

“I WANT TO BELIEVE, BUT...”

Why Does God Allow Suffering?

by Steve Hixon



Looking at Current Issues from a Biblical Perspective

It was a normal week in TelevisionLand. The three made-for-TV movies featured a simulation of the Waco tragedy, a re-cap of Hurricane Andrew, and a re-enactment of the World Trade Center Bombing in New York City. The fact that they were all incredible tragedies probably didn't faze many people. We're used to a world in which senseless death and destruction is commonplace. A boy in the Sunday paper was quoted as saying, "Why did God let me be born into a family where my parents always fight?" A young couple loses a child to sudden infant death syndrome. An innocent boy exists in a coma after being randomly injured in a drive-by shooting. Whether a person believes in God or not, everyone agrees that something is wrong with this world.

Blaise Pascal, the famous philosopher, wrote: "Of all the creatures in this world, man is at the same time the creature of highest grandeur and of the worst misery. He has the ability to contemplate a better existence than he presently enjoys."

And bad things are not limited to bad people. Good people living wholesome lives seem to get mugged or injured in car accidents or die of cancer just about as often as the drug-dealer or the crooked politician. Evidently religious belief does not exempt a person from pain. All this prompted Paul Little to write, "Perhaps the greatest test of faith today is to believe that God is good."

CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

What are the great questions that come to mind when dealing with this subject? Essentially they haven't changed much over the centuries, because they are so closely tied to the man condition, no matter where or when a person is living. Some of these questions are:

- ♦ Why is there evil in the world if God is good?
- ♦ Why did this happen to me?
- ♦ Why aren't Christians exempt from pain?
- ♦ Why doesn't God just destroy all evil now?
- ♦ Why do innocent people suffer?

THE WORLD'S HISTORICAL ANSWERS

When it comes to answering these difficult questions, the world has proposed a number of answers over the years. Here are some of them:

1. God cares but he can't help it

Rabbi Kushner, a man who struggled with the pain of watching his son's life taken away by a terrible disease, wrote a book called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, in which he suggests that, while God really cares about you and me, He just can't do much to alleviate our suffering.

2. God is both good and evil

Popularized by Star Wars (Was Darth Vader good or evil?), the Ying & Yang of eastern thought, and Zoroastrianism, this view claims that God is a combination of good and evil elements, both equally powerful.

3. Docetism

Derived from the Greek word *doceteo*, which means "to appear to be", the idea here is that evil doesn't really exist except in our perception, and we should learn to just "tune it out". The Hindu Brahmans believe this; so did Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy, who wrote: "The only reality of sin, sickness, or death is the awful fact that these unrealities seem real to human, erring belief, until God strips off their disguise. We learn in Christian Science that all this is illusion."

4. Stoicism

The "macho" writers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries were called Stoics, and they had the original "big boys don't cry" philosophy. R.C. Sproul comments: "The Stoics said: 'Since conscience, human actions, and human events are strictly determined by impersonal forces of nature and since there is nothing we can do about what happens, the only thing left to us is to control our response to what happens.' They tried to condition their emotions to such a degree that nothing could disturb them. They tried to remain calm no matter what happened." This philosophy has obviously lasted down to today; you may know someone who ascribes to it; you may *be* someone who ascribes to it!

5. Hedonism

This can be characterized by Paul's assertion in 1 Corinthians 15:32 that, if Christianity is not true, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then life is essentially meaningless, and we should drown our sorrows in our drug of choice:

"If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'"

This has been re-translated for modern man into the bumper sticker which proclaims: "He who dies with the most toys wins!"

6. Existentialism

This sophisticated and somewhat modern philosophical view claims that life is absurd and has no meaning, so every man

"Can you understand why a little creature who can't even understand what's done to her should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and weep her meek, unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her?"

Ivan Karamozov's challenge to his believing brother, Alyosha, in Dostoyevski's The Brothers Karamozov

should make up his own. Shakespeare's Hamlet was expressing an existentialist's suicidal contemplation when he says "To be or not to be, that is the question; Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them." Perhaps Bertrand Russell said it best: "There is no God, therefore there is no good and evil." But if there's no God, that doesn't solve it; you must still explain the universal concept of goodness and man's preference for good over evil, even if he cannot live up to his good ideals.

7. Bad Karma

Although the average American is not a Hindu, he or she may subscribe to this view of life by asking, "What did I do to deserve this? You may have said it yourself without thinking: "What goes around comes around," or "I'm just waiting for the other shoe to drop." Now, the Bible does teach that we (in general) reap what we sow, but this view says that in every evil experience we are being "paid back" for some wrong we did. The God of the Bible does not work that way.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL DILEMMA

In most basic courses on philosophy, the instructor will lay out the classic argument, supposedly unsolvable, dealing with God and evil. It goes something like this:

1. A good God would not want evil & suffering
2. A powerful God could remove all evil and suffering.
3. Therefore, if God is good & powerful, there should be no evil & suffering.
4. But there *is* evil & suffering. So God is either not good, not powerful or does not exist.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT SUFFERING?

We have adequate but not exhaustive answers from the Scriptures when it comes to this issue. Here are seven points to consider:

1. SUFFERING IS REAL

The Bible gives no pat, superficial answers to the problem of pain. Job really suffers; the Psalmist cries out in his troubles and distress. To follow Christ does not mean that we ignore pain or somehow magically rise above it, wearing rose-colored glasses. The Christian is not supposed to blindly say, "Praise the Lord!" in every conceivable situation. Edith Schaeffer, in her book Affliction writes:

"True hope changes sorrow, but does not obliterate it. Death is not to be taken as a "normal, beautiful release", but as an enemy which separates body from spirit and human beings from each other. It spoils the beautiful creation of God. It is so basically an enemy that God says that He will pay a great price, a ransom, to deliver us from death's power. "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death..."

2. THE WORLD IS FALLEN

I once attended a philosophy class where the professor stated that Christianity claimed that this was the

"best of all possible worlds". I don't know where he got that idea, because it's certainly not in the Bible. In Genesis, at the end of each day of creation, God surveyed the scene and said, "It is good." But that is not the world as we now know it. Something terrible happened; we call it the Fall. It took place when Adam and Eve, two morally responsible beings made in God's image, used their free will to choose to disobey God and thus to abandon life lived in dependence upon Him. They wanted life on their own terms, not His, and they forfeited their spiritual lifeline. They were helped along in their decision by Satan, another responsible, moral being who had previously sinned and fallen from a relationship with God, becoming pure

evil. Not only did people change and become sinners by birth, but in some way the whole of creation changed for the worse. In Romans 8 Paul describes how it will be restored when we are:

"...the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." (Romans 8:21)

3. WHERE DOES SUFFERING COME FROM?

This world is full of suffering, and it can often be traced to certain sources. Here are a few to consider:

a. Our choices

Genesis 6:5-6 says: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain." Likewise, Judges 21:25 records, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." We make choices every day that bring us pain. Adam and Eve made the original choice to live life apart from God's prescription, but we repeat that choice constantly to lesser or greater degree. We eat foods that are bad for us, we take drugs, we disregard God's laws regarding sex, we knowingly commit crimes, we hang out with the wrong crowd, in short, we play with fire and complain when we get burned. But people are often their own worst enemies, bringing pain through foolish choices.

b. Other people's choices

We've all experienced pain because of someone else's choice, and the more influential the person, the more pain they can potentially inflict upon others. In Jesus' day, Herod's attack on babies caused weeping throughout the land. Cliffe Knechtle writes that, "The vast majority of carnage is a direct result of human choice." In his book Modern Times, a commentary on the 20th century, Paul Johnson explains: "Nietzsche said that the greatest event of recent times was the death of God. This would produce a new kind of messiah, uninhibited by any religious sanctions whatever, and with an unappeasable appetite for controlling mankind. The end of the old order, with an unguided world adrift in a relativistic universe, was a summons to such gangster-statesmen to emerge. They were not slow to make their appearance." We all know the results of the choices of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Idi Amin.

"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

C.S. Lewis

c. Satan's work

The Bible says that some suffering is a direct result of Satan's activity, although the devil is restrained. Job's pain was inflicted by Satan, and Peter was attacked; the apostle later wrote...

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8)

d. God's judgment

Some suffering has come from God's hand, as He exercises His right to judge moral evil. The great flood, for example, killed thousands of people, sparing only Noah and his family. Herod died because of his own blasphemy:

"Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died." (Acts 12:23)

e. God's discipline

At times God's dealing with His own people, as He disciplines them as children, are severe. For Achan, in the book of Joshua, his sin brought on death as he became an "example" to the rest of the nation regarding God's holiness. A similar New Testament story involved Ananias & Saphira, a couple who lied to the Holy Spirit and died as a result.

However, it would be wrong for Christians to interpret every illness or calamity as a direct result of some sin (like the "bad karma" approach mentioned above). Jesus actually dealt with this type of thinking in John 9. Seeing a blind man, His disciples asked who sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus corrected them: this blindness was no punishment for anyone's sin. As similar incident takes place in Luke 13:

"Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them -- do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Evidently one purpose of suffering is intended to make us realize our own sinful condition and ask the question, "Why don't we suffer more than we do?"

4. GOD CAN USE EVIL FOR GOOD

C.S. Lewis once wrote: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Although God is not insensitive, and He has pledged not to give us more than we can handle, at times He may choose to allow pain to get our

attention. If we respond with trust, God can and does use pain to build character, and to draw us to himself.

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." (James 1:2-3)

In 2 Corinthians Paul writes that we may become "wounded healers"- people who are sensitive to others' pain because we have gone through similar circumstances:

"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." (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

Charles Spurgeon wrote of this positive aspect of suffering in his life: "I bear willing witness that I owe more to the fire, and the hammer, and the file, than to anything else in my Lord's workshop. I sometimes question whether I have ever learned anything except through the rod. When my schoolroom is darkened, I see most." Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who came to faith in a Russian Gulag, also looked back on those painful days with a certain thankfulness: "Bless you, prison, for having been in my life."

5. GOD EXPERIENCED IT HIMSELF

One of the most common feelings in the midst of tragedy is the feeling that God is distant, that He is oblivious to our pain. Sometimes we conclude that he just doesn't understand. But nothing could be further from the truth. He knows what pain feels like.

Writer Philip Yancey once went to a cabin in the winter determined not to leave until he had read the entire Bible from start to finish. When he had completed the task, he wrote that his overwhelming impression was that God was a "jilted lover" - always initiating with mankind and constantly experiencing rejection and pain. Finally, visiting us in the Person of Jesus, he was known as "he was man of sorrows and familiar with suffering..."(Isaiah 53:4). When his close friend Lazarus died, Jesus wept at his grave, even though he knew he would raise him from death only a few minutes later. Yet he wept because his friend had died. And the pain in Jesus' last hours is unmistakable, even the pain of separation from the only One who could comfort Him - His heavenly Father: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Matthew 27:46).

God knows how we feel.

6. GOD DEFEATED IT

But God not only suffered, He did something about it - He attacked evil at its root and defeated it at the cross. Isaiah 53 describes the Messiah and says that God caused "the iniquity of us all to fall on him." When we think about the unfairness of life, we must ask, "Was that fair? Was it fair for a perfectly sinless person to receive the punishment that all of us guilty sinners deserved?"

God destroyed the power of evil so that one day there will be "no more death or mourning or crying or pain..." (Revelation 21:4). He paid the ultimate price so that we might be set free from suffering.

7. IT IS PART OF BEING A CHRISTIAN

Although there will be no more suffering in heaven, the

"The real problem is not why some humble, pious, believing people suffer, but why some do not."

CS Lewis

Bible clearly teaches that Christians are not exempt from it here on earth. In fact, there is a promise that Jesus' disciples will experience the "fellowship of his sufferings" as part of the Christian life. When Jesus' followers asked for rewards in the kingdom, he responded, "Can you drink the cup I'm about to drink?"

Peter addresses this subject as he wrote to a group of people who were experiencing a lot of pain as a direct result of their faith:

"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."

(1 Peter 4:12-13)

WHY DOESN'T GOD JUST DESTROY ALL EVIL NOW?

Finally, many people ask the question, "If God is so powerful, and so good, and so committed to ridding the world of any suffering, what's He waiting for? Again the apostle Peter directly addresses this issue:

"...the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 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. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives..."

(2 Peter 3:7-11)

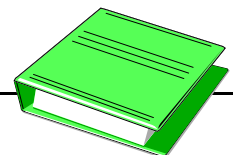
God is fully committed to the eradication of suffering, but He has His own timetable. What we tend to forget is that we ourselves are part of the problem. Evil is in each of us. For Him to remove suffering, he must remove evil, and that means bringing history to a close. When that happens, there will only be two groups of people: those who have responded and given their lives to Jesus Christ, and those who haven't. No matter how good a person seems on the outside, God judges the heart, and everyone falls short of His standard. Therefore, ultimately, there is only one way of escape from suffering - to be found in Jesus Christ on the day when God makes all things new.

"When we begin to understand the significance of the Man of Sorrows, sorrow and suffering seem far less threatening to us than they do at first. Indeed, when history is seen as His-story, suffering is seen as the dark spot in a magnificent painting, heard as the low note in a harmony whose high notes are lost in heaven..."

Peter Kreeft

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

Romans 8:18-21



Recommended Reading

Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*
C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*
R.C. Sproul, *Surprised by Suffering and Reason to Believe*
Edith Schaeffer, *Affliction*
Philip Yancey, *Where is God When It Hurts?* and
Disappointment with God