn't lead anywhere” (Frank Clark).

“There are no shortcuts to any place worth going” (Hellen Keller).

“Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts” (Winston Churchill).

“Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again” (Nelson Mandela).

“Our greatest glory consists not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall” (Oliver Goldsmith).

“Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it” (Hellen Keller).

“It has been said, ‘Time heals all wounds.’ I do not agree. The wounds remain. In time, the mind (protecting its sanity) covers them with scar tissue and the pain lessens. But it is never gone” (Rose Kennedy).

“Resilience is all about being able to overcome the unexpected. The goal of resilience isn’t to just survive but thrive” (James Casio).

“Resilience is our ability to bounce back from life’s challenges and unforeseen difficulties, providing mental protection from emotional and mental disorders” (Michael Rutter).

“On the other side of the storm is the strength that comes from having navigated through it” (Gregory Williams).

“Life doesn’t get easier or more forgiving, we get stronger and more resilient” (Steve Maraboli).

“Finding gratitude and appreciation is the key to resilience. People who take the time to list things they are grateful for are happier and healthier” (Sheryl Sanders).

“Resilience is not a single skill. It’s a variety of skills and coping mechanisms. To bounce back from bumps in the road as well as failures, you should focus on emphasizing the positive” (Jean Chatzky).

“I have seen better days, but I’ve also seen worse. I don’t have everything I want, but I do have all I need. I woke up with some aches and pains, but I woke up. My life may not be perfect, but I am blessed.”

“Some people think that to be strong is to never feel pain. In reality, the strongest people are the ones who feel it, understand it, and accept it.”

“I ask not for a lighter burden but broader shoulders” (Jewish proverb).

“Let’s practice doing hard things. When we do a hard thing, we make the next hard thing just a little easier” (Melissa Mork).

“Trials come to prove and improve us” (Augustine).

“If God were not to test us, there would be no patience” (John Calvin).

“You may readily judge whether you are a child of God or a hypocrite by seeing in what direction your soul turns in seasons of severe trial. The hypocrite flies to the world and finds a sort of comfort there. But the child of God runs to his Father and expects consolation only from the Lord's hand” (Charles Spurgeon).

“You will have not test of faith that will not fit you to be a blessing if you are obedient to the Lord. I never had a trial but when I got out of the deep river I found some poor pilgrim on the bank that I was able to help by that very experience” (A.B. Simpson).

“Believe steadfastly on Him and everything that challenges you will strengthen your faith. There is continual testing in the life of faith up to the point of our physical death, which is the last great test. Faith is absolute trust in God—trust that could never imagine that He would forsake us” (Oswald Chamber).

“Trials are medicines which our gracious and wise physician prescribes because we need them; and he proportions the frequency and weight of them to what the case requires” (John Newton).

“Sorrows and trials are like the sand and grit that polish a stone” (G. V. Wigram).

“We are always in the forge, or on the anvil; by trials God is shaping us for higher things” (Henry Ward Beecher).

“In regard of God, patience is a submission to His sovereignty. To endure a trial, simply because we cannot avoid or resist it, is not Christian patience. But to humbly submit because it is the will of God to inflict the trial, to be silent because the sovereignty of God orders it - is true godly patience” (Stephen Charnock).

“Trials should not surprise us, or cause us to doubt God's faithfulness. Rather, we should actually be glad for them. God sends trials to strengthen our trust in him so that our faith will not fail. Our trials keep us trusting; they burn away our self confidence and drive us to our Savior” (Edmund Clowney).

“I never had a trial I wanted to have, but I never had trial I wasn't glad I had” (Jack Hyles).

“The man who has an easy way through life, will be spiritually weak, flabby and impoverished. He won't be able to do all that God wants him to do. But the one who has gone through trials and testing successfully, will be strong and capable of doing all the will of God” (Zac Poonen).

“Anger and bitterness are two noticeable signs of being focused on self and not trusting God's sovereignty in your life. When you believe that God causes all things to work together for good to those who belong to Him and love Him, you can respond to trials with joy instead of anger or bitterness” (John Broger).

“Often, we endure trials seeking God's deliverance from them. Suffering is painful for us to endure or to see those we love endure. While our instinct is to flee trials, remember that even in the midst of suffering, God's will is being done” (Paul Chappell).

“For the believer in Jesus, every trial of suffering is an opportunity to grow in the faith, to grow in our relationship with the Lord, and to see Him work in our lives in a uniquely personal way that demonstrates His compassion, His comfort, His tender mercies, His loving kindnesses, His grace, and His endless love. Only God knows what each of us needs to experience and learn in order to be ‘conformed to the image of his Son’” (T. A. McMahon).

“God tests us because we are so oblivious to the mixed allegiances in our hearts. The purpose of the test is to help us see our hearts and if they are found traitorous, we can turn back to God (Edward Welch).

“Temptation and testing (or a trial) are two sides of the same coin. Satan uses an occasion or a person to tempt us to fall; God uses the same to try us and make us stronger” (Ruth Graham).

Books about Suffering

Alcorn, Randy. *If God is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil*. Colorado Spring, Multnomah, 2009.

Biebel, David. *If God is so Good, Why Do I Hurt so Bad?* Orlando: Healthy Life Press, 2014.

Carson, D.A. *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.

Colson, Charles, and Nancy Pearcey. *The Problem of Evil*. Wheaton: Tyndale, 1999.

Feinberg, John. *When There are No Easy Answers: Thinking Differently about God, Suffering, and Evil*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2016.

----- . *The Many Faces of Evil*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Kaiser, Walter. *A Biblical Approach to Personal Suffering*. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003.

Keller, Timothy. *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*. New York: Penguin Books, 2013.

Kreeft, Peter. *Making Sense out of Suffering*. Ann Arbor: Servant Ministries, 1986.

Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.

Palau, Luis. *Where is God When Bad Things Happen?* New York: Doubleday, 1999.

Piper, John, and Justin Taylor, eds. *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006.

Rice, Richard. *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*. Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014.

Sproul, R.C. *Surprised by Suffering*. London: Tyndale House Publishers, 1994.

Tada, Joni Eareckson, and Steven Estes. *When God Weeps: Why Our Suffering Matters to the Almighty*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

Wiersbe, Warren. *Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God's People*. Fleming H. Revell Company, 1984.

Yancey, Philip. *Where is God When It Hurts*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.