

IF GOD IS REAL, THEN WHY IS THERE SO MUCH EVIL AND SUFFERING?

This article includes a short answer by North Point Church and then a longer one by Nicky Gumbell.

Short answer by North Point Church:

When you examine the wonders of creation, it's hard not to believe in a Creator. Many of the most brilliant scientists through the ages have reached the conclusion that there must be a divine source for the universe. There is order in the life cycle of every creature. There is design in the placement of our solar system. There is even logic in the structure of the molecules and atoms that make it all up. It all points to a master plan.

But then along comes disorder and chaos. And suddenly, all our theories of providence and logic and order go right out the window. An earthquake wipes out an unsuspecting village. A random act of violence kills an innocent bystander. A child dies from a fatal disease. Even a bad day at the office can cause us to wonder if God is watching, if he cares, or if he even exists at all. Can so much evil in the world really be a part of his plan?

There are no easy answers to the problem of evil in the world, but we can find a few clues in the book of Genesis. When God created humans, he gave us authority over the earth and free will to make our own choices. This freedom included the choice to sin - to question God's wisdom and do things our own way. And even though this always brings harmful consequences, God gave us that option. Is it possible that God could have made humans without the ability to sin? Perhaps, but then to remove the chance of sin is to remove choice all together. We would have been mere robots, taking orders from God and never thinking, feeling, or choosing for ourselves. And could God really have a relationship with machines that are programmed to serve him with no other alternative? That's why God created humans like he did. He gave us all the creative desire, free will, and moral responsibility that he himself had. And most significantly, we have a genuine ability to experience a relationship with our Creator.

In spite of God's desires for us and the world, the first humans chose to sin. Nothing has changed today. With every act of selfishness, we continue to abuse the freedom God gave us. Put simply, we choose sin. And along with sin come the consequences of our sinfulness; broken lives with broken relationships in a broken world.

Of course, we all admit to causing some of our own troubles. It's no surprise that most of our wounds are self-inflicted. And yet, every now and then, we're forced to ask: what about everything else? Though much of the evil we see and experience in the world may not be a direct result of our own actions, it is a consequence of humankind's sinfulness. God is not the source of meaningless evil. But oftentimes he permits us to encounter the effects of a world rendered imperfect by sin. Perhaps it is to alert us to our need for him, or possibly to remind us that we're not home yet. We may never understand all of God's ways or the stories of our lives that are being written each day. And yet we can trust in his love and goodness knowing that in every story of brokenness lays the potential for redemption.

Longer answer by Nicky Gumbell:

Why does God allow suffering?

Glenn Chambers, a young New Yorker, had a lifelong dream to work for God in Ecuador. At the airport on the day of departure, he wanted to send a note to his mother, but he didn't have time to buy a card. He noticed a piece of paper on the terminal floor and picked it up. It turned out to be an advertisement with the word "Why?" written across it. He scribbled his note around the word "Why?" That night, his airplane exploded into the 14,000-foot Colombian peak, El Tablazo. When his mother received the note after the news of his death, the question burned up at her from the page: "Why?"

The issue of suffering is the most frequently raised objection to the Christian faith. We are constantly confronted by suffering. "The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has been in every generation," writes theologian John Stott in *The Cross of Christ*. "Its distribution and degree appear to be entirely random and therefore unfair."

First, we see suffering on a global scale. There are natural disasters: earthquakes, famines, and floods. The suffering that results is often pervasive and arbitrary. The two world wars focused our attention on global suffering in an acute form.

Second, we see community tragedies. Almost daily we read or hear of a plane crashing, a ship sinking, or some other disaster affecting the lives of hundreds of people.

Third, suffering at an individual level affects us all to a greater or lesser extent: bereavement, sickness, handicaps, broken relationships, unhappy marriages, involuntary singleness, depression, loneliness, abject poverty, persecution, rejection, unemployment, injustice, fierce temptation, and disappointment. Suffering can come in an endless variety of forms, and no human being is immune from it.

It is worth noting that suffering is not a problem for all religions. It is an acute problem for the Judeo-Christian tradition because we believe that God is both good and all-powerful. C. S. Lewis stated the opposing argument succinctly: "If God were good, he would wish to make his creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, he would be able to do what he wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore, God lacks either goodness, or power, or both."

Theologians and philosophers have wrestled for centuries with the problem of suffering, and no one has ever come up with a simple and complete solution. The Bible is primarily a practical book, and it never addresses this issue systematically in a philosophical way. What we see are a number of approaches to the problem, all the way through from Genesis to Revelation. There seems to be four main overlapping insights, and we shall look at each of them in turn.

1. Human freedom

Suffering is not part of God's original created order (Genesis 1-2). There was no suffering in the world before humanity rebelled against God. There will be no suffering when God creates a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21). There will be no more crying and no more pain. Suffering only entered the world because Adam and Eve sinned. It is, therefore, an alien intrusion into God's world. If all suffering is a result of sin, directly or indirectly, why did God allow sin to enter the world?

He did so because he loves us and wanted to give us free will. Love is not love if it is forced; it can only be love if there is a real choice. God gave human beings the choice and the freedom to love or not to love. Given this freedom, men and women from the beginning have chosen to break God's laws. The result has been suffering. Again, as C. S. Lewis puts it:

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 underpropped 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 from the certainty that one of the apparent alternatives before you would lead to no results and was therefore not really an alternative.

Suffering as a result of our own sin. Some of the suffering we endure is the result of our own sin. At times, suffering is the inevitable consequence of breaking God's law. There are physical laws of nature; for example, a hand put in the fire gets burned. In this context, pain acts as an early warning system when we exercise wrong choices. There are also moral laws. God made a world built on moral foundations, and there is a natural connection between sin and its consequences. If a person abuses drugs, addiction may be the consequence. A person who drinks excessively may eventually suffer

from alcoholism. If someone drinks and drives a car recklessly and injures himself, his injuries are partially the result of his sin. In a similar way, selfishness, greed, lust, arrogance, and bad temper often lead to broken relationships and unhappiness of one sort or another.

Suffering as the result of others' sin. Job's friends thought his suffering must be the result of his sin—but they were wrong (Job 42:7, 8). Jesus expressly repudiates the automatic link between sin and suffering (John 9:1-3). He also points out that natural disasters are not necessarily a form of punishment from God (Luke 13:1-5). The apostle Peter draws a distinction between suffering as a result of our own sin ("a beating for doing wrong," I Peter 2:20) and suffering that has no connection with our sin ("unjust suffering," vs. 19,) or suffering "for doing good" (vs. 20).

Much of the suffering in the world is the result of other people's sin. This is true of many global and community disasters. So much suffering is caused by war, which is always the result of human sin, even if the sin is on both sides. Much of the starvation in the world is caused by the unequal distribution of the world's resources, civil war, or some other human sin.

Likewise, individual suffering is often caused by the sin of others—murder, adultery, theft, sexual abuse, unloving parents, reckless or drunken driving, slander, unkindness, or selfishness of one kind or another.

Suffering as a result of a fallen world. It is the result of Adam and Eve's sin that "thorns and thistles" entered the world (Genesis 3:18). Ever since that time "the creation was subjected to frustration" (Romans 8:20). Natural disasters are a result of this disorder in creation. Human freedom does not always answer the question of why a particular individual or nation suffers so much, but it does help explain the origin of suffering. All suffering is the result of sin, either directly as a result of my own sin or the result of someone else's sin, or indirectly, as a result of living in a fallen world.

2. God works through suffering

Suffering is never good in itself, but God is able to use it for good in a number of different ways.

First, suffering can be used by God to draw us to Christ. 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 gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul."

This has proved true time and again in Christian experience. We meet those who have only begun to think about God as a result of suffering the loss of a loved one, a broken relationship, or some other pain in their lives.

Second, God uses suffering to bring us to Christian maturity. Even Jesus "learned obedience from what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8). God uses suffering to build our characters. One image used by the New Testament is that of the discipline of children. The writer of Hebrews says that "our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness"(Hebrews 12:10). He points out that "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" (Hebrews 12:11).

Peter uses a completely different image: that of a metal worker refining silver and gold. He writes that his readers may all "have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials" (I Peter 1:6). 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 honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (I Peter 1:7).

Our temptation would be to say to God, "I'm quite happy as I am. Please leave me alone." But, as C. S. Lewis points out, that would be to want God to love us less.

Over a sketch made idly to amuse a child, an artist may not take much trouble; he may be content to let it go even though it is not exactly as he meant it to be. But over the great picture of his life— the work which he loves, though in a different fashion, as intensely as a man loves a woman or a mother a child—he will take endless trouble—and would, doubtless, thereby give endless trouble to the picture if it were sentient. One can imagine a sentient picture, after being rubbed and scraped and recommenced for the tenth time, wishing that it were only a thumb-nail sketch whose making was over in a minute. In the same way, it is natural for us to wish that God had designed for us a less glorious and less arduous destiny; but then we are wishing not for more love but for less.

Third, God often uses suffering to bring about his good purposes. Paul tells us that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). We see an example of this in the life of Joseph (Genesis 37-50). He suffered from rejection by his close family and separation from those he loved. He was forcibly removed to Egypt, away from his father, whom he did not see again for twenty years. In Egypt, he was unjustly imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. For 13 years, he faced trials, temptations, and testing. At the age of 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. Towards the end of his life, he was able to speak of his suffering to his brothers, saying, "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).

It is not always easy to see at the time what God is doing. Earlier on in his life, Joseph would not have been able to see it so clearly. Often we cannot work out what is going on or why we are suffering in the way we are.

3. God provides a future

Anglican Bishop Gavin Reid of Maidstone, England, tells of a boy in his 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 Gavin interviewed him in church, the boy remarked that "God is fair."

Gavin stopped him and 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 New Testament is full of promises about how wonderful heaven will be. All creation will be restored. Jesus will return to earth to establish a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1). There will be no more crying, for there will be no more pain and suffering. 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 together in the presence of the Lord. As Martin Luther once said, "I would not give one moment of heaven for all the joys and riches of the world, even if it lasted for thousands and thousands of years."

We live in a materialistic world that has almost entirely lost its eternal perspective. We need to take a long-term view and understand the suffering of this life in the context of eternity. This is not "pie in the sky when you die." As the theologian Alister 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."

4. God is involved in our suffering

We must be prepared to acknowledge that there is no simple definitive answer to the "Why?" of suffering. Instead, we may approach the problem from a different perspective: God is a God who suffers alongside us.

This fourth insight is perhaps the most important of all. I once heard John Stott say, "I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the Cross." God is not a God who is immune from suffering. He is not looking on as an impassive observer, far removed from the suffering world. We see that throughout the Bible and, supremely, we see it in the Cross. He is, in

Tertullian's phrase, "the crucified God." God was "in Christ," reconciling the world to himself (II Corinthians 5:19). He became one of us; he suffered in all the ways in which we suffer. He does not just know about suffering—he has suffered himself. He knows what we are feeling when we suffer.

In 1967, a beautiful athletic teenager named Joni Eareckson had a terrible diving accident at Chesapeake Bay that left her a quadriplegic. Gradually, after the bitterness, anger, rebellion, and despair, she came to trust the sovereignty of God. She built a new life of painting (using her mouth to hold the paintbrush) and public speaking. One night, three years after the accident, she realized that Jesus empathized with her completely. It had not occurred to her before that on the cross Jesus was in a pain similar to hers, unable to move, also paralyzed.

The knowledge of Christ's suffering removes what Jurgen Moltmann has called the "suffering in suffering." We are not alone in our pain. When we suffer, he suffers with us.

How do we respond to suffering?

In the midst of suffering, we need to hold on to our hope. This life is always a mixture of battle and blessing, and in times of battle, we need to remember that the battles do not last forever, and often blessing is just around the corner. Whether it is or not, we can be sure that one day we will go to be with the Lord forever. Meanwhile, we need to keep our eyes fixed on Him (Hebrews 12:2), knowing that he is more than able to sympathize with us because He has suffered more than we ever will.

When we see others suffering, we are called to show compassion. In the face of great suffering, attempts to rationalize can be counterproductive. Usually, the most positive thing that we can do is to put an arm around the person and "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15).

We are right to resist suffering because, as we have seen, it is an alien intrusion into God's world. Jesus fought against suffering wherever he came across it. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and raised the dead. He saw his ministry in terms of preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and releasing the oppressed. We are called to follow in his steps.

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