

Why Does God Allow Suffering?

How can a good, wise, and omnipotent God permit decent, upright people to encounter the physical, and emotional, torment that they so often do?

Why do some people suffer so much...whether that suffering be from sickness, personal rejection, criminal activity, or from other causes?

The Lord tells us in Isaiah 55:8, "*My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways.*"

Theologians...and philosophers of religion...debate, endlessly, "*the problem of evil.*" Actually, because the word "*evil*" can refer to both moral evil (sin) and natural evil (cancer, earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural adversities)...and can also induce the **effects** of evil: physical suffering (the physical sensation...pain...of bodily hurt) and mental suffering (mental anguish caused not only by physical pain, but also by such factors as fear, grief and humiliation) ...there are many aspects to "*Why God permits suffering*"...which is why when one asks, "*Why does God permit suffering?*" he is often expressing several different kinds of questions:

For instance, sometimes when one asks questions concerning why God permits suffering, what he is really asking is, "***How can a righteous, loving, God allow evil and suffering?***" This question focuses upon the character and nature of God:

1. **THE INTEGRITY OF GOD**

Consider the matter of God's character and nature. Can God...Who allows evil in our lives...especially when it inflicts suffering that seem to be so extreme and so without purpose...be all good and all mighty? Those who call themselves atheists regard the universal fact of evil and suffering as their most powerful argument against the existence of God...at least as Biblical Christians describe God. Sometimes, however, God's people also have doubts in these matters, although they are usually afraid to express them to other believers.

While the Bible nowhere presents a full-developed theology...a defense of God's character in the face of evil...it does most definitely address the problem of evil and suffering.

(A) Because Paul's teachings go far in helping us to discern the true character of God, let us consider some of the things that the apostle Paul teaches us... concerning the enigma of evil...in Romans 8:18-39: In this Scriptural passage, part of Paul's answer to the question of suffering is eschatological ... [that, it has to do with the *future* program of God]...the main point of which is that whatever people may say against the goodness, and power, of God their argument is groundless in light of the spectacular future awaiting God's people.

Paul writes: "*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*" [verse 18].

(B) Yet there is more to Paul's answer to the question of suffering than eschatology...[*the study of end-time events*]...because Paul teaches that *until we see Christ*, the Father gives us His Holy Spirit to assist us **now** in our weakness and sufferings. Verse 26 tells us that... just as we, and the creation, groan..."*the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with*

groans that words cannot express"...and, then, verse 34 tells us that "*Christ Jesus...is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us*"...so that... God is not an **absent** universe Maker Who has no concern for His creatures but, in fact, He is intimately involved in our lives as Father (**our** Father...our "*Abba*") ...as Son (**our** Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ)...and as Holy Spirit (**our** Comforter and **our** Strengthened)...and...He assures us that "*in all things*"... even in severe illness and prolonged emotional distress..."*God works for the good of those who love Him*" (verse 28).

- (C) In his argument, Paul moves back from the future, back through the present and into the *past*. He declares that God foreknew us and predestined us to be conformed into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ (verses 29-30), and that He did not spare even His own Son to accomplish this (verses 31-32). God Himself, in Christ, not only, voluntarily, became the innocent victim of the worst evil ever known to mankind, but He, also, became the innocent victim of the most intense suffering ever experienced by anyone. Those who malign the good character of God...because of the evil He permits...fail to reckon with this astonishing truth of His Son's self-sacrificing death for the sins of the world.

At other times, when one asks questions concerning why God permits suffering, what he is asking is, "***Why do suffering and evil exist in the world at all?***" This aspect of the problem of suffering deals with the causes...or sources...of suffering.

2. THE CAUSES OF SUFFERING

Our second broad question about the "*why*" behind suffering seeks to know its cause...its source...and, therefore, asks "***What brings about suffering and evil in the world?***" We know that God *permits* suffering, but what factors...[despite the fact that they are under God's control]...are responsible for its appearance in our lives? In a nutshell, God permits suffering because of...and for...the following reasons:

- (A) Sometimes we suffer because of the sins of others...because...it is due to other people's sins (as well as their mistakes and normal errors) that: children are molested; houses are robbed; decent people are murdered; someone is killed on the highway by a drunken driver (who so often escapes with minor injuries).
- (B) At other times, we suffer because our devotion to God arouses opposition from others. The apostle Paul was persecuted relentlessly because he would not compromise his obedience to Christ [Acts 13:42; 14:20]. Joseph was thrown into prison because of his refusal to sin with Potiphar's wife [Genesis 39], and Peter tells us that "*if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God*" [1 Peter 2:20].
- (C) In order to understand the problem of pain and suffering in the world, one must understand what God's purpose is for mankind, on earth...and that Biblical perspective, simply stated, is that God chose to create **responsible** beings on whom He could bestow His love and grace and who, made in His image, would be capable of reciprocating, and responding, to that love...as Revelation 4:11 states, "*Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for Thou has created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created* and, as 1 John 4:19 states, "*We love Him (that is God), because He first loved us.*"

Genuine love demands a choice...freedom to love entails freedom **not** to love. Responsibility to obey implies also the ability to **disobey**. The creation of a *moral* being...created in the image of God...with the ability to choose between right and wrong...implies the reality of sin...and *evil*. God did not make man to be a machine, but, rather, He made him to be a responsible, thinking, decision-making, being!

When one understands this Scriptural concept of man...and the fact that God gave man a **free will** with which he could choose to obey...or to disobey...Him...it is a lot easier to then understand that suffering and pain in the world is the consequence of man's choosing to disobey God's laws.

Of course, an omniscient God foreknew what man would do, but, rather than refraining from creating man because of this, He ordained...and set in motion...His marvelous plan of salvation...and...understanding this...provides a framework within which one can begin to understand the many *individual* problems that seem to exist in the world. All suffering and sorrow, which is so much a part of human experience, is related directly ...and indirectly...to sin...or, as Romans 5:12 states, "*By one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, **for that all have sinned.***" Death, with the suffering and sorrow that leads to it, came into the world when sin entered into the world.

This does not imply that suffering is always...or necessarily...directly related to a particular sin committed by the sufferer.

Jesus' answer to His disciples...when they asked of the blind man, "*Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?*" ...was, "***Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.***"

Romans 5:14 tells us, "*Death reigned...even over them that had **not sinned** after the similitude...[that is, in the same way]...of Adam's transgression ...[or, as another translation states, "*had not sinned as Adam had, in the face of an express command*"]*".

***The problem is that, in many instances,
suffering seems to fall on innocent victims***

While it is true that "*we all have sinned and come short of the glory of God*" [Romans 3:23] and "*the wages of sin is death*" [Romans 6:23], it is still, very seldom, that one can assign a particular suffering to a particular sin...which is why, in many instances, it seems that suffering falls on innocent victims...which evokes the question from us as to "*why do the innocent suffer.*"

Despite the fact that God deals with each of us as *individuals*...and despite the fact that each one of us will have to give an account of himself to God...nonetheless, God also deals with mankind as an "***organized human society***"...because it is a reality that the actions of a member of human society affects...and is affected by...the actions of some other member of that society!

1 Samuel 25:29 refers to this reality as "bound in the bundle of life."

While 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 speaks specifically of a Christian's relationship within the Body of Christ, it, nonetheless, is a fitting illustration of the fact that *no man is an island unto himself*...because each one of us...by virtue of being part, and parcel, of the human race ...is involved in mankind as a whole.

A great deal of the pain and suffering in the world finds its explanation in this fact of "*organic unity*" organic unity which was, originally, designed by God, for man's benefit... however, when the fact of organic unity serves to hurt...rather than to help...man, it is because man has perverted God's laws by his own stupidity and rebellion...despite the fact that man complains that, "*God isn't fair.*"

Therefore, this fact...of the "*organic unity of the human race*"...is one of the explanations as to why the innocent suffer...because each and every one of us is affected ... "*suffer*"...because man irresponsibly frustrates God's laws and the intentions for which God created man. God tells us in Deuteronomy 5:9, "*I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me*...however, we must remember that verse 10 goes on to say, "*showing MERCY unto thousands of them that love Me and keep My commandments.*" God's purpose in the "*organic unity of the human race*" was for man's advantage...not for his disadvantage... for man to receive MERCY...not His judgment.

At times it appears that the guilty man goes unpunished while the innocent man suffers, however...according to 2 Thessalonians 1:6; Hebrews 2:2-3, and Romans 2:5-6... one day God's retribution will catch up to the guilty man!

- (D) Still, at other times, we **do** suffer because of our own...individual...sins and mistakes. Proverbs 19:3 warns us that "*a man's own folly ruins his life.*" A person unable to find work, who was fired from his last position due to dishonestly, has brought his present suffering upon himself. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that many among them were "*weak and sick*"...and a number of them had *died*...because they had not properly "*discerned the Lord's Body*"...Christ's *body*, the Church, that is, brothers and sisters in Christ...[2 Corinthians 11:27-34]. Because of one's *personal* sin, that, God may cause...either directly or indirectly...illness, adversities, and even death [Lamentations 3:31-48; Acts 5:1-10 and 12:21-23].
- (E) We must keep in mind that there is a dimension of suffering that is ours as a result of our being disciples of Christ...because part of the call to discipleship is the call to "*suffer vicariously*"...is the willingness to suffer for others...as **Christ** suffered for others. John 15:13; Luke 9:23; Philippians 3:10; Colossians 1:14; 1 Peter 4:12-19; 2 Corinthians 1:5-7; and 1 Peter 2:20-23 all give much insight into this subject of *Vicariously Suffering*...a subject which will be thoroughly dealt with at another time.
- (F) Finally, we frequently suffer because of the imperfect nature of the world in which we live. Some philosophers speak of this imperfection of our world as "*metaphysical evil*"...which makes suffering a fact of life in this fallen, defective, universe. Some bad things happen to us...not because we have done anything wrong or stupid, or because we are being persecuted...but, simply because this world is contaminated with the effects of

man's fall [See Genesis 3:16-19 and Romans 8:20-23]. If you have taken the proper precautions, yet are bitten by a rattlesnake while hiking in the woods, the simplest explanation...for *why* you are bitten...is that you are a *finite* person, living in a defective world, and that these things sometimes happen to people who like to hike in that kind of terrain.

Then there are those times that, when one asks questions concerning why God permits suffering, what he is asking [and this is, perhaps, the most common question asked among Christians] is "*What can be the possible purpose in...or benefits from...suffering?*"

3. THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM SUFFERING

What good can possibly come from the difficulties...the suffering...that one faces ...and has to cope with...in his daily trials? The answer to that question is that good **can** come from one's suffering **if**...*(and only if)*...one responds *properly* to his suffering...his trial.

"*The same sun that melts the wax, hardens the clay.*" If one resists God's working on his behalf...by becoming bitter and ungrateful toward Him as a result of his having to suffer...one will not only fail to grow spiritually, but he will actually go backward in his spiritual growth.

(A) **SUFFERING CAN BE USED BY GOD**
TO DEVELOP CHRIST-LIKE CHARACTER

Surely one benefit that comes to the responsible sufferer is the development of character. In the first chapter of James...(verses 2-3)...we are told to "*consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.*" Verse 4 then goes on to tell us that, as perseverance continues to work in us, we become "*mature and complete.*"

This Scripture text tends to shock us with its paradoxical command because ...to the natural mind...the joyful embracing of suffering, and trials, appears to be absurd. Is one to leap for joy when the pain from his cancer is especially severe, or when one is told that a loved one has been murdered? ***Surely not!*** We are instructed, rather, to consider the trial as an occasion for the highest and deepest kind of joy...the joy of God's comforting and sustaining presence known only to those who are walking in full obedience and faith...and it is in this sense...because our trials afford us an opportunity to know the joy of God's comforting presence... that we are to give thanks "*in all circumstances*" [1 Thessalonians 5:18] and "*for everything*" [Ephesians 5:20]...and as we choose to obey God...by trusting Him and by giving Him thanks..."*for everything*" and "*in all circumstances*" that, that quality known as Christian character, is formed in us...which is another reason that "*we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance... character...and hope*" [Romans 5:3-4].

(B) **SUFFERING CAN BE USED BY GOD**
AS A DISCIPLINE TO LEAD ONE TO REPENTANCE

Because there are times in our lives...perhaps more often than we want to admit ...when we have a lethargic...(careless, and unconcerned)...attitude toward our sinful thoughts and practices, God, very often, permits...and uses...trials and suffering as a form of discipline [training]...or even as a rebuke...from Him, in His endeavor to lead us to repentance.

While Christians sometimes focus too excessively...or even exclusively... upon the reality of sin in one's life as the possible purpose...or reason...that one is suffering (as was true of the accusations hurled at Job by his friends) so that, as a result...like Job...many who suffer are wrongly accused of having sin in their lives ...we are, nonetheless, as much in error if we fail to at least *consider* the reality of sin *as a possible reason* for...or cause of...one's suffering.

After discussing the problem of sin in the reader's lives in Hebrews 12:1-9, the author concludes...in verse 10...that "*God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness*" ...and...in Revelation 3:19...the Lord declares to the church at Laodicea, "*Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.*"

(C) **SUFFERING CAN BE USED BY GOD TO SHOW FORTH HIS GRACE**

There are times that God permits suffering in our lives in order to show forth His greatness...which He does...not because He is some kind of tyrant king who cruelly uses His subjects for some kind of perverted pleasure...but, rather, because it is His desire that...as a result **of** His revealing His power, goodness and wisdom through...and in the midst of...our suffering...people will focus their thoughts upon the only One Who is capable of meeting their deepest needs.

John 9:3 gives the account of Jesus ministering healing to a man who was blind from birth...whose blindness was allowed "*so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.*"

Until we enter our Savior's presence in glory, we can...by the power of the Holy Spirit and because of the sufficiency of God's grace...emulate the kind of spirit that enabled Paul to say, in 2 Corinthians 6:9-10, "*Known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*"