

**Tough Questions:  
Helping thinkers believe, and believers think.**

**Part 1: How could a good, powerful God allow such suffering?**

(Written by Terran Williams, Common Ground Church)

**How could a good, powerful God allow such suffering?** By way of introduction let me say three things about suffering...

**First, suffering is a central part of life.** This is not some academic talk. Under those clothes many of us bear the marks of suffering. Certainly, under that skin, upon our psyches we carry wounds. The wounds of suffering. *There is individualized suffering:* I think of those of us who have experienced the loss of loved ones, sickness, handicaps, broken relationships, unhappy marriages, involuntary singleness, depression, loneliness, abject poverty, persecution, rejection, unemployment, injustice, fierce temptation, and disappointment. *There is larger-scale suffering:* I think of those who have experienced natural disasters like floods, famines, tsunamis, disease outbreaks, and the suffering of mass-death tragedies: plane crashes, sinking ships, war. There's no way around it: *Suffering is part of life.* From the moment we're born – we suffer. It's one thing considering the agony a mother goes through as she gives birth to her child, but think of what the child goes through. Scott Peck writes, 'Life is difficult. Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy. They voice their belief, noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, or their tribe... and not upon others.'

**Second, suffering challenges the God of the Bible.** The Bible says that God is good, and that God is powerful. But sceptics argue that such a God cannot exist in the face of suffering. Let me state their argument: 'Let's assume there is a God. The fact there is so much suffering means that 1) either that this God is powerful (and could eliminate suffering) but is not good (and therefore doesn't want to do anything about it) or 2) this God is good (and wants to eliminate suffering) but he is not powerful (and therefore can't do anything about it), or 3) Neither good nor powerful. Either way suffering shows the Christian God is not true.' On first glance, it's a good argument. But, upon deeper reflection, it's flawed – because the God of the Bible is not just infinitely loving and powerful. He is also infinitely wise – which means that he may have good reasons to not eliminate suffering - reasons that may or may not be accessible for us to see.

**Third, Christianity has a unique perspective on suffering - compared to other major belief systems.** Let me give you some examples...

- Hindus, who believe in karma, believe that you suffer because you have sinned – either in this life or in a life before. So take it on the chin – you brought it on yourself. In contrast, Jesus teaches that not all suffering is the result of one's sin.
- Buddhists believe that suffering is an illusion, and if you could just become detached – and see through the illusion of desire, you would be free from the pain. In contrast, Jesus affirms the reality of desire and suffering. They are not illusion, but real.

- Islam believes that Allah brings pain on whom he will bring pain and one should not ask why. Just submit to the will of Allah. In contrast, Jesus invites us to question God – by doing so himself: on the cross, he cries out: ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’
- Atheism believes that suffering is simple bad luck. In his book, *River out of Eden*, Richard Dawkins writes: ‘*The universe is just electrons and selfish genes...blind physical forces and genetic replication – which means some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice ... nothing but pitiless indifference.*’ In contrast Jesus affirms that – though God is not the source of evil – yet God is in control of your life’s circumstances, and indeed he cares.
- Lastly, think of the New Age spirituality. One of its bestselling books, ‘*The Secret*’ teaches that your suffering is a result of your thoughts. The pattern of your thoughts, the book teaches, attracts the circumstances on your life. Page 30 says: “*Nothing merely shows up in your experience. You attract it—all of it. No exceptions . . . We must still explain that only you could have caused it, for no one else has the power to attract what comes to you but you. By focusing upon this unwanted thing, or the essence of it, you have created it by default*”. In response to this claim, Larry King asked Jo Vitale, a proponent of the book, if Jessica Lunsford, the nine-year-old from Florida who was brutally raped and murdered, had created this horror. Jo answered: ‘We attract everything to ourselves and there is no exception.’ In contrast, Christ teaches us that we humans are not gods – there are limits to what we can and can’t control.

In this message I want to look at a passage of Scripture, and from it draw four perspectives on the connection between suffering and faith. Peter the apostle – writes to a church that was experiencing immense suffering: the suffering of poverty and injustice, as well as persecution from the Roman empire. In fact it was just a matter of years before Peter himself would be crucified upside down. This is what he writes...

**1 Peter 1:3-11:** 3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 10 Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, 11 trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.

According to these verses in 1 Peter, the first perspective of suffering in relation to God is this...

## **SUFFERING IS LARGELY A RESULT OF HUMAN REBELLION AGAINST GOD**

The Bible opens with God's intentions for his creation. A world marked by justice and joy, creativity and kindness, industry and intimacy, worship and wonder, meaning and magic – a world where everybody loved and trusted God, loved and served each other, loved and enjoyed creation.

But, the Bible tells us that our first parents – who represented the entire human race ruined it all. Instead of trusting, loving and obeying God, we turned away from God and chose to centre our lives on ourselves and on the pursuit of things rather than on God and others. This has led to the disintegration of creation and the loss of peace - within ourselves, between ourselves, and in nature itself. War, hunger, poverty, injustice, racism, bitterness, meaninglessness, despair, sickness, and death all are symptoms of this 'divorce' from God.

***For starters, think of how sin hurts the sinner.*** The Bible says, 'A person reaps what they sow. If they sow to please their sinful nature, then they reap a harvest of destruction in their own life' (Gal 6:9). Sin involves the rejection of God's leadership. Think of how we break natural laws – like putting our hands in a fire, or stepping out of a second story window – to our own destruction. Well it's the same with the breaking of God's moral laws: abuse drugs, and addiction results; drink excessively and suffer from alcoholism, drive recklessly and die early – and then think of how things like selfishness, greed, lust, arrogance, and a bad temper can damage your relationships.

***But our sin doesn't only hurt us – it hurts others too.*** Think of how a power-hungry tyrant leader can plunge a nation into war and ruin; or how greedy driven-only-by-profit capitalists can rape the environment of its vitality; or how abusive or neglectful parents can devastate the lives of their young; or how back-stabbing work colleagues can undermine the joy of work.

***Additionally, the fall of the human race has caused all creation to fall with them.*** The symbiosis between humanity and creation meant that the fall of humanity led to the fall of creation. For example, Genesis 3:18 symbolically refers to this when it says that 'thorns and thistles' entered the world only after our first parents sinned. And Romans 8:20 says that the whole creation is currently groaning in frustration and decay because of human sin. In other words, we live in a broken world - a world where even nature has turned against us. These Scriptures suggest that even the likes of tsunamis and tornadoes, pandemics and polar caps melting, famine and floods, disease and death somehow have come about – or at least have been intensified - because of humanity's cosmic divorce from God.

***Now, you might argue: Couldn't God have eliminated the consequences of our sins?*** Let CS Lewis, the brilliant professor and atheist-come-Christian answer: '*It would, no doubt, have been possible for God to remove by miracle the results of the first sin ever committed by a human being; but this would not have been much good unless He was prepared to remove the results of the second sin, and of the third, and so on forever. If the miracles ceased, then sooner or later we might have reached our present lamentable situation: if they did not, then a world, thus continually under-*

*propped and corrected by divine interference, would have been a world in which nothing important ever depended on human choice, and in which choice itself would soon cease, owing to the certainty that one of the apparent alternatives before you would lead to no results and was therefore not really an alternative to begin with.'*

So we have a first answer to the question: 'How could a loving God allow suffering?' The answer is that – precisely because he is loving – he allows suffering to go on, because if he were to eliminate suffering, he would have to eliminate the source of suffering – and that would be you and me. We'd be eliminated. Ah, now you see the situation God finds himself in. So what does this passage of Scripture say he did? Thankfully, instead of eliminating us, he has chosen to rescue us. Verse 12 says speaks of 'the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven' And verse 9 speaks of how – when we believe the gospel – we 'are receiving the result of our faith, the salvation of your souls'.

*According to these verses in 1 Peter, the second perspective of suffering in relation to God is this... **GOD CAN USE SUFFERING FOR OUR GOOD***

In these verses, Peter uses the image of a metal worker refining silver and gold. He writes that we may all "have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials" (verse 6). But then he goes on to explain why God allows this: "These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed" (verse 7).

The analogy is that – like in the superheating of impure metals - so the heating up of our lives has a purging effect. It has the potential to make us better people, deepening our character, purifying our faith.

This reminds me of something the famous journalist Malcolm Muggeridge said, as he reflected on his life: '*Contrary to what might be expected, I look back with particular satisfaction on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my experience, has been through affliction and not through happiness.*'

This is also true at a national level. As we have seen in the wake of natural disasters and wars, entire countries and cultures often experience an emergence of renewed national values including unity, compassion, humility towards other nations. For example, I think of the way America and Japan's compassion-levels were respectively catalyzed by the New Orleans floods and the Tsunami. Entire countries and cultures learn most in these kinds of disasters. Yes thousands of lives are sometimes lost, but in the process, millions upon millions of lives are deepened.

***One good thing that often comes of suffering is that God tends to use suffering to awaken people spiritually.*** C. S. Lewis wrote: '*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world... no doubt pain as God's megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to a*

*final and unrepented rebellion. But it may give the only opportunity a man far from God can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.'* This has been true in my life and in the lives of so many I know: so many only begin to think about God when something goes wrong: a relationship bust-up, the loss of a loved one, a terminal disease. It's true that tragedy may turn a person away from God, but for every person that runs *from* God in pain, I'll show you five that run *to* him as a result of pain.

***God has his ways of turning life's tests into testimonies of his goodness, tragedies into triumphs.*** In fact the apostle Paul tells us, "In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Want an example of this? Look at Joseph (Genesis 37-50). He was rejected by his close family, separated from those he loved, forcibly taken to Egypt, away from his father, whom he did not see again for twenty years - he was unjustly imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. For 13 years, he faced trials, temptations, and testing. Then at 30, he was made ruler over Egypt and was in a position to save the lives not only of his family, but also of all God's people. An older man now, he was able to see God's hand in his suffering. He said to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). And that's still how God works today. Every bad thing that comes your way could be used for good. Of course, as in the case of Joseph, it may take time – sometimes decades even - to see what good comes out of it.

According to these verses in 1 Peter, the third perspective of suffering in relation to God is this... **GOD SUFFERS WITH US**

Verse 11 speaks of the prophets of the Old Testament who wrote prophecies of the coming Messiah, who would suffer. It says that 'the Spirit of Christ in them ... predicted the sufferings of Christ'. It is one of the main themes of Old Testament prophecy that the coming Christ would suffer – and suffer he did! Our Saviour is a crucified Saviour – he still carries the wounds in his hands and side.

Let's go back to Peter's image of suffering as being a furnace. Isaiah 43:2 tells us that God promises to be with us in the furnace...

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

Now the promise is clearly figurative, but did you know there was a time when God literally kept this promise? In Daniel 3 we're told that a megalomaniac king once threw three Israelites into a superheated furnace because they refused to worship his statue. Listen to verses 24-25...

Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire? Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

There's Christ in the flames with his people, suffering alongside them! And still today he is there with us in our suffering. If you have any doubt about his readiness to be there with us in the flames, just look at the cross...

John Stott, one of the greatest Christian leaders of our time once said: *'If it was not for the cross, I could not believe in God. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?'* God does not stand detached, looking upon our suffering from afar, he stands right there next to us, blood dripping to the ground, tears rolling down his cheeks.

When I first became a Christian I heard this story that imagined a confrontation between suffering humanity and God. This is how it went...

*"At the end of time, billions of people were seated on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly, not with cringing shame - but with belligerence.*

*"Can God judge us? How can He know about suffering?", snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. "We endured terror ... beatings ... torture ... death!" In another group a Negro boy lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched, for no crime but being black !" In another crowd there was a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes: "Why should I suffer?" she murmured. "It wasn't my fault. I was raped" Far out across the plain were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering He had permitted in His world.*

*How lucky God was to live in Heaven, where all was sweetness and light. Where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.*

*So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most. A Jew, a slave, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a thalidomide child. In the centre of the vast plain, they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever...*

*'God, before you can be qualified to be our judge, you must endure what they have endured. Your sentence: to live on earth as a man. You must be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of your birth be doubted. Have a work so difficult to do that even your family will think you out of your mind. You be betrayed by your closest friends. You face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. You be tortured. And at the last, feel what it means to be terribly alone. You die there drinking down the poison of injustice to its dregs.'*

*As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled. When the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered a word. No one moved. For suddenly, at the sight of his extended pierced hands, all knew that God had already served His sentence."*

Edward Schiltoff, comforting his grieving German church during World War 1 wrote this poem/prayer: *'The other gods were strong. But Thou was weak. They rode, but Thou did stumble to Thy throne. And to our wounds, only Thou wounds can speak, and no other god has wounds but Thou alone.'*

Mind you, Christ did not just suffer like us (and therefore show he is able to empathize with us) – he suffered for us (and therefore showed his love can be counted on in our darkest hours)...

Jonathan Edwards – centuries ago – wrote these words: *'In the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before his crucifixion, Jesus had a near view of that furnace of wrath, into which he was to be cast; he was brought to the mouth of the furnace that he might look into it, and stand and view its raging flames, and see the glowings of its heat, that he might know where he was going and what he was about to suffer... And still he went to the cross willingly. There are two things that render Christ's love wonderful: 1. That he should be willing to endure sufferings that were so great; and 2. That he should be willing to endure them to make atonement for wickedness that was so great.'*

Tim Keller writes, *'That love – whose obedience is wide and long and high and deep enough to dissolve a mountain of rightful wrath – is the love you've been looking for all your life. No family love, no friend love, no mother love, no spousal love, no romantic love – nothing could possibly carry or satisfy you like that. All those other kinds of loves will let you down; this one never will. When you suffer, you might not know why, but one thing for sure is that it can't be that he doesn't love us.'*

To your wounds only God's wounds can speak. And when you're in the flames, One who was once destroyed by the flames on your behalf, is there with you. And because of that, you are not destroyed.

According to these verses in 1 Peter, the fourth perspective of suffering in relation to God is this... **GOD PROMISES TO ELIMINATE SUFFERING**

Verse 11 speaks of 'the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow'. What are 'the glories that would follow'? Let the words of Peter answer: '3 In his great mercy God has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In all this you greatly rejoice.'

Can you hear what he is saying in these verses?

1. That Jesus' resurrection from the dead has changed everything. It means that death and injustice and suffering don't have the last say. It means that God's ability to restore and renew all things is the last word. Jesus' resurrection body is itself a mere foretaste of a glorious new creation, and wonderful new resurrection bodies. What God has done in Christ on Easter morning, he would do on a cosmic scale for the entire creation, including us!

2. That we have a future guarantee of an inheritance 'that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power'.
3. That already now we can enjoy the certainty of that future. We have 'a living hope' and in 'this you greatly rejoice'. Though our bodies and hearts are ripped to shreds by suffering, yet we already can drink from that eternal fountain of joy.

Nicky Gumbel tells of an English boy in a congregation who shattered his back falling down the stairs at the age of one. For years, he had been in and out of the hospital. When the pastor interviewed him in church, the boy remarked, "God is fair." The pastor asked, "How old are you?" The boy replied, "Seventeen." "How many years have you spent in the hospital?" The boy answered, "Thirteen years." He was asked, "Do you think that is fair?" He replied, "God's got all of eternity to make it up to me."

God has indeed all eternity to make it up to us, and the Bible is full of promises about how wonderful heaven will be. There will be no more crying, for there will be no more pain and suffering. He will wipe the tears from our eyes and turn weapons of war into instruments of peace. We will change our frail, decaying, mortal bodies for a body like that of Jesus' glorious resurrected body. We shall be reunited with all those who have died "in Christ," and we shall spend eternity enjoying each other and the God we love. Martin Luther once said, *"I would not give one moment of heaven for all the joys and riches of the world."*

This might sound foreign to you. We live in a materialistic world that has almost entirely lost its eternal perspective. But we should take a long-term view and understand the suffering of this life in the context of eternity. This is not wishful thinking. As the theologian Alistair McGrath points out in his book, 'Suffering': *'If the Christian hope of heaven is an illusion, based upon lies, then it must be abandoned as misleading and deceitful. But if it is true, it must be embraced and allowed to transfigure our entire understanding of the place of suffering in life.'*

Listen to how Dostoevsky puts it: *'I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, of the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood that they've shed.'*

In the last book of The Lord of the Rings, Sam Gamgee wakes up, thinking everything is lost and discovering instead that all his friends were around him, he cries out: *"Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead! Is everything sad going to come untrue?"* The answer of the Bible is 'Yes'. If the resurrection of Jesus is true, then the answer is yes. Everything sad is going to come untrue. Many of you are saying, "I wish I could believe that." Well, why not giving it a try?

After all, the resurrection of Jesus shows it's absolutely right. And that's how a person could both be suffering and rejoicing at the same time. No wonder verse 8,

speaking of people who were in the midst of tremendous suffering are nonetheless described like this...

‘Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy’.

Perhaps you may have suffered. Perhaps you are suffering. Certainly you will suffer. But there is One who is with you in the flames, one whose wounds speak to you, one whose resurrection promises that this suffering will pass. Why not trust him completely?

Main sources: 1. Nicky Gumbel's 'Searching Issues' 2. Tim Keller's 'The Reason for God' 3. Transcript of Tim Keller's talk to 9-11 family members in 2006. 4. A talk by Tim Keller on the subject (free mp3s @ Redeemer) 5. Rick Warren sermon, 'Why's the world so messed up' from [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com) (subscribers only).