

## QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

### **5 Why Does God Allow Suffering?**

The question we face this morning has to be one of the most difficult for the Christian to answer. Without any exaggeration I am quite certain this subject has been the means of millions of people abandoning religion and turning their backs on Christianity. They have chosen not to have anything to do with a God who would allow babies to be born deformed, and lives to be snuffed out by war or other tragic happenstance. The most effective argument of the atheist has been what C. S. Lewis once called, "the problem of pain." It was H. G. Wells who described God and the human predicament as the bombs were falling on London during the Second World War, "Either God has the power and does not care, or God cares and does not have the power." This has come to be considered the classic statement of the problem. Put another way, either God is all-powerful but not all-good, and therefore doesn't stop evil, or He is all-good but unable to stop evil, in which case He is not all-powerful. All of this sounds too reasonable when we think of the unlimited suffering throughout the world and the silent heaven above. It is even difficult, if not impossible, for us to evaluate the situation correctly as we sing the words, "Safely through another week, God has brought us on our way, Let us now a blessing seek, Waiting in His courts today." It is so true, "they ignore scars who never felt a wound." So, lets just remember, there are some who didn't make it safely through another week and stay in the real world when we talk about human suffering.

As we come to try and hammer out a Christian view of suffering and pain, let me say that I believe that any person would have to be omniscient as God is to satisfactorily answer the question before us. There is no easy answer. We plainly do not fully understand the designs of God in this matter. I would never come before you and attempt to convince you that I have the answer to the problem of suffering. However, there are certain factors which we can be made aware of, and there are certain truths in the Word of God which give us a proper perspective on the matter. These can be a source of strength and help us to keep our balance when suffering touches our lives.

## I. SUFFERING IS COMMON TO ALL:

It matters little where you look. Suffering is to be seen everywhere. Everyone suffers, to a greater or lesser degree. If we had eyes to see, we would be aware of the different kinds of suffering which surrounds us. We might even begin with a creation that groans. The words of Romans 8:22-23 readily come to mind, *“For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our bodies.”* The Weymouth translation has it *“For we know that the whole of creation is moaning.”* Think of those tragedies of nature that touch the human race taking toll of human life, the tornadoes, the hurricanes, the pestilences and the like which make a disaster area of our world. The most common kind of suffering is physical. Disease, famine, war, accident, all of these happen to young and old.

A kind of suffering more difficult to bear is mental in nature. I read the story of two men who were lying side by side in beds in a certain hospital ward. They both had been struck by automobiles, and brought unconscious to the hospital. Both suffered from fractured skulls and broken legs. They were both fifty years old and of substantially the same build. As time passed, only one of the men showed signs of improvement. The reason was psychological. The man who improved was hit by a total stranger in a normal kind of automobile accident. The other man was deliberately run over by his son who had been refused use of the car a short time before. Thus, this man had no will to survive. This kind of grief is very common. There is mental suffering among us today. Many people live with a broken heart. Ambitions that are never realized, dreams that do not come true, disappointment in someone who is dear, all of these cause inner heartache and suffering. Of course, there is also a spiritual suffering. The Bible teaches that the *“way of the transgressor is hard.”*(Proverbs 13:15). The Christian carries a whole series of burdens through life; the Lord's burden is light, you remember, but it is there.(Luke 10:3; I Peter 4:4; Hebrews 11:27; II Corinthians 1:6-8; 4:8-11) There are no utopias, no Shangri-Las. Suffering comes to all regardless of their place in life. Suffering therefore, is not an isolated event that touches a person's life, it is rather a principle written into the human story. It is the Bible that explains this universal experience and gives rational to senseless suffering. It is not the fickle finger of fate, bad luck, the way the ball

bounces, or the breaks of the game. All people suffer, and they suffer for a reason.

## II. SUFFERING IS A CONSEQUENTIAL HAPPENING:

Genesis 1:1 tells us that *"In the beginning God created the (first) Heaven and the (first) earth. What was made by God was perfectly made."* Then something happened. Sin came into being and God shook the universe. *"The earth was without form and void,"* or as another translation has it, *"the world became a wreck and a ruin."* There is evidence from geology that the world may have existed in this wrecked condition for several million years. Again, God brought beauty to what He had made and Adam's world reflected the loveliness of the first heaven and earth. With Adam's rebellion came the indictment with which we live to this day, *"Cursed be the ground for thy sake... thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee."* (Gen.3:17-18) This is our world. It bears the evidence of a curse. God could have made man like a robot and programmed his every move. He did not choose to do this, and of course, granted freedom of will, moral evil is a necessary possibility. In his book, **God Our Contemporary**, J. B. Phillips has written, "Evil is inherent in the risky gift of free will." Man employed his free will and moved in the direction of disobedience which is the reason for suffering in the world today. God told man that if he failed to obey, certain things would happen. Man disobeyed and the resultant suffering covers the globe. Suffering is the result of sin.

## III. GOD ALLOWS CAUSE AND EFFECT TO WORK:

There is an interesting verse found in Psalm 90:9 *"For all our days are passed away in thy wrath."* Again in verse 7, *"By thy wrath are we troubled."* The word "wrath" is one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible. We normally associate the word with temper and anger. When we think of God's wrath we imagine God is mad at us and He is going to lower the boom at any minute. The real meaning of the word is that of moral integrity. God's wrath is his attribute of holiness in motion against man's disobedience. This is a condition that prevails throughout human life as the waters cover the sea. Man, in his unbelief, has created certain conditions which are calculated for his harm. God will see to it and for that reason we live out our days in a perpetual state of tragedy and suffering.

We recognize there are certain laws which operate in the physical world and the same in true in the spiritual. One such law is that God will require unbelief and

disobedience to result in sorrow and suffering. Thus; the practical effect of man's disregard of God are incredible and spill over to eventually touch the entire life, and as we have shown, even brute and physical creation has felt the shock of man's sin. The world has been a place of brevity, uncertainty, and inadequacy, since the woman listened to that evil but personal and rational enemy, in the garden, and it will not cease to be such until Christ comes and reigns over a new creation. It can be pointed out that there is no such thing as "innocent suffering." *"Because all have sinned (consciously sinned) and come short of the glory of God."* There is no one who has the right to be free from the wrath of God. As far as babies are concerned and those incompetent mentally, it is clear from Scripture and experience that they are sinners by nature and would become such by choice if able to do so. Jesus Christ was the only "innocent" and perfect person in all of history.

#### **IV. IT IS OF THE LORD'S MERCIES WE ARE NOT CONSUMMED:**

If evil is the cause of suffering in the world why doesn't God stamp out evil? If His wrath is operative through the lives of a Hitler or the murderers that stalk our neighborhoods, why doesn't God just strike down all the bad people? The answer is that if God were to remove all evil from the world, His action would have to include our crimes as well. He would have to deal with evil everywhere and completely. This is also true of Satan who is responsible for a great share of human suffering. Robinson Crusoe had a good answer for his man Friday at this point. "Well," says Friday, "you say God is so strong, so great, has He not as much strong, as much might, as the devil?" "Yes, yes," says I; "Friday, God is much stronger than the devil." "But if God much strong, much might as the devil; why God no kill the devil so make him no more do wicked?" "You may as well ask," answers Crusoe reflectively, why does God not kill you and me when we do wicked things that offend Him? God could stamp out evil if He chose. It would include all of us, our sins would have to be included. Little wonder Jeremiah wrote, *"It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed because His compassions fail not."* (Lamentations: 3:22)

#### **V. WE LIVE OUR LIVES WITHIN THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD:**

Absolutely speaking, God could annihilate the whole universe and then, of course, there would be no problem with evil or suffering. But granted that God could do such a thing and hasn't, we must conclude that pain and suffering are a condition that God sees fit that we are subject to. It is within His plan that suffering should

occur. One day the disciples were asked about a certain blind man and if his affliction came because of his own sins, or the sins of his parents. Jesus answered, *“that neither was the case, he was blind because God planned his blindness in order to bring glory to Christ.”* (John 9: 1-3) When Moses complained he had a speech impediment the Lord replied. *“Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the Lord.”* (Exodus 4:11) Dare we say there has never been a case of deafness, blindness, cancer, or any other ill but that the Lord has not planned to use that frailty to glorify His name. We will glorify Him. If we do not do it voluntarily, we will do it involuntarily. *“For it is written, as I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow.”* (Romans 4:11)

## **VI. SUFFERING CAN LEAD US TO TRUST IN CHRIST:**

A remarkable verse of the Bible is found in Psalm 77:2, *“In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord.”* Psalm 90:11-12, *“Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath. So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.”* The suffering which we have in this life may be God's way to get us to look to Him. When things go well, we forget God. We push him to the edge of our lives. We say, “I will run my own life, who needs God?” Someone has well said, “God whispers to us in pleasure, He shouts to us in pain.” Notice Psalm 90:15, *“Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil.”* God is gracious in affliction when it is a means of our coming to our senses and looking to Him. When suffering comes into our lives let us be assured that atheism and agnosticism are not the answer. People will continue to want to hang on to life and believe that “good” is a higher order than “bad”. These innate beliefs are the whispers of God that He has implanted in the human soul. He wants us to come to a personal and vital trust in Him, to the place that we can say that whatever God does, is by definition and the nature of the case, right. Let us also realize that God is mindful of our suffering. He is not aloof, distant, or some impervious bystander. Furthermore, He feels the suffering that has come to us. God Himself is the great sufferer. We can trust a God who suffers with us. Hebrews 2:18 reminds us, *“For in that He himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succor them that are tempted.”* *“We have not a high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are.”* (Hebrews 5:15) God allows suffering with a view to restoration and reconciliation to Himself. There is so much evidence of God's presence in the universe that the Bible declares,

*"The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God."* (Psalm 14:1) Those who will not understand this finally resort to philosophical questions and objections to undermine God. The problem of suffering is the greatest of these.

#### **VII. THERE CAN BE NO ULTIMATE OR FINAL SUFFERING FOR THE CHRISTIAN:**

Because God is the great sufferer and He has fully met the problem of suffering through the work of Jesus Christ, no suffering is final for the believer. The catastrophic interpretation of life is wrong. Even though we see tragedy and disaster all around, we can accept the providence of God. The Scripture clearly teaches God is in control, even in the process of death and decay. He upholds these processes because He has a plan that includes the death of all things visible. Helmut Thielecke of Hamburg points out that a fabric viewed through a magnifying glass is clear in the middle and blurred at the edges. But we know the edges are clear because of what we see in the middle. Life, he writes, is like a fabric. There are many edges which are blurred, many events and circumstances we do not understand. But they are interpreted for us by the clarity of what we see at the center the cross of Christ. We should not guess about the goodness of God by appealing to isolated bits of data. God has clearly demonstrated his love and concern for us. Romans 8:32 reads, *"He that spared not his own son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"* It is our reaction that can determine the suffering being a blessing or curse. The same sun, as someone has written, melts and hardens. Let us view suffering through Scripture and we shall come to affirm the truth of Romans 8:28, *"God is working all things together for good to those who love Him."*

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